

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

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

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

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OFFICIAL
HISTORY
OF
NEW ZEALAND
IN THE
SECOND
WORLD WAR
1939-45

18
Battalion and
Armoured Regiment

W. D. DAWSON

WAR HISTORY
RESEARCH
NEW ZEALAND



Queen's University of Kingston
and the University of Toronto

18 Battalion
and Armoured Regiment

by
W. D. LAWSON

WAR HISTORY BRANCH
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE AFFAIRS
OTTAWA, CANADA
1961

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[FRONTISPIECE]



Bayonet charge in the Desert

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18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

[TITLE PAGE]

Official History of New Zealand
in the Second World War 1939–45
18 Battalion
and Armoured Regiment

W. D. DAWSON

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18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

FOREWORD



WINDSOR CASTLE

Foreword

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

It gives me great pleasure to write a foreword for the history of the 18th Battalion, later the 18th Armoured Regiment, for unit histories such as this provide the opportunity of paying a well-earned tribute to the officers and men who served in them.

The 18th Battalion was one of the First Echelon units and has an impressive record. It served as infantry in the early period of the war under Colonels Gray, Peart, Lynch and Pleasants in arduous fighting at [Servia Pass](#) in [Greece](#), at [Galatas](#) in [Crete](#), at [Gambut](#) and [Belhamed](#) in [Libya](#), and at [Minqar Qaim](#), [Ruweisat Ridge](#) and [El Mreir](#) in the defence of [Egypt](#).

These were trying days, but the Battalion carried out its duties with skill and fortitude. I remember with gratitude the attention given me by its stretcher-bearers when I was wounded at [Minqar Qaim](#).

When, after converting from an infantry battalion to an armoured regiment under Colonel Pleasants, the [18th Armoured Regiment](#) was again employed operationally, the Division had moved to [Italy](#) where conditions were in marked contrast to those of the desert. The Regiment had often to contend with bad going, with mountainous country, with snow, rain and clinging mud. Under Colonels

Pleasants, Ferguson, Robinson, Elliott and Parata it fought at Guardiagrele and Orsogna, at Cassino, in the advance to Florence, in the arduous winter in the Romagna, and finally in the victorious Battle of the Senio and the advance to Trieste, which marked the end of the war.

This is a great story of a very worthy unit which I hope will be widely read.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

,
Windsor Castle 30 June 1961

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to ex-members of the 18th who have extended me hospitality, lent diaries and photographs, and given their time freely to write detailed replies to my persistent queries;

and to my wife, to whom I have been a poor companion in the evenings for several years, but who has given me nothing but encouragement.

W. D. Dawson

Wellington August, 1961

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CHAPTER 1 – EARLY DAYS

CHAPTER 1

Early Days

They didn't look much like pioneers, the men who tramped into Hopuhopu Camp just before lunchtime on that October day. They looked like young fellows picked up at random out of offices in [Auckland](#), orchards in [Northland](#), farms in the [Waikato](#), except that they wore their civvy clothes self-consciously, as if they really had no right to them any more. That they were to become the Old Men of a great fighting division it would have been hard to guess. Into Hopuhopu they tramped; and what they saw of Hopuhopu they didn't like much.

That was not altogether surprising. Hopuhopu, though fair enough by 1914 standards, wasn't too good by the changed standards of 1939. The bell tents, dug out from stores where they had lain for years, were by no means waterproof. The cookhouses were inconvenient and outdated. You had to line up for a wash, and rip your whiskers off in cold water. The whole camp had been hurriedly patched up on the outbreak of war to hold nearly twice the numbers it was designed for.

To cap everything, there was a ready-made reception committee of officers and NCOs, who had already been put through it for a solid week by Regular Force instructors, and were now thirsting to pass on the process.

All this had begun some weeks before, after the Government's announcement on 8 September that a Special Force was to be raised for service within or beyond New Zealand. Volunteers, all of them. To enlist 'for the duration and twelve months'. From 21 to 35 years old. Medically fit for service anywhere in the world. In other words, the Government said, 'We want the pick of the young men of New Zealand.' Then, as if to dampen any possible excitement, it added, 'We will train you for at least three months, and if you are not needed after that, you can go back home.'

If they were not needed after that! Good Heavens!

Not that the men who thronged the recruiting offices would have regarded themselves as the pick of New Zealand. Probably they couldn't have said just why they were volunteering, except the non-committal 'May as well, I suppose'. They were quite matter-of-fact about it, so much so that the [New Zealand Herald](#)

remarked, 'The most striking feature of the recruiting was the entire absence of excitement.' But the offices were packed to the doors; men queued up from 7 a.m. for the doors to open at 9; two offices in the Northern Military District ran out of enrolment forms on the first day; the District's quota of 2200 men was exceeded that day, and nearly doubled by the end of the week.

It was also noteworthy that a great many of the recruits had never been in the Territorials—to quote the Herald again, 'Active service always had an appeal to the adventurous which routine training did not possess.' But there were old soldiers, too, some with war service from 1914–18 to their credit. Some, try as they might, could not even pretend to look under 35, and didn't get past the doors of the recruiting offices. Others did— many who would never see 35 again trained, sailed and fought with the First Echelon. So did many whose twenty-first birthdays were celebrated among desert sands.

The volunteers could choose their own branch of the service. You might ask, 'Who in his sane senses would volunteer for the footsloggers when there are so many other more attractive and safer jobs to get into?' Well, many did. More than enough to fill up the Rifle Brigade which was to be the infantry of the Special Force. From the Northern Military District, more than enough to fill up 1 NZ Rifle Battalion, which later became [18 Battalion](#).

The men who volunteered in the first week were medically examined in the second, and then sent home to await their call into camp, while the Public Works Department got busy preparing camps for them: new permanent camps (for example, one at [Papakura](#), 19 miles south of [Auckland](#)); temporary camps like Hopuhopu to tide over until the others were ready. There, on 27 September, assembled 160 officers, NCOs and men of 1 Rifle Battalion. And there to join them, on 3 October, came the main body of the battalion, 546 of them, followed next day by another small party of 32. So the battalion assembled.

[Auckland](#), [Whangarei](#), [Hamilton](#) and [Paeroa](#) all farewelled advance party and main body in style, with bands and civic functions. Then they went back to their everyday life, while the battalion settled down to work at Hopuhopu in the rain.

The first commander was Lieutenant-Colonel [Gray](#),¹ an officer with many years

of Territorial experience, young, keen and vigorous, who set high standards and worked ruthlessly to realise them. As second-in-command he had Major [Allen](#),² Member of Parliament for Hauraki; the company commanders were [Major Peart](#)³ (HQ Company), [Captain Fussell](#)⁴ (A Company), [Major Evans](#)⁵ (B Company), Major [Petrie](#)⁶ (C Company), and Captain [Day](#)⁷ (D Company). On these men fell the main responsibility for forging a team out of the collection of individuals that could, as yet, be called a battalion only by courtesy. How they succeeded will be seen as the battalion's story progresses.

The battalion did not yet have its full complement of junior officers. Down to the rank of captain, yes; but on 3 October it had only eleven subalterns. Six more, who entered camp as warrant officers, were commissioned a few days later. The rest were to come from the ranks.

The backbone of the battalion, the four rifle companies, were organised to keep together men from the same districts. A Company was drawn from [Auckland](#) city and its surroundings; B from Hauraki, the Bay of Plenty and the [Rotorua](#) area; C from [North Auckland](#); D from the [Waikato](#). Each company wore the badge of its home Territorial regiment in the meantime. Headquarters Company comprised the specialists—signallers, light anti-aircraft platoon, 3-inch mortar platoon, carrier and pioneer platoons, besides the huge 'administrative' platoon which includes cooks, drivers, and the various bits and pieces that make a battalion tick.

Unfortunately, the battalion's weapon strength in those early days lay more on paper than in reality; apart from its rifles and bayonets, there were only eighteen Lewis guns, which served as machine guns and light anti-aircraft guns. In its early manoeuvring round Hopuhopu, the battalion had to 'play soldiers' with crossed sticks to represent machine guns, anti-tank rifles and all the rest. Such things as 2-inch mortars still lay in the dim future. The signallers had a few field telephones, signal flags and lamps, but no wireless sets.

The transport establishment was also largely imaginary. In theory each rifle company had five motor-cycles, HQ Company fourteen of them and ten push-bikes. Actually there were altogether half a dozen old civilian and Railways lorries—enough to be tantalising, but not enough to do anything much with. The Bren carriers were non-existent. There was a carrier platoon, but its members were ordinary

footsloggers in the meantime.

On the second day in camp army clothing was issued, and everyone got a 'reconditioned Territorial uniform', or in the vernacular, 'giggle suit'. Stove-pipe trousers; tunic with lots of brass buttons to be cleaned, and cut to fit where it touched; antique greatcoat. And, of course, the felt hat that marked the New Zealand soldier wherever he went. Collarless grey shirts and heavy woollen underclothes. Web equipment dating back to the Great War, a mass of brass knobs and buckles. The best thing about the whole outfit was the boots. There were no spare uniforms, which was unfortunate considering the weather. It was not until early November that denim working suits were issued. However, in view of the shortage of army gear in New Zealand, the equipping of the battalion with even one suit on the second day was a good effort.

Thinking back, those who were at Hopuhopu in those early days find that the most lasting impression on their minds is one of wetness. Rain that turned the camp roads into morasses, that penetrated the tents both upwards and downwards, that soaked gear and clothes so that at times men had to go round with only greatcoats preserving their modesty while trousers dried in the boiler room—and the greatcoats were saturated, too. No wonder there were a lot of colds and influenza. There was a real epidemic at the end of October, and patients were sent to Hamilton Hospital when the camp's facilities became overtaxed. The epidemic lingered on long after the battalion had left the damp of Hopuhopu behind, and was not really mastered until late November.

But the rain did not damp Lieutenant-Colonel Gray's keenness. His battalion was going to be a good one if he had anything to do with it. And his officers and NCOs were 'raring to go'. So the training began. At Hopuhopu this was mainly elementary foot and arms drill, beginning with the painful 'turn to the right by numbers', 'salute to the front by numbers', 'slope arms by numbers'. But this stage passed. From week to week it was noticeable how the men became steadier, how the battalion began to gain cohesion and to learn the use of its tools of trade. Potential leaders were sorted out and marked down for promotion. In mid-October a party of twenty-one left for [Trentham](#) to be trained as officers, and eight of these came back to the battalion as second-lieutenants at the end of November.

Physically, too, the battalion got harder, helped by physical training and weekly sports. The men's bearing improved steadily. Route marches (including night marches) got longer, sore feet fewer. This process was aided by the regular hours which are one of the best, but least appreciated, aspects of camp life. Good food and plenty of it was wanted.

This was not always available, however. The inconvenience of the Hopuhopu cookhouses has already been remarked on. Some of the cooks were cooks only in name. The quality of the food, the men said, was all right, but the cooks did some fearful things to it. Worst of all was the washing up—come out of the mess marquees and fight for room to dunk your tin plates in a bucket of greasy, lukewarm soup masquerading as washing water. There were a lot of complaints, some justified and some exaggerated, all quieted by the promise of something better when the battalion moved to the palatial new camp at [Papakura](#).

The five weeks at Hopuhopu were weeks of hard work. Fatigues, that curse of camp life, were few, so the training was not seriously interrupted. There wasn't much chance of recreation in the evenings apart from an occasional film or concert in the [YMCA](#) marquee—you could go there and write, read or have a cup of tea, but it was always overcrowded, and the only alternative was to make the most of a book or a game of cards in your leaky tent by candlelight. The weekends, except for Saturday mornings and Sunday church parade, were free, and there was generous weekend leave. [Hamilton](#) was not far away, and special weekend trains ran to [Auckland](#).

But weeks, even weeks of hard work and discomfort, always come to an end. October went, November came, and with it the promise of a shift very soon to the [Eldorado](#) of [Papakura](#).

In the meantime the battalion had been renamed. The original names, 'Special Force', '1 NZ Rifle Battalion', and so on, had been stopgaps, created for temporary convenience. Now, late in October, the important question of permanent names was settled. The Special Force was to be the nucleus of a New Zealand Division. Battalions were to be numbered from north to south, carrying on from the 17th ([Waikato](#)) Regiment of the Territorial Army. So to 1 Rifle Battalion fell the honour of heading the list. With its death [18 Battalion](#) was born. Along with [19](#) and [20](#)

Battalions from farther south, it made up [4 Brigade](#), the infantry of the First Echelon.

On 7 November [18 Battalion](#), with very few regrets, packed its gear at Hopuhopu for the last time. A special train took it north to Tironui railway siding, and from there the men marched into [Papakura Camp](#), realising for the first time how much army gear weighs when it all has to be carried at once. The battalion's heavy stores went to [Papakura](#) by truck at the same time.

Two months earlier [Papakura Camp](#) had been bare pasture land. Then the Public Works had moved in, and ever since had been working flat out to make what was to be the best training camp in New Zealand, with new standards of comfort. Its battalion 'blocks' with their rows of 40-man wooden huts, slat beds, cubicles for officers and NCOs, messrooms connected to the kitchens by serving hatches, hot showers and closed ablution sheds, later to become the normal thing in New Zealand camps, were novelties in 1939. [Papakura](#)'s accommodation was 'considered to surpass average housing conditions', and, though this statement is open to doubt, it was certainly a great advance on Hopuhopu. Instead of a candle stuck into an old bayonet, there was electric light. Instead of mud there was asphalt, and hot water to shave with instead of cold. There was a reasonable amount of room for gear, and room to move round in the huts. You could hang your greatcoat up instead of trampling it underfoot. True, you still had to lay your kit out in inspection order every day, but you weren't working under the same disadvantages. There were better facilities for drying clothes too.

The improvement most appreciated was in the food. With up-to-date cookhouses the cooks could at last turn out something edible. It was served direct from the cookhouses without having to be carried out into the open, which meant that the hot meals really were hot. Complaints didn't die out—it wouldn't have been the Army if they had—but they simmered down to normal.

Only a short hop from the camp was [Papakura](#) township, which offered the attractions of a pub and a change of diet in the local restaurants. And Auckland was within easy hitchhiking distance. Weekend leave was still generous, and there was now evening leave as well.

The camp wasn't complete when [18 Battalion](#) moved in. Canteen, recreation

huts and other facilities were still under construction or not even begun, but there was enough to carry on with, and more were opened as they were finished. Notably the wet canteen. After a lot of controversy the Government finally decided on 15 November to establish wet canteens in New Zealand camps, and the following Monday (the 20th) the first beer flowed at [Papakura](#). For once nobody grumbled at having to queue up.

[Papakura](#), being the Army's show place, attracted plenty of visitors, both high and humble. Every Sunday it was thronged with the men's relations and friends, along with hundreds of others out from [Auckland](#) just to see the camp. Before 18 Battalion had been there a month it had been inspected by Major-General J. E. [Duigan](#)⁸ (Chief of the General Staff), by the Minister of Defence and by the Governor-General— probably a record number of important visitors in such a short time.

Three days after moving to [Papakura](#) 18 Battalion got its first reinforcement draft of ninety men, replacing those who had gone to train as officers, or had been found unfit, or had fallen by the wayside. Some of the newcomers had been in the [Papakura](#) camp guard before 18 Battalion arrived. They made a brand-new company, 1 Reinforcement Company, under Captain Lyon⁹ (Member of Parliament for [Waitemata](#)). From then on most new arrivals went to this company, which (as its name implies) was drawn on when necessary to keep the other companies up to strength.

The battalion now resumed its training where it had left off, and that training was solid. It had to be, if the battalion was to be knit together into an efficient fighting unit in another two months. There was still a lot of parade-ground work, but this was varied with section, platoon and company exercises, and more route marches, including a couple of night compass marches over the countryside. There were extra night classes for the NCOs, most of whom were only one jump ahead of the privates in their military knowledge. At Penrose the men had their first rifle-range practice, and at Duder's Beach (14 miles from [Papakura](#) on the coast of the [Hauraki Gulf](#)) they fired rifles and Lewis guns on the range.

The march to Duder's Beach was made partly on foot, partly in the battalion's own transport. The battalion had progressed since Hopuhopu days, and now had

more than twenty trucks, Fords and Bedfords, enough to carry a third of the men. For moves such as that to Duder's Beach these trucks ran a shuttle service to a complicated timetable, worked out so that everyone marched and rode approximately the same distance, and so that the whole battalion arrived at its destination together. The organisation of such a timetable was the kind of thing in which Colonel Gray took particular delight.

The progress made was remarkable. The men, as befitted volunteers, were keen, and their keenness was increased by the knowledge that they would not be going home when their three months were over. Of course few, if any, had ever believed they would be. Almost as soon as they had set foot in camp, Rumour had them halfway across the globe and in the most unlikely spots. Any lingering fears were killed for good on 24 November, when the Prime Minister announced that the Special Force would go overseas after its training was satisfactorily completed, as ships and escorts became available. This was definite enough. Rumour still had the question, 'Where are we going?' to play with—but it was quite certain now that they were going.

However, a lot of things have to be done to soldiers before they go off to war. Both at Hopuhopu and [Papakura](#) the 18 Battalion men lined up for blood tests, typhoid and tetanus inoculations, dental inspections. The first typhoid 'jab' was a major disaster, putting scores of men out of action, some for several days. Many more men found, to their surprise, that they had to spend uncomfortable hours in the dentist's chair.

Episodes there were in plenty. Who among the [18 Battalion](#) originals will forget the First Conscript, an unwilling white goat smuggled into camp and tethered outside the battalion orderly room, and later exercised on the parade ground at 3 a.m. by a subaltern caught introducing it into the officers' quarters? Or the martyr put 'on the mat' by the RQMS after an argument over the breakfast sausages? Or Captain Day cancelling his company's weekend leave because some unknown person had misused one of its more delicate domestic facilities? You will always have these incidents, dozens of them, in the Army.

On 14 December the battalion went 'on active service'. The same day it went on leave.

This leave was a solemn rather than a joyous one. Its official name was 'Christmas leave', not 'final leave'; yet it was final leave, everybody knew that. The exodus from [Papakura](#) took all morning, beginning when the first trainload (the North [Auckland](#) men) crawled out of their blankets at 4 a.m. At eleven o'clock the last train left, and [Papakura](#) lay desolate, while for a swift fortnight the men banished reveille and parades from their minds.

Then the first wartime Christmas was over, it was 28 December, and back streamed the men. But not for long. Departure was in the air, and everyone was keyed up to it. The battalion might not be trained to the last click of the heels, but it was well on the way to fighting trim—a very different body of men from the one which had straggled into Hopuhopu three months before. Now the men had almost forgotten what civvy clothes felt like, they walked with a new swing, their speech was sprinkled with curious jargon and complicated oaths. Some had for the first time learnt the art of living among men. The first matter-of-fact approach to the Army had changed, too, replaced by a unit pride, though the men would have been embarrassed to hear it put that way. There was a notably good spirit in the battalion, that comradeship which can never be fully grasped by those who have not experienced it. The closer the prospect of adventure and danger, the better the spirit. With departure imminent even officers and sergeants could be tolerated. Significant of this change was the most effective threat to wrong-doers in those days—unless they mended their ways, they wouldn't be allowed to go overseas!

On New Year's Day [18 Battalion](#) entered a rifle team of four to compete at [Penrose](#) against all comers, including rifle clubs. The team nearly brought home the bacon, being beaten by only one point; but individual members collected five trophies among them, a good performance in competition with [Auckland's](#) best.

One ceremony yet remained. [Auckland](#), though it had showered hospitality on the troops, had not seen them en masse, and it was to get the chance on 3 January, when the men from [Papakura](#) and Hopuhopu would parade at the Domain and then march through the city. So after its return from leave the battalion went back to the parade ground to smarten up and rehearse its part. The parade ground is normally a most unpopular place, but this time everyone entered into it with zest—there were going to be thousands of eyes on them on 3 January, and the show had to be good.

The day before the parade the battalion had a visit from the commander of the Expeditionary Force, [Major-General B. C. Freyberg](#),¹⁰ just arrived from [England](#) to take over his command. 'Tiny' was to become a familiar figure to the men of his division in all sorts of places and situations, but now he was meeting them for the first time. It was a brief glimpse, but the General was pleased with the look of his troops. And vice versa. A 'man's man' was the popular verdict.

If the General was pleased, so was [Auckland](#) next day; and its way of saying it was much less restrained. From quite early that day there was a current of excitement running through the city, and all roads led to the Domain, for this was its first mass parade since the war had begun. They had a brilliantly fine day for it—in fact, the men in their heavy serge found it too hot until midday, when a merciful breeze sprang up to take the edge off the heat.

The battalion made an early start that day. Brass was polished as never before. The troops left [Papakura](#) on a special train at 9.30 a.m., and at [Auckland](#) station formed up with the rest of the parade, which marched with three bands to the Domain and took up mass formation before a crowd of at least 15,000. There were over 2500 men on parade; of these 18 Battalion, by far the largest unit, formed a third.

After marching on, the parade gave a general salute, and was then addressed by the commander of the Northern Military District ([Colonel N. W. McD. Weir](#)¹¹), the Mayor of [Auckland](#), and the Hon. Walter Nash. Colonel Weir's popularity took a leap that morning when he ordered the parade to sit down before he began to speak. An officer who shows this consideration is always regarded with favour, and you feel more like listening to him, too. Not that any of the speakers said anything out of the ordinary. They gave you a pat on the back, and you stirred restlessly and muttered to your neighbour, 'Why can't the old ... dry up?', even though deep inside you felt quite pleased.

This part of the proceedings didn't last very long. The parade marched off to the outer Domain, had lunch, and at midday set off again on its farewell march, past the Hospital and through the city by the main streets.

Then it was that heads really went up, shoulders straightened that extra fraction

of an inch, marching took on an added swing, all quite involuntarily. The route was thronged. [Auckland](#)'s everyday business affairs came to a standstill, shops and offices were emptied, every roof, window and verandah top was full of spectators. And they cheered, and they cheered, and they cheered. Probably not one of those 2500 men had ever been the object of such cheering before, nor would be again. Excited people ran alongside the parade—Great War veterans, wearing their medals, joined in the march. Some men had gifts thrust into their hands, others had their rifles carried for them by admiring girls. At the Town Hall Colonel Weir and the Mayor took the salute, and on went the parade in its triumphal progress down [Queen Street](#), along Customs Street and Beach Road, before disappearing into the railway station, where the crowd could not follow. At 1.30 p.m. the trains began to pull out for [Papakura](#). The public followed at leisure, and at 3 p.m., when the camp was opened to them, in they swarmed in thousands. There had never been so many visitors there before, and a sort of hysteria was in the air. Even after the visitors had gone the camp's atmosphere was tense.

A soldier is a matter-of-fact animal—once a thing is finished, his normal attitude is, 'Well, that's that. What happens now?' But this time it wasn't like that. This was an occasion that happens once in a lifetime, and you couldn't help being affected by it, although you might sneer at yourself for getting sentimental. The anticipation of adventure ahead was tinged with an almost furtive regret for what was to be left behind.

The tension was still there next morning, but toned down by the bustle of departure. There was a general tidying up, final equipment issues were made, kitbags packed and stacked for loading. All equipment was handed in, except rifles and personal gear. After lunch, though relatives and friends were not allowed into the camp, there were many of them just outside the gates or at the boundary fences, and for two more precious hours discipline relaxed. All too soon the time was over, the last goodbyes said, the parades called, and at 4 p.m. 18 Battalion marched off to [Papakura](#) station.

The blanket of security silence officially fell on the battalion when it left [Papakura](#). For weeks everyone had been lectured on the necessity for henceforth keeping a tightly closed mouth. Anyone letting out the strictly guarded secret of departure would be severely dealt with. The newspapers, which had been chronicling

the doings of the First Echelon since October, described the [Auckland](#) parade with enthusiasm, then fell suddenly silent.

But these security measures didn't baffle the people of the [North Island](#). Everyone knew that the men were headed for [Wellington](#) to embark on the liners that (said the grapevine) had arrived there. The ships certainly weren't there just on a pleasure cruise, and neither was the battleship [Ramillies](#), whose bearded sailors had been the admiration of [Wellington](#) for the past three days. So the journey south became a triumphal procession nearly comparable with the one in [Auckland](#). Station platforms were packed with people eager to bid the troops farewell, and to speed them with food parcels and drinks. Bands turned out, songs were sung. It was late that night before the men settled down to sleep in their cramped carriages.

The 'security' at [Wellington](#) took a rather ridiculous turn. On leaving the station for the wharf all the carriage blinds were pulled down and the men ordered to stay inside and keep quiet. For those last few hundred yards on New Zealand soil they travelled blind, something like men going to execution.

At ten o'clock on the morning of 5 January [18 Battalion](#) carted its gear, sea kits, packs, rifles and all, on to HMNZT Z₄ (in normal times the Orient liner Orion). The men's big kitbags, which had come down from [Papakura](#) in bulk in the care of a baggage party, disappeared into the holds.

The Orion left the wharf at 2 p.m. that day and anchored in [Port Nicholson](#) with the rest of its convoy, containing the North Island part of the First Echelon; for the rest of the afternoon the men hung over the rails and gazed down on the sightseers of [Wellington](#), who flitted round from ship to ship in small boats of every description.

At six o'clock next morning the ships—four big liners, with HMS [Ramillies](#) and HMAS [Canberra](#)—moved off down the harbour. Even at that hour the waterfront road was lined with hundreds of cars, and hundreds of horns tooted farewell. Through the Heads went the line of ships, and out into Cook Strait, where they were joined by two more liners bearing the [South Island](#) contingent, along with HMNZS Leander. At last, though there wasn't any opportunity yet to get to know each other, the entire First Echelon was together, and it was off to the war.

All that day the convoy steamed in bright sunshine up the west coast of the [North Island](#). Apart from getting organised into boat stations and running through the emergency drill procedure, there wasn't much to do except lean over the rail and watch the coast slip by. In the evening the peak of [Egmont](#) was still visible above the mist on the horizon. Then darkness fell, and the last glimpse of New Zealand was lost.

¹ [Brig J. R. Gray](#), ED, m.i.d.; born [Wellington](#), 7 Aug 1900; barrister and solicitor; CO [18 Bn](#) Sep 1939-Nov 1941, Mar-Jun 1942; comd [4 Bde](#) 29 Jun-5 Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

² [Lt-Col J. M. Allen](#), m.i.d.; born [Cheadle, England](#), 3 Aug 1901; farmer; MP (Hauraki) 1938–41; CO [21 Bn](#) May-Nov 1941; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

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

⁴ [Capt G. K. Fussell](#); born [Auckland](#), 1 Jan 1909; accountant; killed in action 20 May 1941.

⁵ [Maj W. H. Evans](#), ED; born NZ 7 Mar 1899; schoolmaster; killed in action 24 May 1941.

⁶ [Maj M. de R. Petrie](#); [Wellington](#); born [Christchurch](#), 9 Aug 1895; company secretary; 2 i/c [18 Bn](#) 1940–41.

⁷ [Maj L. I. Day](#), ED; [Hamilton](#); born [Wanganui](#), 29 Oct 1898; school-teacher.

⁸ [Maj-Gen Sir John Duigan](#), KBE, CB, DSO, m.i.d.; born NZ 30 Mar 1882; served South Africa, 1900–1; [1 NZEF](#) 1915–18; Chief of General Staff, NZ Military Forces, 1937–41; died 9 Jan 1950.

⁹ [Capt W. J. Lyon](#); born [London](#), 15 Feb 1898; MP ([Waitemata](#)) 1935–41; served in 1914–18 war; killed in action 26 May 1941.

¹⁰ Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg, VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Gk); born [Richmond, Surrey](#), 21 Mar 1889; CO Hood Bn 1914–16; comd 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917–18; GOC 2 NZEF Nov 1939–Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand Jun 1946–Aug 1952.

¹¹ Maj-Gen Sir Norman Weir, KBE, CB, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); born [Christchurch](#), 6 Jul 1893; Regular soldier; Auck Regt (Lt) 1914–17; GOC 4 NZ Div, 1942; OC NZ Tps in [Egypt](#), 1943–44; QMG, Army HQ, 1945; CGS 1946–1949; died [Hamilton](#), 11 Jul 1961.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 2 – THE ORION

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The Orion

There are well-defined differences of opinion about troopships. Some men can get a kick out of them, some can't. To the former, troopship life abounds in interest; to the latter it is deadly dull. Some can stand happily for hours gazing over the rails into the swirling water; others think every moment wasted that keeps them away from their cards or crown-and-anchor. Eighteenth Battalion had its quota of both types, so it would be idle to try to prove that the voyage was interesting and enjoyable, or dull and monotonous. It was as each man found it.

There could be no doubt, however, that the accommodation was good. The *Orion*, fitted up to carry 1140 civilian passengers, had 1500 troops on board, mostly 18 Battalion and the ASC. She was not overcrowded. An old soldier of 1914 who had spent six weeks in the packed, airless hold of a rolling cargo tramp might be excused for reflecting on the degeneracy of the next age when he saw the *Orion's* cabins, most of them unchanged from peacetime. And if the men in the 'tourist' class cabins had little to complain of, what about the officers and sergeants in the luxury of the first class? They had every right to think that this war wasn't a bad sort of racket.

Messing accommodation was also palatial by any troopship standards, though meals had to be served in several sittings. The dining saloons were unaltered. The ship's stewards were there to supervise the waiting, which in the men's mess was done by fatigue parties. The food was good, and there was plenty of it, including supper of cocoa and ship's biscuits. It became somewhat lacking in variety after a while, but that is inevitable on a troopship, especially for men used to fresh New Zealand food.

The wet canteen was a very fine institution, with one snag— you had to wait in long queues for your beer. It was open twice a day and in the evening, and the official ration was two pints a day, though you could always get more, as there were a lot of men who didn't bother because of the queues. Prices were low— New Zealand beer at tenpence a quart bottle, Danish lager at eightpence a pint. For the officers and sergeants there were spirits at comparable prices. There was a dry canteen, too, where you could buy plenty of cigarettes at 15. 8d. for fifty.

On the first day out from [Wellington](#) there were naturally some who didn't take kindly to the unaccustomed motion, but thanks to the fine weather, they were not many. Vaccination, carried out on the second day, prostrated many more towards the end of the first week, but only for a day or two. On the whole, health was good throughout the trip.

On that first day out, 6 January, [18 Battalion's](#) Routine Order No. 64 was issued.

Routine orders are one of the Army's standing jokes. As a rule they are most uninspiring documents. But this one, Routine Order No. 64, deserves to be quoted almost in full, as it covers much of the shipboard routine followed by the battalion on the [Orion](#). Here are its items:

Unit For Duty. This Unit is alternating weekly periods as duty with the A.S.C., and will be Unit for duty until Reveille, 12.1.40. When we are Unit for duty, the Duty Coy. will supply the following details daily:—

Guard. 2 Officers, 1 W.O., 2 Sjts, 4 Cpls, 54 O.R.'s Mess Room. A fatigue of an N.C.O. and 6 men.... Washing Up. A fatigue of an N.C.O. and 10 men....

Guards. Guards will wear lifebelts during guard mounting. They will be carried to their posts and left in a handy position. In case of emergency they will don the lifebelt before taking the necessary action.

The guard kept fire and blackout watch from posts scattered all over the ship, and provided submarine lookouts and anti-aircraft posts, the latter armed with Lewis guns. A Lewis-gun post on the forward well-deck provided a purple patch one day, when an [18 Battalion](#) crew, in stripping the gun for cleaning, inadvertently let a burst go in the general direction of the lookout in the crow's nest. Even [18 Battalion](#) stood lost in admiration at the command of English employed by the lookout when he came down.

Daily Routine. Until further notice the routine for this will be as follows:—

0900 hours Coy. parades.

1030 hours Dismiss and proceed to cabins for ship's inspection.

1100 hours Parade with pannikins for wet canteen.

Afternoon free for sports and games.

From the third day out, the working hours were mainly taken up with lectures in such things as signals, tactics, map-reading, first aid, and so on, to which nobody paid very serious attention. For variety there were physical jerks and short 'route' marches round the decks daily. Sunday church parades, of course. Nothing very strenuous. There is never room for that on a troopship, and even the work has a sort of holiday atmosphere about it. The most earnest business of life took place in the evenings, when the crown-and-anchor kings braved the threat of dire punishment to set up shop in the cabins, and the pontoon and poker schools flourished in the troops' lounge, vanishing miraculously when the duty officer hove in sight on his rounds. Whenever he entered the lounge only the legal 'housie' remained. Whether he was taken in by the law-abiding demeanour of the men nobody can be sure, but even duty officers are human.

Swimming Bath. The aft bath is available for swimming at all times. Costumes must not be worn in this bath.

The forward bath is reserved for officers in the morning until 0900 hours; it is then available to all. Costumes Must be worn in this bath.

These baths were a main centre of attraction. There was a continuous jam of troops in and round them; usually it was open slather, all in and no holds barred, but occasionally the exhilarating pastime of boom fighting was organised. The baths, unfortunately, were too small for serious swimming, but the battalion ran a 'learn to swim' campaign, and by the end of the voyage nearly all its members could at least keep themselves afloat. With the extra advantage of complete nudity, the aft bath was a rowdy, uninhibited place, more popular than the more sedate forward bath, which could be seen from the deck allotted to the officers and nursing sisters.

Mail. All outgoing mail will be censored from now on. This will be done under Coy. arrangements....

There are two points of view about censorship of mail—that of the men, who imagine the officers rubbing their hands and gloating over every spelling mistake and every touch of sentiment, and that of the officers, who one and all consider it a most distasteful chore. To both officers and men, however, it served to emphasise

the thought, 'We're on active service now, all right.'

Alarms And Stations.... On the sounding of 'fire' or 'Emergency Stations', men will immediately don life belts and proceed to the muster stations. On 'Man Overboard' sounding, all personnel will remain quiet, those below decks remaining there.

Drop what you are doing, drag on your life jackets, climb up to your boat stations, and hang round there like a lot of dummies until you are released—that is boat drill. It is a drudgery common to all troopships, and everybody despises it until the day when it has to be carried out in grim earnest. For 18 Battalion, fortunately, that day never came. However, they practised it day and night. Lifeboat guards were detailed to attend the drills in full web equipment, with rifles and live ammunition.

Sunset. At sunset one 'G' will be sounded round the ship by bugles. Rubbish will then be dumped overboard. All scuttles and ports closed. Entrance doors from decks to accommodation rooms and passages closed. No lights to be shown at all. No matches struck on the deck. Use of torches is prohibited on decks. These orders remain in force until one hour after sunrise.

The safety of the vessel depends on darkness, and the severest disciplinary action will be taken against offenders....

The blackout was good, and was strictly enforced. Later in the voyage this made some cabins almost unbearably stuffy, but was overcome by ingenious souls who, before retiring, took the bulbs out of the lights and opened the portholes.

It was also forbidden to dump rubbish overboard during the day. At times, however, a prowling raider might have guessed at the identity of the troops in the convoy from the odd empty New Zealand beer bottle, or New Zealand felt hat, left irretrievably behind as the Orion ploughed on.

Footwear [sic]. Canvas shoes will be worn throughout the voyage.

Army boots are dangerous on the steep, slippery companion ladders of a ship. In this connection, dress for the whole trip was 'easy'. Jerseys and denim slacks or shorts were the usual wear, and later on this was reduced in most cases to shorts or bathing trunks only, except at parade times.

Use Of Fresh Water. Great care must be taken to avoid waste of fresh water.

The need for going slow on the fresh water was a bit unpopular, but that is just another of the things that must be done on a troopship.

Rifles. All rifles will be kept in wardrobes in cabins.

You lugged your rifle up the gangway at [Wellington](#) with the rest of your gear, and down the gangway on arrival in [Egypt](#); but in between it didn't see the light of day except for an occasional cleaning.

Discipline. Climbing into rigging, or boats, or sitting on the rails will be treated as a serious offence.

This order was relaxed as the convoy left [Wellington](#), but at sea it was insisted on. It was a sensible precaution. A convoy can't stop, as a rule, to pick up a man who falls overboard.

Care Of The Ship. All ranks must exercise the greatest care to avoid damaging the ship in any way....

So they did, in most matters. But this rule did not prevent a certain number of men from carving their names on the ship's rails, just as happened on all troopships that carried New Zealanders.

And there, in brief, you have the everyday life of 18 Battalion on board the Orion.

The first day on board saw the birth of the [18 Battalion](#) band, formed from scratch by [Lance-Corporal Fred Bowes](#) ¹ under Lieutenant-Colonel Gray's orders. Nobody could pretend that it was a first-class band, but it gave an extra fillip to the church parades and helped the battalion on its daily tramp round and round the decks. Its masterpiece was '[Sussex by the Sea](#)'; to this day many an [18 Battalion](#) original cannot hear the tune without once more smelling the shipboard smells and feeling the deck under his feet again as he sets out on another lap. '[Sussex](#)' for the time became the battalion's own personal property.

Some small but important items of equipment were issued to the troops during

the first few days on board. Identity discs (or 'meat tickets'), henceforward to be worn round the neck at all times. Field dressings, an omen of things to come. Lastly, the new, specially designed NZEF hat and collar badges, and distinguishing patches to be sewn on the shoulders of the serge jackets.

On 10 January the convoy was almost doubled in size by the appearance from the north of four liners full of Australian troops, escorted by HMAS [Australia](#) and HMAS [Sydney](#). Yet another liner joined on the 12th, and the convoy that passed through [Bass Strait](#) into the [Australian Bight](#) had now grown to impressive size. [The Bight](#) didn't behave too well—the ships ran into cold winds and the heaviest seas yet, and some men who had prided themselves on lasting the distance found that they had boasted too soon.

During the night of 17 January the convoy rounded Cape [Leeuwin](#) and swung north up the coast of [Western Australia](#) towards [Fremantle](#), which came in sight about 3 p.m. on the 18th. The men of [18 Battalion](#) who lined the Orion's rail for the first glimpse of an overseas port saw nothing to be excited about—a low, dry-looking shore line, a few factory chimneys, a gasometer—but that was from a distance. On closer examination [Fremantle](#) turned out quite different.

After dinner that evening the first of many tidal waves of New Zealand troops hit [Fremantle](#), swept through the town, carried on up the Swan river with slightly diminished vigour, and gatecrashed the defences of [Perth](#).

The atmosphere in both towns that night was later described by the First Echelon's commander as one of almost hysterical goodwill and comradeship. There was general leave until midnight. Hotels were open, and though the New Zealanders found difficulty at first in changing their money, this eased up as the evening wore on and the bonds of international friendship were woven more tightly. The New Zealanders' behaviour could not be classed as excellent, but considering that the whole First Echelon was getting together for the first time, along with the Aussies into the bargain, it wasn't too bad.

Next day (19 January) will live for ever in the minds of those who were there as the day of the Great Trek. The troops from the Orion had to turn to that morning, rip their nice new shoulder patches off their 'giggle suits' and sew them on the lighter

drill tunics. Then at 10 a.m. they paraded and set out for [Perth](#), 12 miles away. They marched in boots for the first time since leaving [Wellington](#). Some of them were suffering from a re-vaccination, and many more from the effects of the previous night. The sun was blazing, the temperature nearly 100 in the shade; though there wasn't any shade to speak of.

Nearly four hours later a weary body of men came to a ragged halt outside the Anzac Club in [Perth](#), and was dismissed with leave until midnight. Weary, but almost intact—wonderful to relate, out of more than 1400 men only eight had fallen out! The battalion band had given them an occasional boost along, and gifts of fruit and beer had been pressed on them by the people living along the route; but they were fit.

They had also made history, though they didn't realise it until later. Long after the sweat and discomfort of the march were forgotten, its honour remained, boasted of wherever [18 Battalion](#) went, and recounted with more and more fearsome exaggeration as the years went on. It was an exclusive affair, too, entitling its participants to a certain deference from all other New Zealanders. Campaigns were danger and hardship shared by all; but the march to [Perth](#) was the monopoly of [18 Battalion](#) and the ASC, and jealously they guarded its memory.

Controversy followed the march. The ineffable *Smith's Weekly* commented on it as follows:

March by the New Zealanders from [Fremantle](#) to [Perth](#)—12½ miles—will never be forgotten, not only by the unfortunates who took part, but by the silent sympathetic crowd which lined [Perth's](#) streets watching the troops pass through the city. One hundred degrees in the shade it was that day, and the troops arrived in [Perth](#) at the peak of the heat—after 1 p.m. Some of them were reeling, and doggedly persisted, only to collapse in the main streets. These men had not had boots on for a fortnight, and then to trudge 12½ miles in the heavy unyielding military issue was asking too much of them. When the Enzeds had gone through the city and were allowed to dismiss, most of them did not worry about food. They were too eager to get to the nearest water-tap to cool their feet, on which blisters, the size of an egg in some cases, had formed. It was rumoured that the march had been a

disciplinary one. If so, the troops paid not only by the sweat of their brows, but in weariness, exhaustion and blistered feet.

Not only the allegation of ill-treatment, but even more the suggestion that the New Zealanders' conduct might have been anything but exemplary, raised quite a storm in New Zealand. Parents deluged the Government with inquiries and requests to investigate, and the Government, concerned at this 'undesirable publicity', asked [Australia](#) for the facts behind the article, adding, 'Our newspapers have not been allowed to mention the departure of the First Echelon—what is the idea letting Smith's Weekly do it?'

The soft answer came back. The editor of Smith's Weekly had been rapped over the knuckles for his indiscretion. As for the New Zealand soldiers—well, boys will be boys! 'The only complaints made,' said the Australian Government, 'emanated from temperance organisations and the Railway Department....At no time did the behaviour of the troops become vicious....No exception seems to have been taken by the general public to the conduct of the troops.'

[Major-General Freyberg](#) also said that the allegations of uncouth conduct were uncalled for, and that the march had not been disciplinary, but had been made to keep the men's feet in condition. This last statement would have been greeted with raised eyebrows by those with raw feet to show for it, but it was official exoneration for misdeeds committed in [Perth](#) and [Fremantle](#).

To penetrate behind the scenes briefly, the march had been thought up by Lieutenant-Colonel Gray and [Lieutenant-Colonel Crump](#)² of the ASC (commander of the troops on the Orion), officially as a training march, but also as a means of getting the men another day's leave ashore. Without it they would have had to spend the day aboard the Orion, on orders from the convoy commander, while the men from other ships had leave. As it was, nearly every New Zealander from every ship was in [Perth](#) that day.

We left [18 Battalion](#), tired and soaked with sweat, let loose in [Perth](#) until midnight. Tired, yes, but not too tired to let itself go. Like the rest of the New Zealanders, it was out to enjoy itself, and enjoy itself it did. The Australian soldiers in town joined whole-heartedly in the fun, and Kiwis and Aussies together proceeded

to take [Perth](#) over, to 'control' its traffic, to commit mild mayhem on its movable objects, to souvenir advertising posters, and generally to fraternise with each other and with the citizens in the streets and hotels. Pot plants and furniture from the Wentworth Hotel were taken out and put up gaily for auction in the street. Some incidents, such as the carrying of a baby Austin car bodily up the steps of the General Post Office, undoubtedly caused some inconvenience, but even this sort of escapade was tolerated by [Perth](#), which accepted the foreign invasion with the utmost good humour and hospitality. Some New Zealanders, looking back from the viewpoint of the next morning's head, may have considered the hospitality overdone; but it established [Perth](#) in the good opinion of the New Zealand soldier, an opinion that the experience of later contingents was to confirm and heighten.

Trains and buses took the men back to [Fremantle](#) that night, but there were many whose sudden affection for [Perth](#) made it necessary to drag them away. A picket went the rounds and removed the stragglers, and the last to be rounded up rejoined the convoy in the stream off [Fremantle](#) next morning, though there was nobody from [18 Battalion](#) in this select band. Every member of the battalion was safe home on the Orion when she left the port at 9 a.m. on 20 January. There were even some who had finished the evening flat broke, and had to tramp the whole way back to [Fremantle](#); but they made it.

A check parade held on deck that morning revealed some quaint international variations of costume. Some men had merely swapped hats with the Aussies, some jackets as well, while some, obviously unwilling to spoil the ship for a ha'p'orth of tar, had included trousers in the exchange. Many of the new badges issued only a day or two before had vanished, replaced by a bewildering assortment of Australian badges. Naval headgear, both British and French, dotted the parade. Official recognition of the exchanges was given in the battalion's next routine order, where appeared the names of 84 men—HQ Company headed the list with 23, A and C Companies shared the wooden spoon with four each. The fine was a flat rate of 7s. 6d. for each missing article.

On went the convoy, north-west this time, straight out into the [Indian Ocean](#). The Australian escorts were replaced by HMS Kent and the French cruiser Suffren. The heat increased daily, and clothing became scantier in proportion. Some men forsook their cabins and spread blankets on deck at night. The wet canteen and the

swimming pools became even more popular places.

Journalistic collaboration between [18 Battalion](#) and the ASC bore fruit on 21 January with the publication of NZ Abroad, Vol. 1, No. 1. Its eight cyclostyled pages embodied the usual ingredients of a troopship magazine—verse, serious and not so serious, sketches, topical allusions to events and personalities, mild pornography—nothing to distinguish it from scores of others. But it was a pioneering venture. The editors expressed their intention of publishing NZ Abroad twice a week while the voyage lasted, but this was optimistic, as it ran to only three numbers, the third on a grander scale printed in [Cairo](#) shortly after the First Echelon's arrival.

Highlights were few during the voyage across the Indian Ocean. The first flying fish caused a buzz of excitement as they leaped away from the Orion's forefoot. On 23 January the men were officially told (though it was already pretty widely known or guessed) that they were bound for [Egypt](#). On the 25th [Cocos Island](#) was sighted on the horizon, and on the 28th, with none of the traditional ceremonies, the convoy crossed the Equator.

On board the Orion the troops celebrated their last afternoon in the Southern Hemisphere with a grand race meeting. The 'nags' were ingenious devices on the end of strings, wound in by the jockeys from start line to finishing post. Their pedigrees would hardly have been recognised in any stud book—Thirst (by Route March out of [Fremantle](#)), General Malaise (by Vaccination out of Emmo), Many Miles (by Cripes out of New Zealand), to quote a few of the brighter efforts. A sixpenny tote did brisk business. There were five races, after which the winners competed for the 'Z₄ Cup'—this trophy went to the ASC, but horses owned by [18 Battalion](#) filled second and third places.

Shortly after 9 a.m. on 30 January the convoy filed in through the [Colombo](#) breakwater and anchored in the capacious harbour. Lighters were quickly at hand to take the men ashore. From the wharf [18 Battalion](#) marched a mile and a half to Rifle Green, a small park in the middle of the town, where a hurried payout was made, each man getting 10.20 rupees, the equivalent of 16s.—they certainly were not to be allowed to squander their savings! Then they were turned loose with instructions to be back by 4.30 p.m.

The time was tantalisingly short for men having their first glimpse of the East, particularly such a colourful, cosmopolitan spot as [Colombo](#). A look round the main part of the town, a little haggling for souvenirs in the native quarter, a rickshaw ride (nearly everybody had a rickshaw ride), and it was time to go back. A few roving spirits managed to get up into the interior of [Ceylon](#), but most were content to stay in [Colombo](#) and see as much of the town as they could. Only three members of [18 Battalion](#) missed the lighters back.

For the rest of the battalion's stay in port the main fun was provided by the bumboatmen, who swarmed round the Orion in their cockleshell craft, loaded down with fruit and curios. Trade and backchat were brisk. Both goods and money changed hands in baskets on the end of ropes, with invariable arguments as to which came first, the money or the goods. The New Zealanders, though new to the art of bargaining, were picking up its first principles well. Humour was maintained on both sides—the commercial ethics of the East were still a novelty, and the days were not yet when New Zealanders, soured by many bargaining defeats at the hands of 'George Wog', would lose their tempers and resort to boots instead of wits.

Shore leave on 31 January was limited to one man from each platoon, mainly those who had been on duty the day before. The officers and sergeants were taken over to pay a social call aboard the nearby HMS [Sussex](#). They were shown over the ship, and stayed for dinner, but the visit was quieter than expected.

Incidentally, it was in connection with HMS [Sussex](#) that the [18 Battalion](#) band had its brief hour of glory. No sooner had the Orion arrived at its anchorage astern of the cruiser than Lieutenant-Colonel Gray ordered the band forward smartly, to show the Navy what it could do. The same activity took place on the [Sussex](#), and the two bands played alternately, the New Zealanders going through their full repertoire, beginning and ending with their own ' [Sussex](#) by the Sea'. They had not long finished when a resplendent naval officer boarded the Orion, thanked the troops on behalf of HMS [Sussex](#) for the compliment paid the ship, but expressed his wonder how the New Zealanders had recognised her, as her name plate had been removed. He was not enlightened.

At 11.30 a.m. on 1 February the convoy left [Colombo](#), cheered on by crowds of natives from the breakwater and the pilot station at the harbour entrance. The

Ramillies was still in attendance, but the other escorts had again changed, and now included the aircraft carrier HMS Eagle. Due west sailed the convoy, towards the searing heat of Aden and the Red Sea.

The usual Sunday morning church parade on 4 February was violently interrupted when, not more than half a mile from the Orion, a plane from the Eagle crashed into the sea. Nearly everybody in 18 Battalion saw the crash, and the pilot's subsequent rescue by launch—for a time the church parade decidedly took a back seat.

Early on the morning of 8 February, off Aden, the convoy divided; most of the ships carried straight on into the Red Sea, while others, including the Orion, put into Aden to refuel. The stay was to be short, but not too short for a look round, so the troops were taken ashore by lighters just after midday and given leave until 4.30 p.m. They accepted the hospitality of the British garrison, heard all about the rain (the first for three years) that had fallen the day before, and took advantage of Aden's being a duty-free port to stock up with cigarettes and tobacco, although there was some difficulty in changing New Zealand money with the Jewish changers who abounded in the town. Apart from this there wasn't much to do but stroll around. By 5 p.m. they were back on board, and about breakfast time next morning away went the Orion on the last leg of the voyage. Through the Strait of Bab el Mandeb; up the Red Sea, with occasional glimpses of arid shores, Africa on the left and Asia on the right; then, on the night of 12 February, Tewfik, and gear packed for departure.

All that could be seen of Tewfik when the Orion first arrived was a line of twinkling lights low on the water. Next morning eager eyes looked on Egypt for the first time, and what did they see? A line of nondescript buildings and camouflaged oil tanks at the port, a few palm trees farther round to the left, a group of army tents; and between all these, and behind them, stretching away and away to the skyline—sand. Sand flat and shimmering, sand in long low ridges. That this sand was to play a dominating part in the whole existence of 18 Battalion for nearly four years was yet hidden in the future, but there it was, miles and miles of it, and more miles beyond the horizon. And near at hand, crowding round the Orion in their little boats, the Egyptians, shouting, spitting, filthy, holding up for sale oranges and cigarettes and wallets, brooches and bracelets. The troops, with lectures on the diseases and bad customs of Egypt fresh in their minds, mostly shied clear for the time being. It

took some time to get used to the sight of George Wog in numbers, to his filth, his informal attire and wheedling ways.

Late that morning the battalion, for the third time in its life, piled into lighters and left the Orion. But this time the men weren't going off gaily for a few hours ashore and a return to their comfortable berths at night. This time they had all their worldly possessions on their shoulders; they were herded into rusty old lighters that had only too obviously been used for lime; they were deposited on the wharf, in this strange land, with even their immediate future a matter for conjecture. Another phase in the battalion's life was about to begin.

¹ [Capt F. Bowes](#), BEM; [Auckland](#); born [England](#), 5 Oct 1907; truck driver; wounded 18 Nov 1940.

² [Brig S. H. Crump](#), CBE, DSO, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); [Lower Hutt](#); born [Wellington](#), 25 Jan 1889; Regular soldier; NZASC 1915–19; Commander NZASC 2 NZ Div, 1940–45; comd 2 NZEF, [Japan](#), Jun-Sep 1947; on staff HQ BCOF and NZ representative on Disposals Board in [Japan](#), 1948–49.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 3 – MAADI CAMP

CHAPTER 3

Maadi Camp

Eighteenth Battalion had little time at [Tewfik](#) to stand and speculate. There was time to take in the hordes of loafers who swarmed round with demands for 'baksheesh' and fought over a coin or a cigarette thrown in their direction, and to shudder at the dirt and the sores which were evidently quite commonplace sights. Then on to the train and away, through the town and its palm trees, out into the desert.

The Egyptian State Railways' third-class carriages are very far from models of comfort, with wooden seats set close together, and no conveniences at all. But the first of these can be got over by sitting on your pack, and as for the second, well, what are the open platforms at the end of the carriages for? Especially when travelling over an unpeopled waste, with nobody in sight.

The rail trip between [Suez](#) and [Cairo](#) is not attractive, but it is typical [Egypt](#), 'miles and miles of...all', in military language. Every now and again there is a station, planted in mid-desert with no visible means of support, inhabited mainly by children in galabiehs or dirty British Army shirts, who flock round the trains with the inevitable cries for 'baksheesh'. That is what the battalion saw during its first three hours in [Egypt](#). Then signs of civilisation began, and suddenly the troops were in [Cairo](#), among wealthy homes and well-kept gardens in violent contrast to the squalor elsewhere. Then past the enormous army depot at [Abbassia](#); the Citadel looming up on the hill to the left; the eerie 'Dead City' with its jumble of roofless, decaying hovels; then the train stopped, and out piled the men.

The spot where I8 Battalion found itself was literally on the edge of the desert. On one side of the railway were trees, green and cool; on the other side was hard, glaring desert. Towards the desert the battalion now marched, led by the pipe band of the [Highland Light Infantry](#). This band had been waiting for the battalion at the stopping place, and it came as a pleasant surprise to find it there, like meeting a friend in a strange land. The march to camp was almost exhilarating after the monotony of the train, even though the road was covered with coarse metal and the men were laden with all their gear. Up a gentle slope and out into the desert a

couple of miles; then before them lay [Maadi Camp](#), journey's end, and a reunion with the advance party.

This advance party of 110 New Zealanders, including two officers and six others from I8 Battalion, had left New Zealand at short notice on 11 December. Its destination had been a dark secret; the rest of the battalion knew it had gone, but only Rumour could say where. Anyway, here it was. It had arrived in [Egypt](#), via [Australia](#), on 8 January, and half its number had at once been sent off on courses of various kinds, while the rest had been taken to this desert waste outside [Maadi](#) and told to prepare a camp. Not on their own, of course. An Indian sapper unit helped to lay a water-pipe system to the camp site, and permanent orderly rooms, offices, cookhouses, shower rooms, wash benches and latrines were built by a horde of Egyptian labourers. A few days before the main body arrived, detachments from British regiments put up tents and mess marquees for them—for [18 Battalion](#) the job was done by men from the [Highland Light Infantry](#).

Later reinforcement drafts would have found it difficult to recognise the [Maadi](#) into which the battalion marched. The camp occupied only a corner of the huge area over which it later spread. The tents were in tight rows, neatly laid out, with the officers' lines at the end and company orderly rooms at the side. The water system didn't function for some days after the New Zealanders arrived—at first it had to be brought in water carts. Eighteenth Battalion had a half-finished [NAAFI](#) canteen which was completed about a fortnight later; it included a wet canteen. There was no lack of accommodation—six to a tent, which is quite comfortable. Low plank beds a few inches off the floor helped to keep the sand out of the blankets. There were kerosene lanterns in the tents.

The camp was situated on gently undulating sand slopes, with here and there a steep rocky outcrop. It wasn't very high up, but from it you could see a long way—to the east the desert stretching away for miles up [Wadi Digla](#), with unlimited room for route marches and manoeuvres; to the north the long ridge of the [Mokattam Hills](#), with the [Cairo](#) citadel visible at the left-hand end, and below it, unseen, the teeming streets of [Cairo](#); to the west the trees of [Maadi](#) village sloping down to the [Nile](#), and beyond it more sand, with the Pyramids of [Gizeh](#) dim on the skyline. For over six months, and again for long periods later, this was to be [18 Battalion's](#) home.

It was lucky that the battalion arrived in [Egypt](#) in February, not July or August. The winter days were warm, nearly as warm as an [Auckland](#) summer, but it was not an enervating heat. Early morning and evening were delightfully cool, and the nights unexpectedly cold, so that you were glad to pile all your blankets on to your bed, and your greatcoat on top. Every now and again, for variety, there was a decidedly cold day.

Lieutenant-Colonel Gray didn't allow his battalion much time to get bored. Two days after its arrival it went on an all-day route march to the Citadel and on into [Cairo](#), headed by the band. This was a combination of business and pleasure, for on reaching the centre of [Cairo](#) the men were released for a while to give it a swift inspection before marching back to [Maadi](#). It was on this occasion that Colonel Gray, at the last halt before entering camp, put across his famous 'This time you have done well—next time you will do better', a phrase which became a sort of byword in the battalion. It was no idle threat, either. They did much better later on.

This private entry into [Cairo](#) caused a furore, for it was quite illegal. Armed troops are not supposed to march through capital cities without permission. However, official action was limited to explanations and apologies, but the strict warning went out that it must not happen again.

On 19 February training began in earnest. For the first fortnight much of it was repetition of the first steps in weapon training, bayonet fighting, signals, section tactics, parade-ground drill. There were sports, including rugby, once a week, all-day route marches on Fridays. Of more interest were the lessons on the new Bren light machine gun that was to replace the clumsy old Lewis, on the 2-inch mortar, and on the anti-tank rifle (later to attain dizzy heights of unpopularity). The battalion had been in [Egypt](#) only a few days when it received about half its establishment of these new weapons, and immediately set out to learn all about them in as short a time as possible. After about three weeks, too, it thankfully exchanged its antiquated web equipment for a new pattern with large pouches, made especially to carry Bren magazines, but just as good for a packet of biscuits or a cake of chocolate.

Considering the warmth of the days, working hours were long. Reveille at six o'clock, and training from 8.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., with compass marches for officers and NCOs on two nights a week, and night manoeuvres for everyone on two more.

In the third week the battalion was out in [Wadi Digla](#) for whole days and evenings, digging and wiring. In the fourth the companies went off one by one to the camp ranges with rifles and Bren guns, and the fifth was devoted mainly to platoon and company manoeuvres. At least, they were called manoeuvres, but they were actually glorified route marches. Lieutenant-Colonel Gray was pushing his battalion hard, and the emphasis was always on route-marching—longer, harder route-marching.

During the first month in [Maadi](#) a number of the battalion, both officers and men, went off on courses. Courses on the Bren gun, the anti-tank rifle, the 2-inch mortar, the Bren carrier; signal, tactical, cooking and drill courses. They came back from these with new knowledge and ideas, which they proceeded to put into practice and pass on to the rest. There was a lot to learn, and a lot of new weapons and ways in which the battalion had to become proficient before it could regard itself as a fighting unit. Its friends of the Highland Light Infantry helped, too. On 11 March a platoon of them came to live with the battalion for three weeks, to pass on their desert experience and give demonstrations in tactics, use of weapons, loading of trucks, and so on. You couldn't help admiring their drill and weapon handling, even though their tactics smelt of the drill book a little.

When [18 Battalion](#) arrived in [Maadi](#), of course, it had no transport save its own feet. There were numerous vehicles on its war establishment but their issue was not complete until many months later. Soon after its arrival it received about eight light trucks, a few motor-bikes and a water cart. After that the trucks kept trickling in, a few at a time, until by June the battalion had about nine-tenths of what it was supposed to have. Its fighting vehicles, the Bren carriers, came in still more slowly—three in March, no more for some months. Signal equipment was also very short, only a few telephones. It was early June before more arrived. After that the battalion had its full quota of telephones and exchanges, but suffered from a chronic shortage of telephone cable until the end of the year.

But this is looking too far ahead. In March [18 Battalion](#) was still making do with very little, and learning as well as it could with what it had.

It had its share of ceremonial parades, too, along with the other New Zealand units. Within a month of its arrival the big parade ground beside its lines saw inspections by General Wavell (commander of the Middle East Forces), General

Wilson (commander of British troops in Egypt), and the British Ambassador to Egypt. What these distinguished men thought of 18 Battalion we do not know. Towards them the battalion adopted what its members were already beginning to call a 'maleesh' attitude, plus a slight grievance at having to sweat out its Saturday mornings on the parade ground. For these parades the bands of 18 and 20 Battalions combined, the two of them together making up one good-sized band.

Life wasn't all work, though. There was plenty of leave into Cairo—from early March the official allowance was 50 per cent on week nights (if there was no night training) and 80 per cent on Saturday afternoons and Sundays after church parade. This meant in effect that everyone could have leave as often as he could afford it. A fast diesel train service ran from Maadi village to Bab-el-Louk station in the heart of Cairo. At first there was a three-mile walk from camp to Maadi station, but soon the units were given permission to run a truck service, and from early April the Maadi bus service began. This soon became a byword in camp. The buses were old rattletraps, held together apparently by prayer and string, which took you to and from the station for a piastre. Their load capacity was never accurately determined, as they could always cram one more on somewhere, even if it was on a front mudguard.

There was plenty to do in Cairo. You could explore the shops for presents to send home, or argue for bargains in the Mousky bazaar; the Egyptian money was easy to get the hang of, and you soon stopped thinking of the piastre ('acker') as twopence halfpenny and began to think in terms of the ackers themselves—a hundred of them to one Egyptian pound, which was a week's pay. You could relax at one of the British servicemen's clubs, or you could 'do' the bars and cabarets if you didn't mind risking a fight, an invasion by the provosts, or a sore head next morning. Less respectable still, you could head for the Wagh el Birket, where every imaginable vice was on display at varying prices.

The day after the New Zealanders' arrival at Maadi the Assistant Provost Marshal of Cairo gave them a talk on the city, with emphasis on the things not to do, and everybody was given a street map which looked like a sea of red with a small white island in the middle. The white was the 'in bounds' area, the red 'out-of-bounds', where it was regarded as unsafe to go. These out-of-bounds areas, despite the warning of disease, danger and drastic punishment, always had an irresistible

fascination for some men.

The battalion's behaviour in [Cairo](#) was no better or worse than that of any other troops away from their own country. Every week brought its quota of men on the mat for drunkenness and other misdemeanours, most of them petty. On 9 March two privates earned the dubious distinction of being the first from the unit to go to the British detention barracks at the Citadel. It would be wrong, however, to think that the whole battalion proceeded to get drunk and take [Cairo](#) apart. As always, the majority behaved well, and managed to enjoy themselves every bit as much as the others.

Nearer home, that wonderful institution, the [Maadi Tent](#), down on the outskirts of [Maadi](#) village, was opened on 24 February. You didn't need leave to go there, and you could get a snack or a cup of tea or a cold drink, or listen to a concert or just relax in a comfortable chair. The Maadi tennis and golf clubs were made available to the New Zealanders, too, and many of the British residents of [Cairo](#) and [Maadi](#) opened their doors to them.

If you didn't want to go even as far as [Maadi](#) village, there was always Shafto's picture theatre. This stark building in the centre of the camp, thrown together out of wood and sacking, was [Maadi](#)'s best-known landmark. For three ackers you could get a seat on a hard wooden bench, and all the fun of the fair thrown in, reels screened out of order, breakdowns of the projector, audible comments from the audience, sound that vibrated round the theatre so much as to be often unintelligible. There was no doubt that you got your money's worth at 'Shufti's'. Every now and then something really exciting would happen, like the April night when the whole front wall blew down, screen and all, in mid-performance. Or the celebrated occasion a week or so later when the audience, irritated by the evening's delays and breakdowns, got out of hand and wrecked the theatre.

The battalion's own social centre was the [NAAFI](#) canteen. You could go there in the evening for a game of 'housie', cards, or just for a 'natter' over a bottle of Stella beer, a plate of eggs and chips, pies or doughnuts. It was a noisy, friendly, smoky place, and although the building looked as if a good push would flatten it, it stood up to a lot of hard wear.

The meals in [Maadi](#), after a shaky start, were plentiful, and surprisingly good. The cooking was still done centrally for the whole battalion, but there was little complaining. The men ate in big marquees at first; wooden mess huts (flimsy-looking edifices like the [NAAFI](#)) were built during the first two months, and came into use at the end of April.

In those days everybody was perpetually hard up. The pay wasn't much when there were all the delights of [Cairo](#) to spend it on. To relieve the position, there was a free issue of fifty cigarettes weekly, with chocolate for the non-smokers. Washing was collected and done free by a native contractor, if you didn't mind taking pot luck on getting your own clothes back.

Taken all round, [18 Battalion](#) was comfortable enough. The main shortage was mail from home. The speedy airgraphs and air letter-cards that came in later had not yet been thought of. In 1940 mail came in once or twice a month on the average, and mail day was a special occasion.

During the early weeks the battalion was plagued by three things in particular—flies, a diarrhoea epidemic, and George Wog. In an attempt to deal with the first two, a great cleanliness campaign was organised, not only in [18 Battalion](#) but right through [Maadi Camp](#). Garbage cans and latrines were subjected to a new, stringent code of sanitation. Not only was the camp purified, but the desert all round was combed, and traces of the Egyptians' promiscuous presence removed.

The Egyptians themselves were not so easily removed. Hawkers of oranges and other delicacies were a curse to [Maadi](#) until banished, and after that they sat out in the desert just beyond the camp limits, or infiltrated inside if they could. News vendors bawling the virtues of the Egyptian Mail and Egyptian Gazette or proclaiming the loathsome diseases allegedly suffered by [Hitler](#) still roamed through the camp. The Egyptians' skill in quiet thievery was recognised early in March by the issue to every tent of a chain and padlock, with which all rifles were to be secured to the tent pole day and night. Rifles and other weapons were particularly beloved of the Wogs—they fetched high prices.

Easter was early in 1940, and [18 Battalion](#) kept holiday from Good Friday to Monday. Nearly everybody went on leave, some on conducted tours to the Pyramids

or north from [Cairo](#) to the [Delta Barrage](#) with its pleasant green gardens, others on a long weekend trip up the [Nile](#) to [Luxor](#).

The training after Easter took a new turn. Not so much parade-ground stuff, more manoeuvres (company and battalion) away out up the wadi. In the first few days of April there were skirmishes, one company against another, and concerted battalion exercises in which the companies lived as separate entities (including cooking) for the first time. On 1 April, appropriately, [18 Battalion](#) was caught by one of [Egypt's](#) rare rainstorms while on its way out to an all-night bivouac, and so thoroughly drenched that the night's work was abandoned. Then on 8 April the whole of [4 Brigade](#) ([18](#), [19](#) and [20 Battalions](#)) marched out of [Maadi](#) for the first brigade exercise, lasting four days. Ten miles south to [Helwan](#) aerodrome by the main road running alongside the [Nile](#), then off the asphalt on to the sand and stones of the desert for five more miles before the real manoeuvre began.

On its excursions up [Wadi Digla](#) and on this first brigade manoeuvre [18 Battalion](#) learnt a lot. The lessons were no longer the elementary ones, but the more advanced aspects of living and fighting in the desert. The battalion had now been hammered into shape, and was getting its first polish.

From a tactical point of view the desert is no different from anywhere else. The battalion's tasks in the brigade manoeuvre were much as they would have been on a similar occasion in New Zealand. Occupation of an outpost line; reserve position in an attack; a night attack, withdrawal, and fortifying a defensive position. Not that the rank and file knew or cared that they were doing all this. All they knew was that they were shoved round over miles of hard, dry desert, marching till they nearly dropped and then digging holes. What they learnt was different. They learnt how hard it is, on a hot dusty day, not to drink deeply from your water bottle, and how fatal it is to succumb to the temptation. They learnt how tiring it is to march over soft sand, and how at night small wadis and bumps in the ground become traps for the unwary. They learnt that it is easy to lose direction at night, and how little you can rely on landmarks that look quite clear in the daytime. They learnt how to travel light, with food, toilet gear, rifle and ammunition, and as little else as possible. The truck drivers learnt (if they didn't know already) that driving across country at night without lights is difficult. The quartermaster's staff learnt something of the technique of getting supplies to a battalion out in the 'blue', and distributing them to the

companies—the question of supplies is of the highest importance in the desert, and [4 Brigade](#) tried to make this manoeuvre as like the real thing as possible in this respect. The [18 Battalion](#) cooks did their cooking on patent oil-drip burners, long home-made iron boxes dug into the sand, with tall chimneys at the back. The battalion was proud of these burners, which worked very well on used engine oil and water.

For three days the battalion floundered in the sand, advanced six miles and retired again, something like the manoeuvres of the Grand Old Duke of [York](#). Then for another day it sat in a defensive position, and next morning the whole brigade went back to [Maadi](#).

On 22 April another full-scale manoeuvre, this time a divisional one, began away out beyond [Helwan](#). For the men the procedure was much the same as before—rush round the desert, or bed down miles from nowhere, with no idea of the general picture. They only realised that they were hot, thirsty and grimy, and that they couldn't do anything about it in the meantime. This exercise ended at dawn on 25 April with a combined Anzac Day service out in the desert, after which everybody returned to [Maadi](#). Those who had been on the manoeuvre had all-day leave on the 26th.

In both these exercises [18 Battalion](#) was handicapped by another outbreak of diarrhoea far worse than the one in March. This ailment, elegantly known as 'Gyppo tummy' or 'Wog guts', was never far away while the New Zealanders were in [Egypt](#). Strict sanitary precautions might lessen the hordes of flies and the severity of the epidemics, but they couldn't banish them altogether. It laid you out for three or four days if you got it badly, and even with a light dose of it you crept round like a ghost and were happy to leave all food alone for a while. The battalion was smitten in mid-April—from the 15th to the 21st 107 men were sent off to hospital, and many more to the battalion's own isolation tent, and thus missed the divisional manoeuvre, as all who had been ill within the last ten days stayed behind in camp.

Part of the blame for the outbreak was attributed, whether justly or not, to the first bad khamsin the New Zealanders had experienced. This hot desert wind, bringing with it fine sand which penetrated clothes, blankets and kitbags, eyes, mouths and noses, hit [Maadi](#) on 13 April. The battalion was to experience worse

ones later, but at the time it seemed as if nothing could be worse. [Egypt's](#) stocks went down with a bump.

April in [Egypt](#) is a transitional month from the comparative cool of winter to the blistering heat of summer, and was therefore a month of changes in [18 Battalion's](#) domestic arrangements. On the 13th, immediately after the [Helwan](#) manoeuvre, the battalion got its first issue of summer clothing. For a fortnight yet the men had to struggle into 'giggle suits' for dinner in the evening, and not until the end of April were they allowed to wear drill suits in the evenings, and shorts on leave. The drill was comfortable enough, but the original issue was now getting a bit the worse for wear; many of the men had had new ones made by a local tailor, who would fit you out with a drill uniform in under twelve hours for just over a pound.

Of the new summer clothes, the light khaki shirts and underpants found immediate favour; the woollen hose tops and puttees not so much, because they were finicky to put on. The topees weren't as comfortable as the old New Zealand peaked hats, and were rather looked down on. The gem of the lot was the shorts, cut long and wide, the greatest possible contrast to the 'snake-proof' serge. Still, they were comfortable, and it was a great thing to have the air getting at your legs.

Nobody works all day in an Egyptian summer—it would be foolish to expect it. So on 29 April the unit changed over to a summer routine. Reveille at 5.30 a.m. from now on; work from 6 to 11.30 a.m., with a halt for breakfast; after lunch, no work until 4.30 p.m. You can't escape the summer afternoon heat in [Egypt](#), but by staying in the shade of your tent you can make it a little more bearable. At the same time every tent was issued with that necessary instrument, a fly swatter.

It was about now that 'zirs' began to appear in large numbers in [Maadi](#). These porous pots, bought from Egyptian hawkers, did great service in keeping water down to a drinkable temperature, and the tent without one was poorly off indeed. They had to be filled often because the water in them evaporated fast, but that was a trifling inconvenience to put up with for the sake of having a mouthful of cool water always handy.

The training wasn't so strenuous as it had been. Energetic stuff like physical training and bayonet fighting was kept for the beginning of the day, 6 to 7 a.m.,

before the sun really got fierce. Later in the day the battalion practised the more complicated handling of Bren gun and anti-tank rifle, or learnt how to camouflage itself away from the enemy's view. There was still the occasional night exercise, but not so much route-marching as before.

The summer was made much less unpleasant by the [Maadi](#) swimming baths, opened at the beginning of April. Inevitably, they at once became one of the camp's most popular institutions, a position which they held until the last Kiwi left [Maadi](#) in 1946. Their only drawback was their distance from camp—two miles down the road towards [Maadi](#) village, not far from the railway siding where the Kiwis had first arrived. But to immerse yourself in the cool water, to laze about with nothing on, that was worth the walk down. It was difficult sometimes to find a spare space in the water, and almost from the beginning the baths had to be rationed, different units using them at different times. Swimming became [18 Battalion's](#) main recreation. At the end of May a relay team of twenty from the battalion won the divisional inter-unit championship and a cup presented by [General Freyberg](#).

With the coming of May, the war moved closer.

Before this, though the New Zealanders were on active service, the war had been something remote. Now the possibility of [Italy's](#) joining in began to loom larger, and the British command in [Egypt](#) began to sit up and think how silly it would look if the Italians took it into their heads to invade [Egypt](#) by air. [Egypt](#) ([Cairo](#) in particular) was stiff with Italians and Italian sympathisers. Anything might happen. So the Army began to think up plans to counter this.

In [Maadi Camp](#) the precautions were mostly defensive. Blackout after 7 p.m.; an air-raid warning system; anti-aircraft and gas sentries; fire-fighting teams; first-aid and decontamination posts. Fourth Brigade Headquarters set up some anti-aircraft machine-gun posts, but the battalions had nothing heavy that could be used against attacking planes, and so their main role could only be to sit and take it, and clean up the mess afterwards. New gas masks were hurriedly handed out to everybody.

The first blackout practice was held on 5 May. You could still use a lantern, carefully dimmed with blue paint, in your tent, but all else was black. Truck headlights were also dimmed with paint. From 7 May there was a full week's try-out

of the precautions. Most of [18 Battalion](#) took a poor view of this, as they had nothing to do. There were active jobs for fewer than a hundred of its members, and the rest simply went about their normal business, with the great disadvantage that evening leave was cancelled. You could still go to [Cairo](#) in the afternoon if you cared to brave the heat, but you had to be back by 7 p.m.

For the time being there were no desert exercises, but while the week's try-out was in progress [18 Battalion](#) (except for those on air defence duty) went up [Wadi Digla](#), along with 19 and 20 Battalions, and dug. Digging in the May heat was no joke, but they dug, and wired, and laid stones to represent mines, until in five days they had a complete model battalion position, with full-sized trenches, dug away out there in the middle of nowhere. Then for a day and a night the battalion manned the position before moving back to [Maadi](#). When the men came back they learnt that [Maadi](#) would only be a brief stopping place on their way into [Cairo](#).

This was where the Cairo Internal Security Scheme came in. This plan rather optimistically entailed co-operation between British and Egyptian troops if the skies over [Cairo](#) suddenly began raining Italians. Egyptian battalions were made responsible for the city, and as their immediate support 4 Brigade Headquarters and [18 battalion](#) were to move into town during the early hours of 16 May.

The move was made in good old army style, at very short notice. The battalion went to bed up [Wadi Digla](#) quite unsuspecting on the 15th, was roused from its dreams at 3.30 a.m., and by six o'clock was piled into ASC trucks at [Maadi](#) and on its way to Kasr-el-Nil, the big British barracks beside the [Nile](#) in the heart of [Cairo](#). Only the Reinforcement Company stayed behind.

Not until [18 Battalion](#) was in Kasr-el-Nil did it know what the fuss was all about. After seeing the battalion installed, Lieutenant-Colonel Gray went off to GHQ and was told the story—if trouble broke out, a number of known Italian agents in the city were to be rounded up. The battalion was to be on four hours' notice all the time, and nobody was to be on leave in the evenings. Liaison officers went off to live with the two Egyptian battalions in [Cairo](#). The same day the men got their first steel helmets since leaving New Zealand.

Kasr-el-Nil was a come-down after [Maadi](#), which by now was home to the Kiwis.

Instead of the wide open spaces, the tents, and the comparative freedom, there was a gloomy old E-shaped brick barn built round a paved yard, with the Nile as the fourth wall. It seemed like a jail to 18 Battalion. The six days it spent there were long, hot, boring days. Nothing happened; not even one small Fascist made any trouble. After all the early morning rush and bustle, with its attendant rumours, this was an anticlimax.

Only the keg incident livened things up for a time. This began when a large keg of beer vanished off a truck unloading at the barracks canteen, and led to a fruitless full-scale search. Lieutenant-Colonel Gray told a poker-faced battalion that the whole thing was very mysterious, so much so that he would be pleased to be told at some future date just where the keg had been hidden.

Despite this brief excitement, the six days dragged badly; then, just at lunchtime on 21 May, more rush orders, more tumult and shouting, and an hour later the battalion was on its way back to Maadi. No drastic change in the situation, no spectacular action ahead, in spite of the rumour-mongers—the battalion was to stay on four hours' notice to carry out exactly the same job as before. No wonder it asked itself bitterly, 'What does the Army think it's up to?'

Even this wasn't all. The battalion now spent nine days on edge at Maadi, doing a little sporadic training and taking day about with 19 and 20 Battalions to be on call in case things flared up. There was no leave on duty days, of course. The battalion was on 15 minutes' notice in the daytime, 30 minutes' at night, and during stand-to (3 to 5 a.m. and 6 to 8 p.m.) on five minutes' notice. This meant that for those two early morning hours, and again in the evening, the men packed all their gear, climbed into full web equipment, and sat in ASC trucks on the parade ground waiting vainly for something to happen. Then, as nothing ever did happen, they climbed out again and went about their lawful occasions. Training on duty days was pretty harmless; nobody who has been hauled out of bed before 3 a.m. can possibly get much kick out of a day's training. After the first day all the heavy gear, except what was actually in use, was left on the trucks, which stayed in readiness on the parade ground.

The rumours that flew during these few days were wonderful. The situation was made for rumour. The Germans had been pushed back in Belgium—the Germans had

broken through in [Belgium](#)—the New Zealanders were going to [France](#)— [Italy](#) was in the war—the Italians had been knocked back on the Egyptian frontier—the Italians had pushed forward over the Egyptian frontier, and were advancing fast—the New Zealanders would be going up into the desert any time to stop them. This last was the favourite. Wishful thinking, of course. The last few weeks of playing round [Maadi](#) and [Cairo](#) had done much to glamourise the desert in the Kiwis' eyes. Also, [18 Battalion](#) had responded well to the training it had been through; it was now fit to fight, and terrifically keen. 'The blue' was spoken of with a sort of wistfulness.

Then, on 30 May, another sudden call—everything had to be packed up right away, ready to move. Surely this was it. It must be. In a flurry the battalion packed, clambered on to its trucks, and away—where to? Back to Kasr-el-Nil. The comments were unprintable. Kasr-el-Nil was very far from being [18 Battalion's](#) idea of a battleground. The only fighting to be done there was an inglorious campaign, not even against Italian agents, but against something one degree lower in the scheme of things—the bed-bug.

It is sad, but it must be recorded. To [18 Battalion](#) goes the distinction of having introduced the bed-bug into the New Zealand Division. Out from the crevices in Kasr-el-Nil's bricks poured the invaders, infiltrated into blankets, clothes and packs, and there made the journey back to [Maadi](#), where they established themselves, never again to leave. The story that they were planted by Fifth Columnists is quite groundless, but they might well have been, so much did they cost the Kiwis over the next five years in annoyance, wakefulness, bad temper, and time wasted hunting them. The honour of having brought them in is one that the battalion could well do without.

Six more days at Kasr-el-Nil, days of heat, boredom and parade-ground drill. The battalion was on two hours' notice now. Leave into [Cairo](#) was doled out two hours at a time, which is just enough to whet the appetite. Nobody was sorry when on 4 June the [18th](#) was ordered back to [Maadi](#) again, its place at Kasr-el-Nil to be taken by [19 Battalion](#). It packed up next morning and left at 10 a.m., passing [19 Battalion's](#) convoy on the way.

Back at [Maadi](#) the 'duty battalion' routine came into operation again, only now it was every second, not every third day. The situation was still uncertain, and

anything was likely to happen any time, so the duty battalion had to be there waiting in its trucks for four hours daily. Leave was easier to come by this time, however. There was plenty of it after work on the off days.

Better than any [Cairo](#) leave was the divisional 'change of air' camp at [Sidi Bishr, Alexandria](#), which opened in May. During the month [18 Battalion](#) sent two big drafts there for a fortnight, the first of 65 men and the second of 75. These drafts were made up by company quotas, with preference for men recovering from sickness. There was never any trouble filling up the numbers—the sea air and salt water of [Sidi Bishr](#) were much sought after.

However, 140 men is only a fifth of a battalion, and those who were not lucky enough to get to [Alexandria](#) had to make the best of the monotony of Kasr-el-Nil and [Maadi](#). It seemed as if this messing round was going to last to doomsday—until 10 June.

At 6 p.m. on that day the battalion climbed into its trucks for the usual two-hour stretch. At 8 p.m. it morosely climbed out again. At 8.30 the telephone wires began to hum. The news was round the battalion with amazing speed. [Italy](#) was in. One more enemy to face—but for [18 Battalion](#) this was a matter for joy, not gloom. Now at last, thank God, the messing round would be over. Surely something would happen now.

And so it did, for a few hours. The rest was anticlimax.

No sooner had the news come through than [Maadi Camp](#) went into feverish action. Announcements in Shafto's, the canteens and the [YMCA](#) brought the men tumbling out. The battalion's carriers were sent out in haste up [Wadi Digla](#) to recall Reinforcement Company, which was out there by itself acting the part of 'the enemy' for another battalion. The plan prepared weeks ago for this emergency now became reality. Tents were struck, moved out of their tight precise rows, spread far apart over a big stretch of desert, re-erected. Working like demons, the men had their tents ready for occupation again soon after 2 a.m. Then they fell into bed, to be up again early next morning digging slit trenches beside the tents.

In the meantime, A Company (now under Captain [Kelleway](#)^{1.}) had been spirited away on some obscure mission, from which it reappeared the following afternoon. It

hadn't gone far; only to [Tura](#), two miles up the [Nile](#) from [Maadi](#), where one of the biggest ammunition dumps in the Middle East was tucked away in caves in the hillside. Here it had reinforced the British guard until permanent reinforcements arrived.

From now on there was a palpable change in the air of [Maadi Camp](#). The troops were on a war footing now. Officers had to carry revolvers wherever they went, and everybody had to have his field dressing with him all the time. The excitement certainly sagged as the days passed and nothing more happened, and the old routine was kept on for a few days more, but there was an expectancy about that had not been so marked before.

Then, on 17 June, the news arrived. Eighteenth Battalion was going 'up the blue'.

There wasn't going to be any chance for the battalion to cover itself with glory yet. It was to be away only about a fortnight, along with [19 Battalion](#), digging defences in the sand several hundred miles from the battlefield. A useful role, perhaps, but not spectacular.

This was the battalion's first long-distance move in convoy— that is, with its own trucks carrying all its stores and equipment, and the men travelling in ASC three-tonners. Everything was to be taken, tents and all; except for Reinforcement Company, the Cinderella company, which was to stay behind, as it always seemed to do when anything interesting was on. The three Bren carriers with their crews went up by train.

To the question, 'What was the most important manoeuvre an infantry battalion had to carry out in the Second World War?' a likely answer might be, 'Move in convoy.' It was the usual way of getting a battalion about from place to place, and was to be [18 Battalion](#)'s normal mode of travel for over two years. It sounds easy— jump into your trucks and rush away over the countryside—but it is really a highly complicated proceeding, demanding accurate timing and teamwork from a lot of people. One of the marks of a raw or ill-disciplined battalion is bad convoy work. The [18th](#) was now no longer raw, and certainly not ill-disciplined, and this was reflected in the smoothness of its convoy work.

A convoy's timing and route are usually laid down by 'higher up', and if they are not kept to, other bodies of troops on the move are likely to be inconvenienced, and there may be traffic jams. The battalion must arrange meals, contact with its ASC trucks, petrol supplies, packing and loading, and all this sort of detail so as to ensure that it gets away on time. It must decide its order of march, and see that the trucks are marshalled in that order without muddle or waste of time. It must move at a speed which will keep the convoy to time. Its provosts must patrol the convoy, and sometimes act as traffic policemen at places where drivers are likely to go wrong. Each driver must keep his truck in such condition that it will not break down on the way. An advance party must go on ahead to see that the night's bivouac area is clear, to meet and direct the convoy when it arrives. The cooks must be ready to go into action immediately on arrival, and have a meal ready quickly. If necessary, supplies of petrol, oil, water and so on during the move must be arranged beforehand. The mechanics and the medical section must be always ready to repair trucks or men. And many other details.

At 8 a.m. on 18 June [18 Battalion's](#) convoy left [Maadi Camp](#).

The move was a 'tactical' one—that is, organised as if the unit was in the battle zone, with protection against any untoward event that might happen. Not that any were expected this time. It was mainly for practice. So the battalion moved well spaced out, 175 yards between trucks (in army parlance, ten vehicles to the mile, or VTM for short), ten-minute intervals between companies, Bren guns with each company set up on top of trucks for anti-aircraft defence, signallers with each company, every man wearing web equipment, with rifle and ammunition handy, and gas masks at the 'alert' position. Everybody carried his own lunch for the day, and a full water bottle.

Through the outskirts of [Cairo](#) and past the Pyramids streamed the convoy through the June heat. North along the [Alexandria](#) road, with the cultivated [Nile](#) delta on its right, and on its left 'the blue'. It travelled slowly, much too slowly for the drivers and the troops, who fretted somewhat at having to crawl along this lovely tarsealed road. By 3 p.m. it was at [Amiriya](#), only 70 miles from [Cairo](#). Here it turned left off the road, and bumped across the desert for a few more miles before stopping for the night just after 4 p.m.

During the day, as has been seen, the anti-aircraft platoon had kept its Bren guns ready for action. Now at the bivouac area its men dug pits and set the guns up in them for the night. They weren't so very far from [Alexandria](#), which was already being raided every now and again by Italian planes. You never knew.

Nobody bothered putting up tents, which aren't necessary in [Egypt](#) in June. Some of the men slept in their trucks, some under the stars. They were happier than they had been for a long time, even though the cooks, not yet experienced at getting meals on the move, didn't have dinner ready until 9 p.m. Camp life, with its rules and regulations and its messing about, was left behind, for a short time at any rate. The time was to come later when every man in [18 Battalion](#) longed for the comparative comfort of [Maadi](#) and the luxuries of [Cairo](#), but now they were enjoying a release from all that.

At 8 a.m. next day the battalion was on the move again, across the desert for a few more miles and then on to the sealed road running west along the coast, a road which it was to travel several times later under violently different circumstances. Now, as always, it was full of traffic in both directions—you never saw that road empty. The convoy's speed was stepped up considerably, which pleased everyone.

The Mediterranean—long stretches of the road ran within sight of it—looked tantalisingly cool on a hot summer day, while [18 Battalion](#) sat and sweltered in its trucks. So its joy can be imagined when at 4 p.m. it reached its destination 12 miles short of [Mersa Matruh](#), and found that its camp site was right on the coast. Despite a vicious dust-storm, the men had their tents up in quick time, so eager were they to get into the water. For most of them this was the first swim in the [Mediterranean](#), and its clean sand and buoyant, salty water were blessings straight from Heaven.

While this move was going on, 10 Platoon of B Company, under Second-Lieutenant [Sutton](#),² had gone off 1200 miles in the other direction, escorting a trainload of arms and stores to [Khartoum](#). Its journey was a long-drawn-out one, ten days in tropical heat, by train, river steamer, and train again. Mounting guard on open railway trucks in that heat was no joke, but the men were cordially greeted wherever they stopped, and again at [Khartoum](#), where the local British commander welcomed them as the first New Zealand troops to enter the [Sudan](#). They rejoined the battalion on 1 July.

The move away from [Maadi](#) meant the end of [18 Battalion's](#) band, which was looked on as unnecessary away from base. It was disbanded, and its members went back to the companies. Most of them went to [4 Brigade](#) Headquarters to help form the brigade band early in 1941, but the battalion never again enjoyed the luxury of its own band.

¹ [Capt C. T. Kelleway](#), ED; [Hamilton](#); born Aust., 15 May 1905; accountant; wounded 23 May 1941

² [Capt H. B. J. Sutton](#); [London](#); born England, 24 Feb 1908; civil engineer; p.w. Apr 1941; escaped; reported safe 30 Nov 1941; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 4 – GARAWLA INTERLUDES

CHAPTER 4

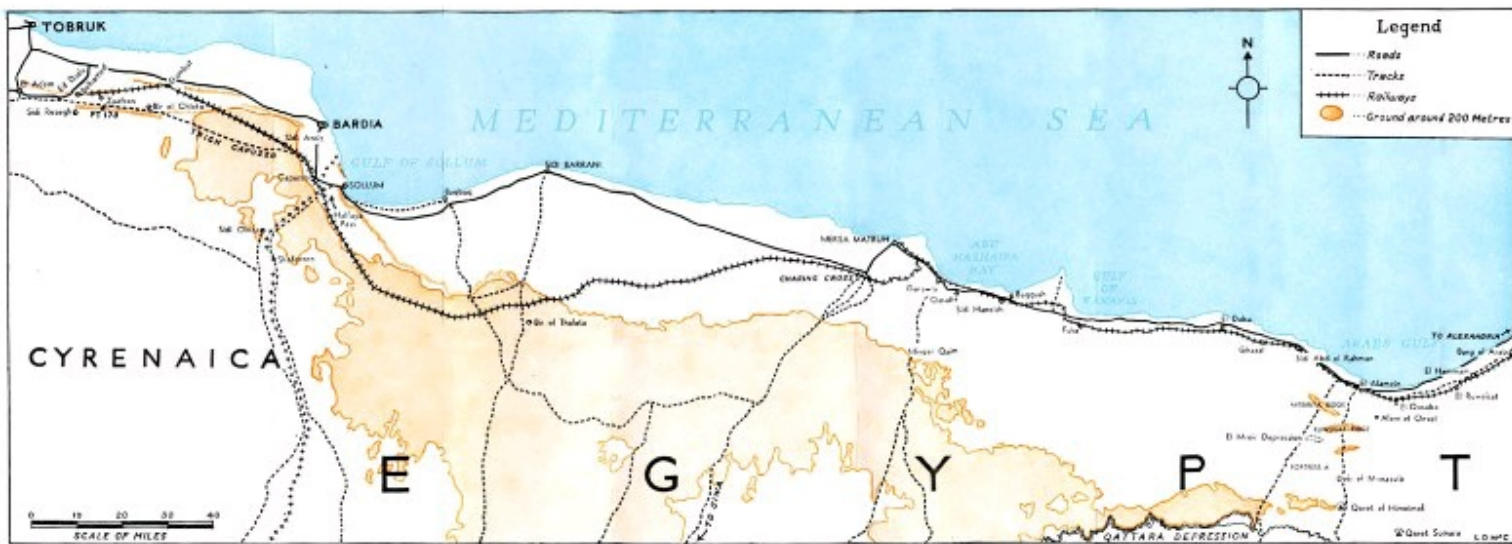
Garawla Interludes

Mersa Matruh, apart from a luxurious tourist hotel or two on the waterfront, is a most insignificant little town. But placed where it is, on the only good harbour for hundreds of miles along that unfriendly coast, and near one of the few sources of water, it is of great strategic importance. No army invading Egypt along the coast can afford to neglect Mersa Matruh. That is why it was to be surrounded with a ring of defences, and why 18 Battalion went there to dig.

The battalion, for the time, was reasonably happy about its role. It would have preferred to be right up at the front taking a more active interest in the Italians on the border but in the meantime it had to make the best of its menial job. It was a good long step forward from Maadi, anyway, and the general feeling was that if the war on the frontier flared up they would probably be into it.

The spot where the battalion ended up was called Garawla. Nobody knew why it was called anything. There was a tiny railway station there, but nothing else to distinguish it from any other patch of desert: a dirty, sandy, stony hole, with a few stunted bushes poking up here and there. The coast in this region was cut by occasional steep-sided wadis running down to the sea, and it was in one of these, Wadi Naghamish by name, that 18 Battalion was to work. The wadi was to be transformed into an obstacle for tanks, with a five-foot ditch twelve feet wide at the bottom, and the spoil piled up into a long mound alongside.

There were two free days before the job began, but they were free in name only. To begin with, fifty unfortunates went off on 20 June and toiled through a hot afternoon on a new runway for the RAF, up on the escarpment some 15 miles east. Next day another party of fifty left for Sidi Haneish, on the coast 30 miles east, where they spent four unpleasant, hot, dusty, nearly waterless days clearing a landing ground. The rest of



the battalion spent the two days digging slit trenches round their tents, digging the tents in, and, of course, popping in for frequent swims.

There was a major upheaval after lunch on the 20th, when a shocked battalion received orders to move inland away from its lovely spot on the coast. This would have been a catastrophe, but luckily the order was countermanded later in the afternoon. The reason given for the order was that the camp was visible from the sea; the reason for the later change, that the risk wasn't so very great. Whoever thought up these bright orders, [18 Battalion](#) considered, was pretty jittery. It must be remembered that [Italy's](#) entry into the war was still very recent, and that the British had not yet acquired their later contempt for Italian military prowess and daring. But the battalion was to suffer more from the same cause within a few days.

Admittedly, the unit was in the danger zone, even if only in theory. While it was at [Garawla](#) there were air raids on [Mersa Matruh](#) almost nightly, and sometimes during the day. All the battalion usually got was disturbed sleep, noise, and the distant sight of tracer and gun flashes. But once or twice the Italians paid attention to the railway line not far from camp, and the odd formation of bombers flew overhead. Then everybody grabbed rifles and whooped off a few rounds at the planes for luck. Occasionally a few trigger-happy soldiers, overcome by the novelty of the proceedings, fired on low-flying British planes, but this novelty soon wore off, and the battalion began to treat the fireworks displays with indifference.

The air raids had their uses. The battalion drew canteen supplies from a [NAAFI](#) dump near [Mersa Matruh](#). Occasionally while the trucks were loading at the dump the air-raid alarm would sound; all the Egyptian attendants would immediately go

for cover, whereupon the drivers would load up the trucks and leave, plus a few extra items.

The battalion soon found that being up the blue wasn't all fun and games. It was terrifically hot, and you couldn't rush off to the [NAAFI](#) for a bottle of cool beer as you could in [Maadi](#). The Matruh drinking water was warm and brackish, the food uninspiring. The company cooks did their best with it, but you can't do much with tinned bully, M & V, and herrings, especially when fresh vegetables are short. One thing, however, made up for a lot, and that was the [Mediterranean](#). The men spent every spare minute in the water. There was plenty of opportunity for swimming; after a heavy digging session it was particularly delightful.

The Wadi Naghamish job began on 22 June. Despite the heat, and a fierce sandstorm that brought work to a standstill for two days, the battalion worked fast, and by 2 July had finished two-thirds of the 1200 yards allotted to it, more than had been expected in the time. The digging site, just inland from the coast road, was about a mile from camp. Working hours were from 7 a.m. until about midday, which left the worst heat of the day free for swimming or relaxation. The sun blazed down during working hours too, of course, but they were made more bearable by daily visits from the water cart and by a 10 a.m. break for a cup of tea. For the job the battalion borrowed extra picks and shovels from the Royal Engineers. At first mechanical tools were forbidden, with the idea of keeping the men fitter. Later this rule was relaxed, and [18 Battalion](#) managed by some means to acquire a compressor and drill, which helped a lot, even though there was only about one man who could use it. Lieutenant [Mackay](#)¹ and CSM George Andrews² of B Company also brought off a good stroke by commandeering a tractor from [Mersa Matruh](#) during an air raid; with the addition of a home-made scoop this greatly eased the labour of removing the spoil.

For their next attack of the jitters the authorities chose a fine time—just after midnight on 24 June. The battalion was suddenly dragged from its sleep, ordered out with all its machine guns, and pushed into the semblance of a defensive line along the beach. Nobody knew at the time what it was all about, but it transpired later that somebody had seen, or thought he had seen, a mysterious ship off the coast, and that an Italian deserter (probably mythical) had said that it contained an invasion force. At any rate, nothing happened. Poor excuse to haul us out of bed,

thought [18 Battalion](#) bitterly, as it stood down after several hours of waiting.

The affair didn't just blow over. On the 26th more orders came through. The battalion was to provide a protective force, a company strong, to defend [Garawla](#), the coast and the railway, against any attack from air or sea. This idea had its good points—the duty company had a day off digging, and stayed in camp on an hour's notice to move wherever the Italians might come. One catch was that the company had to stand to from 4 to 5.15 a.m. and from 6.45 to 7.45 p.m., but by and large it simply meant a whole day free for swimming and loafing. If any trouble had blown up the company would have been able to give quite a good account of itself; not only did it have signallers and medical orderlies permanently with it, but it was specially allotted mortars, carriers and anti-aircraft machine guns from HQ Company, and the whole combination would have made a useful force had it been needed. But, as usual, nothing exciting happened, and it is doubtful if anyone really expected it.

On the 26th, too, [18 Battalion](#) camouflaged its tents by the primitive method of throwing sea water over them, followed by sand and dirt. The idea of this was to give a rough surface to the canvas, and thus reduce reflection from the sun. It worked fairly well, too.

This duty company arrangement lasted for four days, and then there was a general switch round. Nineteenth Battalion took over, handing over to [18 Battalion](#) its own previous task of running the prisoner-of-war camp at [Mersa Matruh](#). At 10 a.m. on 30 June A Company left camp, and returned on the morning of 3 July, after quite a strenuous time guarding five times its own number of Italians and Libyans, supervising their working parties, distributing their food, and acting as their agents, postmen and nursemaids. 'Owing to the inadequacy of the wire around the compounds and the disregard by prisoners of the sanitary arrangements,' wrote Captain Kelleway in his report, 'sentries had to be provided on a scale of one sentry to ten prisoners and a very close watch kept.' This meant hard work for the three days. It was the first time anyone from [18 Battalion](#) had come in contact with the enemy, and a scruffy, weedy bunch they looked. [Italy](#), thought A Company, would have to produce something better if she was to win the war.

The last day of the digging was 2 July, and on the morning of the 3rd the battalion struck tents and packed to leave for [Maadi](#), this time by train, as the ASC

trucks were not available. The battalion's own trucks, with the anti-aircraft platoon for protection, set out immediately after lunch, carrying tents, heavy equipment and kitbags. The rest of the men spent their last afternoon in the water, and at 6 p.m. marched to [Garawla](#) station, about a mile from camp.

This train trip was no better than the last one for comfort— worse, because it was longer and lasted overnight. Some men slept on the floor, others made themselves as comfortable as possible on the seats, others slung blanket hammocks from whatever projections they could find. Whichever way they slept, it was a long restless night.

The train passed through [Alexandria](#) in an air raid as day was breaking, then headed south through the [Nile](#) delta (delightfully green and fresh after [Garawla](#)). After some messing about between [Cairo](#) and [Abbassia](#) it reached [Maadi](#) at 11.30 a.m., and back up the hill to camp straggled the men through the midday heat, weighed down under rifles and packs. Some ASC trucks from the camp were borrowed to help the battalion's trucks bring up the heavy gear, weapons and ammunition.

From one point of view [18 Battalion](#) was glad to see [Maadi](#) again. It meant more leave, more comfort, better food. But it also meant a return to the dreadful round of security duties that had palled so badly before. There was no time to sit and think about it, for the duties began again the same afternoon.

They hadn't been back in camp three hours before orders came in. One company to take over a defence job at [Heliopolis](#) and [Helwan](#) aerodromes; another company to the [Gezira](#) Sporting Club on an island in the [Nile](#) just across from the centre of [Cairo](#). The detachments set out at once, without even waiting for a meal— 11 Platoon of B Company to [Heliopolis](#), the rest of the company to [Helwan](#), C Company to [Gezira](#). What was left of the battalion re-erected its tents and prepared for another spell of the dreary [Maadi](#) routine—reveille at 5.30, early morning PT and route marches, weapon training and drill. Plenty of afternoon leave, which most men could better afford now that they had had the chance of accumulating a little credit in their paybooks.

At Heliopolis and [Helwan](#) B Company took over sectors of the airfield defences.

The platoons had to man anti-aircraft Bren guns day and night; the men were free in their off hours during the day, but spent the nights patrolling their sectors, guarding hangars and petrol dumps. It was the same old story—nothing happened to disturb the peace. But apart from the long hours of night duty these few days were very pleasant. The men had their meals with the [RAF](#), and had the run of the canteens and amenities. A number of them scored sightseeing trips by air over [Cairo](#) and the country round it. It was with a certain regret that they went back to [Maadi](#) on 10 July, when [19 Battalion](#), newly back from [Garawla](#), took over the airfield jobs.

At Gezira Sporting Club, C Company found itself in different circumstances. This job was longer, and so was arranged on a more permanent basis, with afternoon and evening leave, and parties to the swimming baths at Kasr-el-Nil. The company slept in the grandstands of the [Gezira](#) racecourse. Its main job was to guard the sacred person of General Wavell, who lived next door. For this purpose the company kept a guard on the main gate, and three permanent anti-aircraft posts scattered round the grounds. From 6.30 to 7.30 every morning ten men patrolled the racecourse in pairs, with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets, while the General took his daily exercise on horseback round the ground.

C Company was ready for other jobs too. If there was an air raid or a riot, if the Italians came, the company had its course of action all planned to carry out at short notice. But none of these things happened. After three weeks the company was relieved by [19 Battalion](#) and returned to the fold at [Maadi](#).

These detachments had the best end of the stick in July 1940. So did some of the signal platoon, who went to the Divisional Signals on 14 July on a course of instruction that didn't finish until the end of November. For the rest of the battalion at [Maadi](#) it was a pretty dull month. Training had lost its appeal now that there was more serious business not so far away—even new work like assault bridging and river-crossing exercises was carried out half-heartedly. The heat got everyone down, and another outbreak of diarrhoea didn't help. The battalion was in the doldrums. About the only bright spots in the month were all-day picnics to the [Delta Barrage](#) and the Grotto at [Gezira](#), where at least the men could see and feel a little grass. Even those excursions had the edge taken off them by the fact that everyone had to wear full web and carry rifle and ammunition.

As always happens under such conditions, discipline suffered. More men than ever before found themselves on the mat for drunkenness, insubordination, and the other minor offences that crop up when a unit is bored. Tents became untidier, rubbish was tossed into the slit trenches; even a sharp reminder in routine orders didn't help matters much.

From 5 July the battalion was back on the old [Cairo](#) security routine, but nobody was very interested in it any more. The companies left in [Maadi](#) took day about as an 'inlying picket', at short notice to move into [Cairo](#) to protect a couple of wireless stations; of this picket company one platoon stood-to morning and evening, but the only effect on the rest of the company was that it couldn't have leave on those days. From 8 July, when [19 Battalion](#) came back from [Garawla](#), the two battalions divided the duty day about.

On 19 July it was D Company's turn to get away from [Maadi](#) for a spell. It was detailed to accompany an ASC detachment, under command of the Division's DAAG (Major [Maxwell](#) ³), up the blue, and establish one of a chain of desert dumps of food, petrol and water. The spot chosen for this particular dump was almost on the edge of that vast sand swamp, the [Qattara Depression](#), 22 miles south of a little insignificant wayside railway station which nobody had ever heard of. Its name was [El Alamein](#).

This detachment ('Maxforce' by name) moved on 19 July to [Burg el Arab](#), near the coast about 50 miles west of [Alexandria](#), and set up camp beside the bulk supply dump from which its stores were to come. There it loaded its trucks up every morning, moved off along the coast road at 5 p.m., and after dark turned down south across the desert to the dump, where the men dug huge pits 15 feet square, filled them up with the stores, and covered them with sand. This went on for six nights. Each morning after work the convoy moved back up to the coast road before daylight, then headed for home, where the men relaxed once the trucks were reloaded, or made for the beach and cooled off in the water.

This was a good week, even though bouncing round over the desert by night in 3-ton lorries without lights may not be regarded as an ideal holiday. But in July 1940 anything away from [Maadi](#) was fine, particularly if it took you within reach of the coast.

On 28 July Maxforce went back to **Maadi**, where D Company found the rest of **18 Battalion** getting ready to leave for **Garawla** again. There was just time for the company to have a wash and a brush-up and a night's rest. After breakfast on the 29th the battalion's convoy headed for the blue again, and reached **Garawla** at 2 p.m. on the 30th.

Once more the men pitched their tents beside the Mediterranean, grabbed picks and shovels, and got stuck into the work in Wadi Naghamish. There was still plenty to do.

Morale went up again with a bound. Everybody was glad to be back by the sea, and the atmosphere was more free and easy than that of **Maadi**. There was more comfort, too, because the battalion, profiting by its June experience, brought with it such luxuries as bed-boards, and organised its canteen and beer supply better.

The food, as in June, was inclined to be monotonous, nearly all out of tins. Even vegetables were very scarce up the blue— vitamin pills were handed out to make up the deficiency, but who can feel that he has dined well on a vitamin pill? C Company had one grand and glorious windfall when a well-fed calf wandered (or was enticed) into its lines from a nearby Wog camp. It found a gory grave and provided the company with roast dinner that evening. Unfortunately the owner located the remains, and his subsequent protest cost the company £20, but it was generally looked on as worth it.

So August came and went, in scorching heat and dust-storms, while **18 Battalion** sweated and raised blisters on its hands in Wadi Naghamish six mornings a week, dozed off in its tents after lunch, spent the rest of its afternoons in the water, and its evenings on the beach with a bottle or two of beer. During the moonlight period working hours were at night, which everyone considered a good idea, as it dodged the terrible heat. Most of the senior officers were away for a week or two on courses of instruction, their absence making the camp atmosphere even more free and easy. Mussolini's airmen weren't so annoying this time. There were very few raids, and those a long way off, except very early on 24 August, when the 'Ities' paid a surprise visit and threw down a lot of bombs close by without hitting anything— **18 Battalion** lost a couple of hours' sleep, but nothing else.

Every second week the battalion had to provide a protective company, with mortars, carriers and machine guns, just as in June. But the chances of the Italians arriving seemed more remote than ever, and, though the protective company was always there geared for action, it would have been most surprising had anything happened.

There was a record crop of rumours when it became known late in the month that the battalion was to go back to [Maadi](#), pick up the gear it had left behind, and strike camp completely before heading for the blue once more. Some people had the battalion really in action this time; others had it sailing to join the Second Echelon, which was reported to be having a lovely holiday in green, civilised English surroundings. Others doubted that they would ever have to do anything but dig 'dirty big holes' in the desert. The matter wasn't decided when, just after midday on 29 August, the battalion formed up in convoy and drove away eastwards. It bivouacked that night among the sand dunes of [Burg el Arab](#), and reached [Maadi](#) late next morning.

¹ [Maj J. G. Mackay](#), ED; [Papakura](#); born NZ 19 Jun 1913; farmer; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

² Capt G. R. Andrews, MC, DCM, m.i.d.; [Waihou](#); born [Cambridge](#), 12 Sep 1910; farmer and contractor; twice wounded.

³ [Brig D. T. Maxwell](#), OBE, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born NZ 13 Jun 1898; Regular soldier; AA & QMG [2 NZ Div](#) Oct 1941-Jun 1942; Commander, British Commonwealth Sub-Area, [Tokyo](#), 1946–47; Commander, Central Military District, 1952–53.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 5 – 'FREYBERG'S WOGS'

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'Freyberg's Wogs'

The Lines of Communication Sub-Area East was a high-sounding name given in 1940 to the stretch of road, railway, sand and scrub along the Egyptian coast from [Alexandria](#) some 130 miles west to [Qasaba](#). Fourth Brigade was ordered at the end of August to take over the command, protection and administration of this unexciting district, and it was to the western end of it that [18 Battalion](#), all unsuspecting, was directed. Once again hopes of action were to be frustrated.

The sector to be 'commanded, protected and administered' by the battalion lay between [Fuka](#) and [Qasaba](#), a distance of 25 miles. It is clear from the size of this sector that the battalion wasn't expected to have much heavy work to do. There had to be someone there just in case, and that was about all.

The most prominent feature on a map of this new domain is [Ras el Kanayis](#), a long sharp point of land sticking out into the [Mediterranean](#). But militarily this is not very important. The focal point of the sector is at [Maaten Baggush](#) and [Maaten Burbeita](#) near its western end, where groups of wells provide the only reliable water supply for miles. At Baggush the whole battalion was to be concentrated, except for a company at the airfield at [Sidi Haneish](#) (2½ miles to the west) and one at [Fuka](#), right at the other end of the sector, where another airfield had to be looked after.

[Eighteenth Battalion](#), after a grand final weekend spree in [Cairo](#), finished packing at [Maadi](#) on 2 September. An advance party left that day for the new sector to find out what was what, and to direct the main convoy when it arrived. Next morning, after an early breakfast, the battalion handed its base-kit bags in to be stored, took its last look at [Maadi](#) for many months, then headed north again with few regrets. A small rear party stayed behind for a couple of days to give the place a final clean up. As usual, the carriers (the battalion now had six) went up by train.

There was no Reinforcement Company to leave behind this time. This unfortunate company, after months of being cannibalised to fill the gaps in the battalion's ranks, had now been disbanded, the fittest men going to the rifle companies and the rest to the new Northern Infantry Training Depot at [Maadi](#). Many of the latter found their way into [18 Battalion](#) later on, but for the time their ways

parted.

Before leaving [Maadi](#), the battalion exchanged its felt hats for solar topees. This was a well-meant exchange, but the topees were neither popular nor comfortable, and were left off as much as possible.

Early on the afternoon of 4 September, after dropping D Company off at [Fuka](#), the battalion reached [Baggush](#). A Company went to [Sidi Haneish](#), and the rest of the men piled out of their trucks and took stock of their new surroundings. There was a reasonably good beach near by, they were pleased to note. Not so good as the one at [Garawla](#), but quite adequate.

The battalion was by no means the only New Zealand unit at [Baggush](#). An assorted crowd, artillery, Divisional Cavalry, machine-gunners, had been in the vicinity for a week, digging up the desert round the [Baggush](#) and [Burbeita](#) wells. This was all right with [18 Battalion](#). Let them dig, was the attitude; we've had our whack of digging, we're quite happy to get on with our job of protecting the place.

For the first few days it looked like being a holiday. The men took their time putting up the tents and digging the camp in, but apart from that there wasn't much to do for nearly a week. The signal platoon set up a telephone office, and kept up communications to the companies and [4 Brigade](#) Headquarters. The carriers, when they arrived, were split up between [Fuka](#) and [Baggush](#). D Company spent its time patrolling the beach at [Fuka](#), as much in the water as out of it. The rest of the battalion had the usual morning and evening stand-to, and manned the anti-aircraft machine guns round the camp, but that was about all.

They might have known that such a state of affairs wouldn't last. On 9 September the dream came to an end. Those in authority (much higher authority than [18 Battalion](#)) weren't satisfied with a narrow ring of defences round [Baggush](#) and [Burbeita](#). This ring was now to be expanded to a big semi-circle about eight miles across; [18 Battalion](#) was to take over part of it, unship its picks and shovels, and dig.

This wasn't according to [18 Battalion](#)'s ideas at all. The men had 'had' digging by now. It looked as if their fate for the whole war would be to dig holes in the desert. ' [Freyberg](#)'s bloody Wogs' they called themselves with some bitterness. The

officers had to do their best to counteract this attitude, but it was a half-hearted best; they weren't any keener on the idea than the men. However, there was no help for it. The battalion spat on its hands, cursed, and began once again to dig.

It dug, and it dug, and it dug. Six days a week, with no end to the job in sight. The terrible July and August heat had slackened a little now, but it was still hot and dusty. There were three miles of desert to cover, three back-breaking miles of rock guaranteed to test any pick. The battalion's sector was on the eastern side of the [Baggush](#) 'box', facing south-east, with its northern end two miles from the coast. The distance from camp (two to five miles) was vexing, as it slowed up the work— it didn't take long to get there in trucks, but there weren't enough trucks to go round, so most of the men had to walk there and back daily.

D Company's beach patrol at [Fuka](#) ended on the 15th, when it handed over to C Company. Back it came to [Baggush](#), and next day it was digging too. B Company had a few days off later in September, manning anti-aircraft guns round Headquarters Western Desert Force on the coast near [Baggush](#).

Once again the Italian airmen began to take a hand in the game. On 6 September [18 Battalion](#) had its first battle casualties, when Privates Jimmy [Roiall](#) ¹ and Reg [Buckingham](#) ² were caught in an air raid while collecting petrol from [Mersa Matruh](#). Their truck was damaged and both were wounded.

The Italians had a new ace up their sleeves now. One night (14 September it was) a bomber came flying low over [Baggush](#), and next morning there lay on the ground dozens of small round things like Thermos flasks. The difference from ordinary Thermos flasks was that when you touched these they were apt to explode.

These were the moonlight nights, when the Ities might be expected to turn on more raids. All the sentries were specially alerted. Battalion orders were brief and clear: 'Paste hell out of the bastards.'

Again next night the lone Itie was on the prowl. In obedience to orders, every machine gun and rifle in the vicinity opened up at him, with an enthusiasm that can be judged by next day's amendment: 'The order to paste hell out of the bastards must not be interpreted as justifying uncontrolled fire. Platoon commanders held

responsible for wasted ammunition.' The battalion had not yet had many chances to fire at a real live enemy, and it was apt to overdo things a little.

Unfortunately, the results were not too good. The Italian got away, leaving another cargo of his lethal Thermos flasks scattered round. The problem now was, how to get rid of them?

Eighteenth Battalion's ingenuity found a way—carrier crews exploding the bombs with rifle fire from the shelter of the carrier. This was much more to be recommended than the method of a local Arab, who came along tenderly bearing a bomb in his hands, and wondering why all the people he met had such urgent business elsewhere. For three days this shooting went on. Then there were no more bombs left to dispose of, and the marksmen reluctantly went back to their digging.

Considering the boredom and frustration of those weeks in the [Baggush Box](#), [18 Battalion](#) did its work well. The defensive system to be prepared was a complicated one, with dugouts and underground fortifications capable of holding a whole battalion. The rock resisted stoutly, and much of it had to be blasted. This caused an unfortunate accident in the closing stages of the job, when an officer and a private were badly burned by a charge of blasting powder which somehow ignited.

Health was surprisingly good during this period in the [Baggush Box](#); there were no more bad epidemics like the summer ones. But the dull routine of digging didn't suit [18 Battalion](#), particularly after the Italians began their push from the frontier in mid-September. The men were listless, fed up with what they considered this futile digging so far from the scene of action. 'Almost invariably,' said one, 'I reckon tomorrow as being so many days to mail day or pay day, the only two days of any real importance in our present existence.' A spark of excitement was kindled in them whenever squadrons of British bombers flew overhead on their way to [Libya](#), but that was about all that could rouse any enthusiasm.

From 23 September a handful of men went off each week to [Palestine](#) or [Sidi Bishr](#) on leave, but it was the end of the year before everybody in the battalion had had a week off. [Palestine](#) and [Alexandria](#) were welcome rests from the [Baggush](#) dust, but no leave is ever long enough, and when the men got back it was only an hour or two before they were as dirty and gritty as ever.

Until early October the same old daily routine went on. It was a thirsty time, with water scarce and strictly rationed. The food wasn't bad, but lacked greens and potatoes. The beer supply, though fairly regular, was never enough to satisfy seven hundred robust thirsts.

From 7 October digging stopped for a few days while [18 Battalion](#) moved camp inland to be nearer its work, but this was a busman's holiday. The new camp had to be organised and dug in, and then back went the battalion to its defences again. It couldn't go swimming now, but that didn't matter so much, as the weather was cooling off. B Company alone stayed in the old camp for beach defence, going to the digging site by truck every morning and back in the afternoon.

Things have to be pretty grim before a unit welcomes a return to training, but it was quite a relief for [18 Battalion](#) to have a little of this in late October.

First there was a two days' manoeuvre out in the desert, with tanks attached for the first time. Real textbook work, this—the tanks moving majestically into the attack, followed by carriers, with the infantry in trucks coming up 200 yards behind, then debussing and rushing forward when the tanks joined action—very nice, so long as there is no real enemy there to mess things up.

Then, on 28 October, to everyone's pleasure, digging was suspended, and a full fortnight of training began. For a week the companies trained independently, then the whole battalion (except for beach and anti-aircraft guards) spent several days travelling about over the desert on battalion and brigade manoeuvres. If there was any man in the unit who hadn't realised what foot-slogging meant, he now knew. One morning the battalion tramped 14½ miles, which is more than enough over rough, stony desert. Some of the moves were made in trucks, but bouncing round in the back of a truck among the dust stirred up by dozens of other trucks is not much more fun than walking. Nights were cold now, too, and sandstorms much more frequent.

On 28 October the battalion exchanged its summer clothes for winter ones, and was quite glad to do so. A week or two later the despised topees were exchanged for a new type of cap, a funny little fore-and-after, peculiarly uncomfortable, known officially as the 'cap F.S.', but unofficially by a less respectable title. These caps were

tolerated, but there were still sighs of regret for the old New Zealand felt hats.

The manoeuvres ended, and for the next fortnight work on the [Baggush Box](#) alternated with exercises and bivouacs out in the desert. These exercises, though they were pretty strenuous and kept everybody busy, were much more to the men's taste than the dreary daily round at [Baggush](#), particularly if they involved field firing or live anti-aircraft shoots. Food arrangements were free and easy. Everybody took his own rations (supplemented in many cases with tinned food from the canteen), and as a rule the sections got together to do their cooking. Most of them had by this time pooled their funds and bought primus stoves; those who had not had the foresight to do this now regretted it, and took the first opportunity to remedy the deficiency. Through the campaigning ahead primuses were to prove indispensable items of every section's equipment, as indispensable as the Bren gun. Their official fuel was kerosene, but they seemed to go just as well on petrol, which was much easier to get.

Each of these exercises saw the teamwork a little better, the whole unit functioning a little smoother, the men a little more self-reliant and capable of taking active campaigning in their stride. 'Battle procedure' is the official name for all this. It is the 'know-how' of soldiering, the culminating point of training, the putting into practice of the knowledge laboriously built up over months of hard work.

For the exercises the battalion had to do without D Company and the carriers, which had gone back to [Fuka](#) on beach patrol. The [18th](#) at last had its full complement of ten carriers and the platoon could now function completely. The carriers were not in the same street as tanks, but they were fast and well armed and the crews well trained. They made up quite an effective little striking force within the battalion.

On 18 November Mussolini's airmen scored their second success against the battalion, but only accidentally, many miles from home, at [Siwa](#) Oasis, deep in the desert to the south. Here one of the battalion's anti-aircraft trucks, complete with gun and crew, had gone as escort to a stores convoy, but hardly had it arrived when it got a pasting from Italian bombers, which missed the trucks but wounded Corporal Norm [Forrest-Brown](#)³ and Private Frank [Nathan](#).⁴ CSM Fred Bowes, the commander of the detachment, also collected a few scratches, but not enough to put him out of

action—he got the other two to safety away from the scene, an exploit which later helped to earn him the BEM.

On the night of 26 November the heavens above [Baggush](#) opened. This was the first real rain [18 Battalion](#) had seen for months, and it poured down in torrents. Daylight revealed desolation in camp, tents flooded out, gear soaked and covered with mud, trucks half drowned in their protective trenches. The RQMS's and armourer's marquees suffered particularly heavily—they had been pitched, somewhat incautiously, at the bottom of a wadi, which was transformed in a few hours into a rushing river five feet deep. It took two days of solid work to fix the damage and get everything cleaned up, and two more to repair the defensive positions, most of which were half silted up.

However, [Egypt](#) doesn't know the meaning of moderation. If it isn't flood it is dust. Following the downpour there were weeks of intermittent sandstorms, vicious and penetrating. Tempers, already frayed, were blown to tatters by the dust-laden wind. The will to work diminished. Even the arrival of a big draft of reinforcements, over ninety of them, didn't stir [18 Battalion](#) to any heights of enthusiasm. The drivers got a mild pleasure out of the new Ford trucks they received on 1 December, but even these soon became just part of the furniture, representing more work for their owners—until 9 December, when the news of General Wavell's westward push brought fresh anticipation. Surely the Kiwis couldn't be left out this time.

Then, as day followed day with no sign of a change in the usual routine, disillusionment crept in once again and grew and grew till the men were, to quote one of them, 'hopping mad at not being in'. All they could do was raise a passing interest in the [RAF](#) bombers going overhead at all hours of the day and night, but that was due to envy rather than anything else, and soon palled. There were no more Italian airmen, even during the full moon period in the middle of the month. The [Baggush Box](#), despite the resentment glowing beneath the surface, was very placid externally.

The men couldn't even work off their anger on the unresponsive desert now. The digging was finished, the positions wired, and from 12 December the [18th](#) went back to company training, which meant a struggle by the officers to keep their men from boredom. The beach patrols were finished, too. Early in the month A and C

Companies had taken over the patrol jobs from B at [Baggush](#) and D at [Fuka](#), but three days later the whole crowd was back in camp, and [19 Battalion](#) took its place on the beaches.

A few men, mostly transport drivers, managed to see a little of the fun, though from a safe distance. Twenty of the battalion's trucks, loaded with supplies, left [Baggush](#) for Sidi Barrani, just short of the frontier, and came back a week later with truckloads of Italian prisoners. Lieutenant Green ⁵ took a small party of twenty-five men up to the frontier to drive captured trucks back. A few more drivers went off to tow heavy anti-aircraft guns up to [Sidi Barrani](#), and a week before Christmas all men who could drive diesel trucks (plus a few who said they could) were let loose on a park of captured Italian diesels at [Garawla](#), and got enough of them going to take another load of supplies to the frontier. These men were the lucky ones, envied by all the rest. True, they didn't get near the fighting, but they saw where it had been, and went to places such as [Sollum](#), [Capuzzo](#) and [Halfaya](#) (Hellfire) Pass, whose names shed a sort of temporary romance over that unromantic frontier. And they gathered up a certain amount of loot. Not the best of the loot, which had already had the eyes picked out of it, but plenty of Italian clothing, tinned food, and the neat, light little triangular groundsheets which were so much handier than the cumbersome British ones for making up a bedroll. In 1940, as always, the word 'loot' had a special magic for all New Zealanders; and this haul, being the first that had fallen into [18 Battalion](#)'s lap, was particularly valued.

Worthy of special mention is the master-stroke brought off by Private Colin [Urry](#), ⁶ who came back from one of these expeditions driving a huge Italian 10-ton lorry containing signals equipment, destined for a salvage dump at Mersa [Matruh](#). By some strange accident he missed the dump and ended up in [18 Battalion](#)'s lines, truck and all. This ended the battalion's chronic shortage of signal cable, and provided enough telephones for nearly every platoon to have one.

Then came the first overseas Christmas, and things brightened up temporarily, under the influence of a huge parcel mail from home, a fine Christmas dinner, and enough alcohol to put everybody in a pleasant frame of mind. New Year was fittingly celebrated, too; at midnight on 31 December 1940 [Baggush](#) was lit up by a pyrotechnic display of flares and tracer bullets with a discordant accompaniment of rifle fire and Italian hand grenades. There were no casualties, but for a little while

the air was full of flying metal.

These two celebrations brought only temporary relief to the general discontent. Just before the New Year the Kiwis had another smack in the eye— [19 Australian Brigade](#), a much more recent arrival in the [Middle East](#), was ordered off up to the front, and, to add insult to injury, it was [4 Brigade](#) that had to provide transport for it. Not only [18 Battalion](#), but all the New Zealanders, shook with fury at this. What were these Aussies doing getting in on the fighting, while they themselves sat on their behinds hundreds of miles away? Public opinion blamed the Second Echelon, still half the world away in [England](#), which was quite unjustifiably despised by the old lags of the First Echelon. 'If those ... were here,' was the growl, 'we'd be in all right.'

The [18th](#) was a little mollified by Lieutenant-Colonel Gray, who came back from a visit to the Libyan front and told the battalion all about it. The theme of his closing remarks was, 'Don't be disappointed at not having been in the fun. Enjoy yourselves while you can. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow—well, tomorrow won't be long now.' The men were a little sceptical, and understandably so; they had heard it all before. But not as sceptical as sometimes, for now there were, at last, signs pointing to something more active. The battalion was under a warning order to move back from the desert to [Helwan](#), where, according to the CO, it would train for a month or so, including a trip to the [Suez Canal](#) for bridge-building with the engineers.

This sort of thing was good for a crop of rumours any day. [Abyssinia](#) and the [Sudan](#) were tentatively mentioned, but the most persistent was [Europe](#). Life began to hold some interest and anticipation again. There might yet be some action shortly. And whatever happened, thank God, they would be getting away from that wretched [Baggush Box](#), with its flying sand and rationed water. They wouldn't have to bear the stigma 'lines of communication troops' for very much longer.

The battalion's departure from [Baggush](#) was, for some reason, delayed until the end of the second week in January, and the companies filled in the time with more day-to-day training, including a little live shooting on the beach. On 10 January they struck tents, packed their heavy gear, and sent it off to [Sidi Haneish](#) to be loaded on the railway. On the 11th the transport set out for [Helwan](#). After breakfast on the 12th the men shouldered their heavy packs, tramped the short distance to the railway line, and climbed on to the train. It was no more luxurious than the usual

Egyptian train, with square wheels and slat seats, but to 18 Battalion it was the loveliest train in the world, as it bumped them across the desert, back towards civilisation, away from the Baggush Box.



GREECE

¹ Pte J. W. Roiall; Auckland; born Scotland, 10 Nov 1911; optical mechanic; wounded 6 Sep 1940.

² Pte R. F. Buckingham; Cambridge; born NZ 17 Feb 1914; carpenter; wounded 6 Sep 1940.

³ L-Sgt N. L. Forrest-Brown; Auckland; born Auckland, 6 May 1918; clerk; wounded 18 Nov 1940.

⁴ Lt F. A. Nathan; Auckland; born Auckland, 3 Aug 1918; storeman; twice wounded.

⁵ Maj H. M. Green, m.i.d.; born England, 3 Sep 1905; sales manager; died of wounds 3 Dec 1943.

⁶ Pte C. T. Urry; Auckland; born NZ 24 Jan 1918; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1941.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 6 – OVER THE WATER

CHAPTER 6

Over the Water

Helwan Camp didn't look very civilised when the battalion arrived; but all were glad to get there, especially the transport, which had driven part of the way through a stinging dust-storm which scoured paint off the vehicles and made driving a torture. The camp was on comparatively level ground, and was not such a far-flung, sprawling affair as Maadi—it had good bitumen roads, and its canteen huts and so on didn't look too bad. There was the luxury of daily hot showers, too.

The battalion turned to on arrival, put up its tents and dug itself in, but this sort of thing was just a chore by now, all in the day's work. The prospect of leave to Cairo once again was pleasant. Leave began almost at once, every evening if you could stand the strain, and weekend leave for a few. Those who could afford it went from the camp to Helwan by taxi; those who couldn't took the bus. Diesel trains ran from Helwan to Cairo. It was a five-mile run into Helwan, past a big prison camp containing what looked like Mussolini's entire army.

The highlight of the first week in Helwan was the issue of a brand-new type of uniform, the famous battle dress. Before the unit left Baggush this had been promised, but the men were a bit wary of army promises, and preferred to wait and see rather than get too enthusiastic in advance. However, this promise was fulfilled only a week after the move to Helwan. Everybody liked the battle dress at once. The loose-fitting jacket, warm and comfortable, with its snug waist belt, inside which two bottles could be safely hidden; the capacious pockets; the trousers, high at the back to keep your kidneys warm, and wide enough in the leg to put on without taking your boots off; above all, the absence of brass buttons and fittings to shine; all these brought the battle dress into immediate favour, which it never lost.

Once more the battalion pitched headlong into training. The men didn't mind. After months of free-and-easy rules of dress, they muttered a little when they had to doll up for a battalion or church parade. But the training they entered into with plenty of spirit. They were pretty well trained by now, and very fit; this was the final polish, so to speak. There was action ahead, nobody doubted that. So there was a zest in their approach to the work.

The first week everybody had a couple of days on the [Maadi](#) firing range. Enough new Bren guns were issued to bring the unit, for the first time, up to strength. Every rifle and machine gun was tested and zeroed. After that a lot of their time was spent out in the desert, on route marches and manoeuvres, in full battle order—rifle, ammunition, respirator and tin hat, rations and water, and only the lightest possible load of personal gear. The emphasis in these manoeuvres was now on the specialists rather than on the ordinary infantrymen. The main points stressed were liaison, communication and coordination, the way to run a battle without getting everything tangled up.

Late in January the battalion practised an advance for the first time under live shell, mortar and Vickers gun fire, carefully regulated to give an ample safety margin. This was a full-dress show, as much like a real battle as it could be with no actual enemy there. The pioneers erected a regimental aid post and headquarters, carriers brought ammunition up and moved the mortars from place to place, provosts directed traffic, snipers sniped, signallers laid telephone lines out to the companies, the anti-aircraft men set up their guns round Battalion Headquarters and the transport.

More manoeuvres in February stressed other technical points of the management of a battle. How to move in the desert, the trucks in a big square covering miles of country, with front, rear and flanks protected by carriers and anti-tank guns; how to dispose the battalion on the battlefield, whether walking, sitting still or riding in trucks; how to set up a position with anti-tank and Vickers guns in support; how to cross a river.

This last was the most interesting of all, something out of the ordinary—though, as things turned out, it was the only one [18 Battalion](#) never had a chance to put into practice in action. The unit didn't go to the [Suez Canal](#) after all, but only to the [Nile](#) five or six miles away from camp, where it used kapok bridging and folding assault boats to cross a small canal and then the river itself. Even the carriers and some more of the vehicles were taken across on wooden rafts, each supported by two assault boats. The crossing took most of the day, as each assault boat could carry only five men at once besides its crew, but they got there in the end. Then a week later they came back and repeated the exercise at night; this time there was some

unrehearsed fun caused by boats sticking on sandbanks in mid-stream.

This was the first ditch [18 Battalion](#) had crossed; the time was fast approaching when they were to cross one much bigger. Towards the end of February it became obvious that things were moving. Excitement and its attendant Rumour once more began to flourish. Departure now could only be for a battlefield. This was confirmed by the arrival of the advance party of the Second Echelon from England. Sixty men from 21 Battalion arrived in mid-February and were billeted in [18 Battalion's](#) lines—the old envy of the Second Echelon hadn't quite disappeared, but it died fast when the 21 Battalion men came in, and men of [18 Battalion](#) recognised old friends or made new ones.

Yes, it could only be for a battlefield. The whole division was coming together at last, and hadn't [Major - General Freyberg](#) promised that when that happened they would be in, boots and all? They were trained up to fighting pitch. Their numbers were filled up, too—seven new officers joined the battalion at [Helwan](#), including the first 'originals' to get their commissions in the [Middle East](#), and right at the last minute, as gear was being packed to leave [Helwan](#), 200 of the newly-arrived 4th Reinforcements came in to replace the men who had dropped out through sickness or transfers.

The big question was, which battlefield? [Europe](#) (probably [Greece](#)) was the favourite bet all through, especially when balaclavas were issued to everybody. But this belief faltered a day or two later when the battle dress was handed in and tropical gear issued—topees, mosquito nets and repellent ointment, and shorts which could be let down below your knees for protection against mosquitoes. The men seeing these voluminous shorts for the first time goggled in amazement. These were the famous '[Bombay bloomers](#)', whose reputation for inelegance was never to die in the NZEF. Anyhow, the net result was that when [18 Battalion](#) finally left [Helwan](#) it didn't know where it was going, but could only guess.

The move out, as usual, came rather suddenly. Just after breakfast on 27 February a warning order arrived, and within half an hour the battalion was on the job packing up kitbags and striking camp. That night it slept under the stars. Early on the 28th the transport headed away north out of camp, and two hours later the rest of the battalion piled into trucks and went to the railway siding near the Italian

prison camp, where a train with its palatial third-class carriages was waiting. Away it went, through [Cairo](#) and north across the Delta country. North, and still north. The Abyssinia and East [Africa](#) rumours died a natural death as the train got nearer to [Alexandria](#), and once more the words 'Europe' and 'Greece' were on all lips. The battalion's spirits were higher than they had ever been. They were leaving behind the increasing spring heat and the rapidly multiplying flies of [Egypt](#), and were going where at last they could 'get stuck into' the enemy. It had been a long and trying wait, but it was coming to an end now.

But there was another horror to overcome first, and that was [Amiriya](#) transit camp.

[Amiriya](#) is a spot which all Kiwis remember with loathing, and none more so than those who went to [Greece](#) in 1941. It is a desolate place on the south shore of [Lake Maryut](#); its only virtue is that, being close to the main road, it is a convenient place for troops to camp and wait their turn to embark at [Alexandria](#), 15 miles away. In the palm trees by the railway siding there is a Egyptian village peopled by expert thieves. Outside the palms there is only hard, baked desert stretching out to infinity, with (in those days) a British transit camp planted grimly in the middle.

The transport reached this health resort on the afternoon of 28 February in torrential rain, which was still falling when the rest of the unit came in early in the evening. The camp was a shambles. Whoever had used the tents last had left them dirty (not unusual in transit camps), the dust had been churned into soupy mud, and some of the tents had rivers flowing through them. The luckiest men were the carrier drivers, who didn't get off the train but went straight on to [Alexandria](#) with their carriers to be loaded on a cargo ship. The rest packed as best they could into the [Amiriya](#) tents, which wouldn't have been enough to go round comfortably even under good conditions. As it was, the men were jammed in like sardines. The camp was chock-a-block with British, Indian, Australian and New Zealand soldiers.

For three days it rained, while [18 Battalion](#) sat in its tents and cursed. The men couldn't do much, and couldn't go anywhere, because their orders were to be ready to move out at short notice. They got a fresh issue of battle dress, which was very welcome, as the weather was cool and all their other clothes wet. Their main occupation for the three days was to sit and watch the never-ending streams of

British and New Zealand trucks filing past along the main road to [Alexandria](#). Their own transport left on 4 March. Its instructions were to keep petrol for only 30 miles after reaching the docks, so hundreds of gallons were run out on to the sand, which everyone considered a sinful waste.

On 4 March the weather cleared and the ground began to dry out, which relieved the general gloom a little. But everyone was sick of hanging round such a dismal hole with nothing to do.

The only bright spot in the week [18 Battalion](#) spent at [Amiriya](#) was the affair of the picture theatre. The ubiquitous Mr Shafto had built one there, a flimsy structure put together largely of old kerosene tins and sacking. It was easy enough to tear holes in the walls, and consequently most of the New Zealanders in camp got in free for several nights. Eventually the management, waking up to what was going on, decided to close for repairs; but the loss of their entertainment (which wasn't much good, but the only one available) so displeased the soldiers that they burnt the theatre down.

Two days later, on 6 March, [18 Battalion](#) received its sailing orders for next day.

The 7th March began early for C and D Companies, who were dragged out of bed at 4.45 a.m., and at six o'clock left for [Amiriya](#) siding, two miles along the road, weighed down under their gear. The train trip to [Alexandria](#) was quite short; C and D Companies arrived there before the rest of the battalion left [Amiriya](#) at 9 a.m. By midday the whole unit had embarked, C and D Companies on HMS Orion and the rest on HMS [Ajax](#). Just after twelve o'clock the ships moved away from the wharf, past lines of French warships at anchor in the harbour; these were the ships that had got away from [Toulon](#) under the noses of the Germans, and as such aroused intense interest. The men lined the cruisers' rails as they passed, and the ships exchanged salutes.

Relations between the Kiwis and the sailors were excellent from the first minute. The Orion and [Ajax](#) were so crowded that it was hard to find a vacant spot on deck to sit down, but the Navy made its guests welcome, fed them well, and went out of its way to do them favours when the occasion offered. A trip aboard a cruiser was a novelty to all in [18 Battalion](#), and everyone enjoyed it. It was a very

different convoy from the battalion's previous one—instead of big liners moving majestically along in rows, there were only three low, grey, businesslike cruisers forging ahead, with spray flung high back from their bows. North-west they headed, at high speed, carrying the New Zealanders towards [Greece](#) and their baptism of fire.

Daybreak on 8 March found the convoy running up the [Aegean Sea](#), studded with dozens of little rocky islands. At midday, just twenty-four hours after leaving [Alexandria](#), the cruisers entered [Piraeus](#) harbour, and after lunch the Kiwis took leave of their friends the sailors and filed down the gangway.

So the rumours were set at rest, and [18 Battalion](#) was in [Greece](#). But why was it there?

It had for some time been obvious that the German drive down through the [Balkans](#) would inevitably hit [Greece](#) before long. The Greeks, even without their war against the Italians in [Albania](#), would have no chance of successfully resisting the mighty German war machine, so [Britain](#) had offered them aid, promising to send a force as soon as the Germans entered [Bulgaria](#). This happened on 1 March. The New Zealand Division was at once sent over as the forerunner of an Imperial force; [18 Battalion](#), the Division's own advanced guard, was among the first British units to reach the country.

And what a welcome it got! As it left [Piraeus](#) and drove through [Athens](#) in borrowed trucks, it was greeted with an enthusiasm rivalling that of [Auckland](#) fifteen months before. All [Athens](#) was on the streets waving, cheering and throwing flowers. That is, all the women, children and old men; for this country was at war, and scarcely an able-bodied man was to be seen. The battalion passed right through the city and out some five miles towards the foothills in the other direction, where a pleasant surprise awaited it—there, in a lovely little wooded valley, among pine trees, was a camp, not quite completed, but habitable, with most of the tents already up.

This miracle had been wrought by Cypriot pioneers, assisted by the men of the transport platoon, who had arrived the day before. Their trip over had not been as free from incident as the main body's; it had lasted three days, and included a bombing raid by Italian planes. Their trucks were not yet unloaded—they arrived in

small groups spread over the next three days—but there the drivers were, welcoming the battalion to its temporary home.

Hymettus camp was a lovely spot. After the barren wastes of **Egypt**, the men revelled in the sight and smell of trees and grass. The Greeks, who came in swarms to visit the camp, were friendly, hospitable folk, the greatest possible contrast to the grimy, cadging, thieving mobs of **Cairo**. In the neighbouring village and in **Athens** many things were free to the Kiwis, who for the first time found some difficulty in spending their money (500 drachmae, equal to just under a pound, was the weekly pay). Everybody had two or three opportunities of going to **Athens**. They tried out the wine; they gaped at the ancient monuments, and marvelled at the view from the **Acropolis**; they really gave **Athens** a good look over. They knew they wouldn't be staying in these delightful surroundings for more than a few days before moving on to a sterner spot where, at last, they could expect to come face to face with the enemy; but despite that, or more likely because of that, spirits were high. Eighteenth Battalion had waited impatiently to come to grips with the enemy, and now the time was very close.

Theoretically, the presence of New Zealand troops in **Greece** was most strictly secret. No badges, no New Zealand emblems, were worn; even mail was stopped. But all these precautions didn't do an atom of good. How could they? All the world can recognise a New Zealander, and here in **Athens**—comic opera situation—the German Embassy was still in business, its staff mingling with the Kiwis in the crowded streets, sitting at the next tables in the restaurants, noting every detail. They had even been on the **Piræus** wharf with their little notebooks. So it is no wonder that **18 Battalion** looked on the security restrictions with an eye of scorn.

From 11 March **18 Battalion** was on six hours' notice to pack up and leave, and everyone knew it wouldn't be long, because the transport loaded up that evening, and left **Hymettus** at 5.30 next morning. The rest of the battalion had their last look at **Athens** on the 12th, then, early on the morning of the 13th, they packed up and left by truck in small groups for the Rouf railway station in **Athens**. At 1 p.m. the train pulled out, followed by cheers and waves from the crowd gathered to watch the departure. The battalion's destination was **Katerini**, 170 miles north as the crow flies, but twice that by road or rail through the rugged Greek mountains.

The road trip was full of interest, though it was tough driving. From [Athens](#) the road wound upwards through a land of craggy mountains, gorges and fertile valleys, over zigzag passes and down again on to narrow plains that ended in more mountains. Many rivers crossed or paralleled the road, a few wide and easy-flowing, but most of them rushing, steep torrents with narrow stone bridges over them. In places the roadway was too narrow for comfort, and the rough surface caused a lot of punctures and blowouts—and this was a main road. The drivers were yet in happy ignorance of what the Greek secondary roads were like.

Every now and again the convoy passed bands of women at work repairing the roads. This was something the New Zealanders were to see many times in this war-harassed country—women and old men forced to do heavy work because they were the only ones left at home to do it. They worked slowly and laboriously, but, no matter how tired they were, there was always a wave and a smile for the Kiwis. It made the men feel almost ashamed to be driving past in the luxury of lorries.

The night of 12 March found the convoy on the wide [Larisa](#) plain. It bivouacked in the town of [Larisa](#), and moved on next morning, up into the mountains again, over the dizzy winding heights of [Mount Olympus](#), and steeply down to [Katerini](#), arriving at 3 p.m.

The main body of the battalion, though it missed much of the magnificent scenery by travelling all night, had plenty of fun—while daylight lasted the men could look at the rugged beauty of [Greece](#) with more appreciative eyes through not having to keep them glued to the road, and at the frequent halts they fraternised with the villagers, and could buy extras like eggs and fresh brown bread to vary their rations of bully and biscuits. Their night was a miserable one—everyone nearly froze, especially the guards on the carriers, which were on open trucks. At daybreak snow was falling gently round them, something quite new to most. From the train they could see a group of massive snowy peaks, which (although they didn't know it) was [Mount Olympus](#). Then down through a gorge to the coast, north along cliff tops overlooking the Aegean, and on to [Katerini](#) just before midday.

[Katerini](#) is a town of some 10,000 people, but, like so many other Southern European towns, it seems to be built huddled and piled up on top of itself, and occupies so small an area that it is hard to see how so many people could fit in. Its

narrow streets are a traffic hazard that [18 Battalion](#) was to find repeated in innumerable other towns and villages in [Greece](#), [Crete](#), and later in [Italy](#). It is only about five miles from the coast, in country that, though steeply undulating, is flat compared to most of [Greece](#). South of it rise the foothills of [Olympus](#), and to the north a lower spur of the same mountain chain, separating the town from the mouth of the Aliakmon River 18 miles away. The land round the town, though [18 Battalion](#), was mostly poor—bare ridges, clumps of firs and evergreens in the gullies, occasional grey stone outcrops; a few groves of twisted olive trees, which somehow always seem to give their surroundings an even more barren look.

But this unprepossessing countryside was more than offset by the people the battalion found there. It was about a mile from the train to the unit's billets, and as the men marched through the streets with full packs up they got a great reception. They were among the first British troops to come as far north as this, and to the Greeks they were the deliverers who were going to preserve their homes from the enemy hordes. They were also a curiosity. During their short stay in [Katerini](#) they were followed everywhere by crowds of people so frankly inquisitive as to be embarrassing. But this was matched by a hospitality and friendliness just as great as that of [Athens](#), though slightly less demonstrative.

Battalion Headquarters was set up in the town's municipal building, and the companies were billeted in empty houses and barns, in the local school, or with Greek families. The carrier crews alone were left out in the cold, under canvas in a park. It was cold, too, and no mistake—an icy wind from [Olympus](#) penetrated to the marrow, especially now that a year in [Egypt](#) had thinned the blood.

Despite the cold and the looming threat of invasion, there was a happy atmosphere in [Katerini](#), and relations between the Kiwis and the Greeks were very cordial. The language difficulty was great, it is true, but not insurmountable—you can put a lot across in a few ungrammatical phrases, helped along by the international language of the hands. When off duty the men mingled freely with the civilians, sampled mavrodaphne, retsina and krassi in their wineshops, visited their homes and were royally entertained.

However, the stay in [Katerini](#) wasn't just a holiday. Some of the truck drivers spent their working hours carting shingle for the engineers for road repair. The rest

of the battalion had a few short, vigorous route marches, and spent one day on the beach five miles away, where they did some shooting with rifles and anti-tank rifles, and all the Bren guns were given a final range test. An attempt was also made during these few days to instil into everyone's mind the idea of taking cover from hostile planes by using trees, buildings, or whatever natural cover might be available. This had been impossible in [Africa](#), of course, but was quite feasible here, and very practical, with the Germans likely to bring to the attack the weight of an overwhelmingly superior air force. The time was not far away, indeed, when the safety of every man in the battalion was to depend on concealment from the air.

Another noteworthy event in [Katerini](#) was a church parade on Sunday, 16 March, in the town's Congregational church. The battalion filled the ground floor, but the gallery was crowded with civilians, attracted more by curiosity than piety, who joined heartily in the hymns in their own tongue, and listened with grave attention to the service, of which they couldn't understand a word. Soldiers, even regular churchgoers, can see nothing good in compulsory church parades as a rule, but this one was something out of the ordinary. It seemed to epitomise the bond of sympathy that had sprung up spontaneously between Kiwi and Greek, a bond that was not to be repeated anywhere else.

From the time [18 Battalion](#) reached [Katerini](#) it was common knowledge that its stay there would be short, and that it was going up into the low hills north of the town to dig positions and man a line which was to stop the Germans cold when they arrived. The men knew no more details than that, and they didn't know the other side of the picture. They didn't know that the forces the British had been able to spare from [Africa](#) were quite insufficient to stand up against a powerful German assault. They didn't know the terrible difficulties faced by the Allied command in [Greece](#), the grave doubts about the Greek Army's fighting capacity, the problems involved in siting a line to cover all possible approaches from the north, the danger that a line based on [Katerini](#) and the [Aliakmon River](#) might be outflanked from the west and cut off. They were full of confidence in themselves, in their training, their weapons, and their ability to see the Jerries off. 'Let 'em all come' was [18 Battalion's](#) attitude at this time.

Lieutenant-Colonel Gray and his company commanders left [Katerini](#) on 15 March and spent three days having a good look over the defensive sector allotted to the

battalion, and deciding the details of its occupation. On the morning of the 18th the men reluctantly said goodbye to their good friends in [Katerini](#). They would be back, they promised. But army promises are iffy things, and nearly all the men who saw [Katerini](#) again did so under vastly different conditions, as unwilling guests of the German government. Of this, however, there was no premonition that morning, as they shouldered their packs and set out light-heartedly into the hills.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 7 – THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

CHAPTER 7

The First Encounter

The British and Greek governments had decided in February that a combined Anglo-Greek force would occupy the [Aliakmon River](#) line. This line was not fortified, but followed a series of river and mountain obstacles from the mouth of the Aliakmon west and north-west to the Yugoslav border.

Greece's northern frontier adjoins, from west to east, [Albania](#), [Yugoslavia](#) and [Bulgaria](#). An enemy thrust through [Albania](#), or through [Yugoslavia](#) to [Monastir](#) (a frontier township in a natural valley approach), would come in behind the Aliakmon line, but it was hoped that [Albania](#) could be taken care of by the Greek armies then holding the Italians there, and that an entry through [Yugoslavia](#) would be successfully opposed by the Yugoslavs themselves.

The sector into which the New Zealanders were ordered wasn't too good. It was steep, and mostly covered with small oak saplings. Roads didn't exist, only cart tracks, muddy and slippery after the winter. There were no prepared defences there at all. The Division's front of ten miles was uncomfortably long. Taken all round, the outlook wasn't very encouraging.

But, as mentioned, the men of [18 Battalion](#) (the first New Zealand battalion to arrive in the Aliakmon line) knew nothing of these misgivings. They didn't even mind digging, now that (as they thought) the positions were going to be put to a worthwhile purpose. So when the unit left [Katerini](#) it was in first-rate spirits and eager to get going.

For a few days the battalion was split up. Headquarters, B and D Companies and Battalion Headquarters headed north on foot towards their battle sector. A and C Companies rode in more comfort back along the main road to the [Olympus Pass](#) to begin work on a position there, covering a demolition which the engineers were preparing on the road in the pass.

The road from [Katerini](#) enters the pass through a narrow defile guarded by two abrupt crags. To the higher of these, Point 917, a conical hill west of the road, went A Company. C Company took the other, on the opposite side of the road, a rocky

outcrop christened ` [Gibraltar](#) ' by the Kiwis. On these steep slopes the companies set to work to carve out the best positions they could. They wasted no time. They had to get back to the battalion as soon as possible, and holes couldn't be hewn in that rock in an hour or two. Besides, it was cold up there, with the snowline not far above. There was no opportunity the first night to make a proper bivouac, and the next morning everyone woke up lightly coated with snow and aching with cold. This snow wasn't so good at close quarters, the men decided. Later in the day the sun thawed most of it, or reduced it to wet slush which was even worse.

All 19 and 20 March the companies worked. On the 20th the pass road was swarming with activity, and the men looked down on to truck after truck moving north—the rest of 4 Brigade on its way to join [18 Battalion](#) in the line. After their baptism of snow, A and C Companies felt like seasoned winter campaigners, much superior to these newcomers; but it was very nice to see them, just the same.

On the morning of 21 March A Company left [Olympus](#) and bounced its way back through [Katerini](#) to rejoin the battalion up in the hills. C Company worked on [Gibraltar](#) for another day, and on the 22nd handed over to a company of [19 Battalion](#) and moved north in its turn, bringing all of [18 Battalion](#) together again.

The main body of the battalion, when it left [Katerini](#) on the 18th, headed north by one of the muddy tracks that criss-crossed the countryside, and after eight miles of ridges and gullies arrived at [Palionellini](#), a huddled-up village built across a saddle, with spectacularly cobbled streets which, [18 Battalion](#) was sure, had never before felt the weight of trucks. Certainly they weren't built for motor traffic. The battalion's arrival caused a local sensation; all [Palionellini](#) turned out to gaze as the men came in. There was a small party of New Zealand engineers there already, but the sudden advent of some 300 more strange soldiers was truly an event. There the companies stayed, except for B Company, which went straight through the village and on another four miles by an even worse track to the hamlet of Mikri Milia, perched on a long east-west ridge. Along this ridge, at Mikri Milia and its companion hamlet of [Paliostani](#), was to be [18 Battalion](#)'s battle position.

The job at [Palionellini](#) was to help the engineers widen and straighten the alleged road that ran up through the village. A miserable track this was, but it would have to be a main access to [4 Brigade](#)'s battle position, and before it could function

as such it needed a good face-lift. So for three days the men toiled with pick and shovel—they were pretty good at that by now—and, despite light snowfalls, succeeded in reducing the mud to something like a passable road. Then they packed up and marched away north, company by company, to join B Company. By 22 March the whole battalion (A and C Companies too) was together again, and at last the digging of its first real battle position could begin in earnest.

The Mikri Milia– [Paliostani](#) ridge dropped away abruptly on the north to the Toponitsa River. From it there was a wide view over the lower hills falling away to the Aliakmon plain, and beyond that the peaks of Eastern Macedonia, with [Salonika](#) gleaming across the gulf on a clear day. The ridge was a hotchpotch of small ploughed fields, patches of young green wheat, and oak thickets, from which rose the thin smoke of charcoal-burners' fires. It was undoubtedly poor, and so were the two villages crowning it, but they gave the battalion a friendly welcome.

The programme up on the ridge was more digging. The ideal of connected and mutually supporting positions was out of the question here, as there were not enough battalions to go round, and so each one had an uncomfortably wide front to look after. Also, the ridge was too sharp and narrow to be manned in any depth. The only feasible way of meeting these difficulties was to hold the top with a series of 'company localities'—strong, dug-in positions in the most commanding spots, each holding a company, and placed so as to defend themselves from any direction, against possible paratroops or Fifth Columnists from the rear as well as against the expected attack from the north. This [18 Battalion](#) proceeded to do: one company round [Paliostani](#); one along the ridge a mile east of it; one at Mikri Milia and on the ridge near by; the fourth in reserve just behind Mikri Milia. Headquarters Company and Battalion Headquarters were at Mikri Milia too.

For the first few inches of top soil the digging was easy, but then came tough clay that really tested the muscles. The holes had to be deep—weapon pits five feet, and roofed dugouts for living quarters deeper still. The men didn't live in the dugouts, but occupied more comfortable quarters in the villages and farms (except for C Company, which spent a week after its arrival in an oak plantation). Mikri Milia and [Paliostani](#) were small, and [18 Battalion](#) taxed their accommodation fully and would have overtaxed it but for the monastery. This fine building, in a lovely green valley half a mile north of [Mikri Milia](#), had plenty of room for a company—two of

them for a few days. Every rifle company except D had a turn living there. The Greek Orthodox monks evidently housed themselves pretty well. They purveyed excellent wine, and kept their guests supplied with fresh vegetables, which was very good, as since leaving [Hymettus](#) the battalion had subsisted mainly on bully and biscuits, and not always much of those.

Up here on the ridge the food situation improved, as the local people nearly always had a few eggs or a loaf of fresh brown bread to exchange for a tin of bully or a few empty petrol tins, which for some reason were much sought after. It was even possible sometimes to buy a chicken or a lamb. For a little more variety many of the men visited [Kolindros](#), a good-sized town on the next ridge north, where there were shops and caf es, and they could get something to eat and some wine with it. So the short rations didn't worry them too much. Far worse was a tobacco shortage, which caused real hardship to some.

The weather favoured the work. In the first few days there were some light skiffs of snow, but spring seemed to be well on the way, and most days were bright and sunny. The nights were freezing—it must be confessed that [18 Battalion](#) was caught on the hop by the bitter mountain frosts, and many men spent sleepless nights, numb with cold, before extra clothes and blankets were organised. But the battalion was in excellent fettle, and wasn't going to let a little bit of cold deter it. So the work went on, while over the heads of the unheeding Kiwis far-reaching decisions affecting their future were made.

The original idea had been for the Division's ten-mile front to be held by [4 Brigade](#) on the right and [6 Brigade](#) on the left. This would have strained its resources, but the line could have been made reasonably strong. But now came a bombshell. Nineteenth Greek Division (on the coast) was to move forward to operate north of the Aliakmon. And the only troops readily available to take its place in the line were [6 Brigade](#).

This was a blow for [General Freyberg](#)—at a stroke his sector almost doubled. While before this the Division might have had a chance of holding its line, it would be impossible now. The line would be so thin, with such wide gaps, that the Germans would be able to get through it almost anywhere they chose. So [Freyberg](#) thought, and so he told General Wilson, commander of the British forces. The best

solution, he suggested, would be to abandon the Aliakmon line and pull back to the higher, steeper country of the [Olympus Pass](#).

General Wilson, unhappily, couldn't agree, as he was working hard for Yugoslav co-operation against the Germans, and so it was still essential to hold a line to the Yugoslav border. Priority could be given, he said, to work on the [Olympus Pass](#) line, but the New Zealand Division must stay in the Aliakmon line. So the preparations on the Mikri Milia ridge went on. Eighteenth Battalion, in happy ignorance that its work would probably be useless, toiled on, the companies outdoing each other to perfect their positions. Every few days the companies changed places, to get to know the topography of the whole ridge.

It was here that the battalion got its first issue of a new weapon, the Thompson sub-machine gun, already famous in underworld legends from [America](#), given now to the New Zealanders at the rate of one to every rifle section. Its reception was a bit mixed at first, the 'old school' regarding it with suspicion, the less responsible as something to skylark with. It was in [Crete](#), two months later, that the battalion learnt the value of the 'Tommy gun' as a close-range weapon; from then on its popularity never waned, and the man was lucky who could acquire one. The Bren and Tommy guns together made up the chief fire power of a section, and a good heavy fire power it was.

Since 21 March 20 Battalion had been up on [18 Battalion's](#) left, the two units separated by an unmanned gap of two miles. It was no better on the other side—after the change in plans 25 Battalion of [6 Brigade](#) came up on [18 Battalion's](#) right, but its nearest troops were over a mile along the ridge from the battalion's flank. The gap on the left was 20 Battalion's responsibility. That on the right was [18 Battalion's](#), so from 30 March the carrier platoon sent out daily patrols along the track to 25 Battalion, and from 1 April the right-hand company sent a permanent standing patrol of a platoon out along the ridge to narrow the gap. Of these two the carrier patrol had much the better time. Its official beat was only as far as 25 Battalion, but actually the carriers roamed much farther afield and explored nooks and corners of the countryside unknown to the ordinary infantryman.

While all this was going on up front, the transport was busy carting gravel for various roading jobs all over the place. When off duty it was parked in a very nice

spot near [Katerini](#), with a stream running through the area, and plenty of trees. Its trucks were causing some headaches—the bad Greek roads, acting on a congenital weakness in the steering box, were making them crack up, and already several had had their steering replaced. This particular model hadn't really been a happy choice for tough work.

By 6 April [18 Battalion](#) had its positions wired, had cleared fields of fire through the scrub, and was as ready as it could ever have been under the unfavourable conditions. It hadn't been easy. All the wire and sandbags, food, ammunition and other necessaries had been manhandled up. The battalion would have been in a bad position if it had been attacked during that fortnight, especially as until early April it was away up there on its own. Not till 3 April did it get any supporting artillery; then a New Zealand battery came along and dug in a mile and a half to the rear. About the same time two two-pounder anti-tank guns came up and were put in position covering the approaches to Mikri Milia.

Then, on 6 April 1941, [Germany](#) declared war on [Greece](#) and [Yugoslavia](#), and her troops gatecrashed the Bulgarian frontier and moved swiftly and irresistibly on to [Salonika](#). On 8 April [18 Battalion](#), from its grandstand seat, could hear demolitions and see fires in the city. From Salonika the Germans headed round the coast and down, straight at the New Zealanders, while another column moved down the [Monastir Gap](#) on to the Aliakmon line's flank. Within two days it became obvious to General Wilson that his Yugoslav gamble had failed—its resistance was weak and quickly collapsed. So on 8 April he abandoned the now useless Aliakmon line and ordered his forces back to the line of the mountain passes behind.

Even at this eleventh hour this move saved the New Zealand Division—as [General Freyberg](#) said, if it had been forced to fight on the Aliakmon line it would have been rounded up with all its equipment, and the history it was to make over the next four years wouldn't have been made. But to the men in the rifle companies, who didn't realise what danger was being averted, the withdrawal was a smack in the eye. Prudence, and the need to yield before overwhelming force, seemed to them like cowardice, so eager were they to try their strength against these invincible Germans.

The withdrawal order was only just in time, and the move back became a

scramble. The toil of the last fortnight went for nothing; the units couldn't even stop now to recover the wire and sandbags they had so laboriously built into the Aliakmon positions. Brigadier [Puttick](#)¹ gave his orders verbally late on the afternoon of 8 April, while the men were still putting the final polish on the ridge defences— [18 Battalion](#) was to get out before daylight next morning, join the rest of [4 Brigade](#) at an assembly area north of [Katerini](#), and move back through the [Olympus Pass](#) (now manned by [5 Brigade](#)). Before daylight next morning! That was short notice indeed.

The battalion sprang into action. The trucks were ordered up to Mikri Milia, and spent the evening loading up all the gear they could as it was brought in from the outlying positions. There wasn't room for all of it—some ammunition and some of the less essential gear had to be left behind, most of it destroyed on orders from Lieutenant-Colonel Gray. As much petrol as possible was crammed on the trucks. The RQMS, for the first time in history, opened up his ration store to all comers; food was packed into any spare corners of the trucks, and the men took as much as they could, along with their own equipment, rifles and tools, and one Bren gun to each platoon in case German planes came round. Everybody was loaded to capacity.

By midnight the battalion was ready to go. A few hours' sleep, and then it was 3 a.m., time to be up and going. The companies assembled just outside Mikri Milia, where the monastery track turned off, and at four o'clock set out back through [Palionellini](#) and down the track towards [Katerini](#). In a glum silence the men slogged through the mud, the same mud that they had traversed with such confidence a fortnight before. The withdrawal was a bitter dose to swallow. The only comfort was that at that hour of night their friends the Greeks weren't around to see them go.

The transport didn't leave Mikri Milia until 7 a.m., as driving over those tracks in the dark was almost impossible. It rejoined the companies at the assembly area; the whole battalion dispersed, with [19](#) and [20 Battalions](#), and settled down to wait for the ASC trucks which were to take it wherever it was going. The men hadn't the faintest notion where that was to be, and for the time being they didn't much care.

After a long morning's wait the ASC arrived and the long brigade convoy moved off. Nature was obviously in sympathy with the general mood. It was dull and lowering as the convoy swung out to bypass [Katerini](#), and the same all the way to the [Olympus Pass](#), through [5 Brigade](#) and the artillery positions; and later it began to

rain, lashing, soaking rain that froze you through and through. For the drivers, peering through their misted-up windscreens, trying to keep an eye on the chap ahead and at the same time keep from sliding off the road, it was no worse than for the infantrymen, sitting squashed up in the back, getting colder and colder. Those unlucky enough to be in open trucks were soaked to the skin before very long.

Their destination was the tiny village of [Lava](#), from which they were to move forward to a position at [Servia](#) and the [Portas \(Servia\)](#) Pass, blocking the road by which the Germans were approaching from the [Monastir Gap](#). From Katerini to [Servia](#) is only 30 miles in a straight line; but the road, away down south-west over [Olympus](#) and then north again at an acute angle, is three times as long, so it was an all-day trip for [18 Battalion](#), especially as most of the New Zealand Division seemed to be on the move at the same time. The drivers had had a taste of it before, but for most of the passengers it was the first long trip over the celebrated Greek roads, through the gorges, round the precipices, zig-zagging up and down dizzy slopes, with barely room for two lanes of traffic, through mud and potholes, in the rain. Before long everyone was praying for journey's end.

But when journey's end arrived, it wasn't any better than the trip. Late that afternoon a drenched battalion was decanted from the trucks on to the roadside miles from anywhere, and told to make the best of a patch of mud which was its bivouac area for the night.

The men were still debussing when three big bombers, roaring at low level up the road, turned every heart upside down and caused a spontaneous scatter to what cover the roadside afforded. They were British planes, as it turned out. But a senior officer remarked that the lesson of cover from the air had obviously been well learnt—the men vanished in the flash of an eye, like rabbits down a burrow.

Never in [18 Battalion](#)'s history, before or afterwards, was there such a night as that. A night of cold driving rain and sleet, with no tents, and no cover except that offered by the odd tree trunk or fold in the ground. Most men could only spread groundsheets on the mud, lie there in their blankets and take it. The only lucky ones were the drivers, who had the cabs of their trucks to sleep in, and the carrier crews, who rigged up their canvas covers and kept fairly dry. The cooks, all honour to them, fought to get their burners going, and managed late in the evening to turn on tea

and stew—the first hot food for twenty-four hours. But it was a wretched, sleepless night, and everyone was fed up next morning, and ready to express free opinions of the Army and life in general.

Early on 10 April the battalion got further orders—go forward over the hills and take up a position overlooking [Servia](#) and the road from the north. It would be [4 Brigade's](#) right-hand unit, with [19 Battalion](#) on its left, and on its right the high, almost trackless Pierian Mountains, with no friendly troops nearer than the [Olympus Pass](#).

Within an hour of getting the orders the troops were on the move, with their soaked gear on their backs, trudging in single file up a bridle track away from the road. The country was rugged, rocky and treeless, a dismal contrast to the cultivation farther east. At the village of [Lava](#), a mile and a half off the road, they dropped Rear Battalion Headquarters, the cooks and other odds and ends; then the companies split up, B and C following one steep, slippery track, while A, D and Battalion Headquarters took another one farther to the right, over the shoulder of a hill and down the far side to the village of [Kastania](#).

From [Lava](#) to the forward line was only a mile and a half, but the scramble over the tracks, up wild ravines and across slopes of loose shingle, took a good two hours. The men were tired and wet to begin with, and when they reached their positions, weighed down under weapons, equipment and personal gear, they were reeling with fatigue.

If the view from Mikri Milia had been splendid, that from the [Servia](#) position was breathtaking, if [18 Battalion](#) had had any breath left to take. [Kastania](#) crowned a precipitous hillside dropping 1500 feet to [Servia](#) and the Aliakmon valley. The sun breaking through the rain clouds showed the Aliakmon winding eastwards three miles off, and beyond it knobby hills, with the road twisting away north among them. Somewhere along that road the Germans were coming, with only a weak detachment of Aussies and New Zealanders ahead to hold them up. This detachment, [18 Battalion](#) was told, would withdraw through the [Servia](#) positions, and then it would be their turn.

[Servia](#) was a wonderful defensive position. The only road from northern [Greece](#)

crossed the Aliakmon there; for six miles east and west of the town the southern wall of the Aliakmon valley rose almost vertically, cut only by the pass west of [Servia](#), where the road wound up the hill. From the top the road carried on for five miles through an open valley (this was where [18 Battalion](#) had spent the night), closed at the south end by two steep peaks. Fourth Brigade, holding the cliff top, would be well placed to see off any attack.

Lieutenant-Colonel Gray set up his headquarters at [Kastania](#). B and C Companies went a mile or so ahead of [Kastania](#), down the forward slope—C Company, perched on the cliff immediately overlooking [Servia](#), had the left flank, and also pride of place nearest the enemy. Both companies had wide fronts, and their platoons were sited on the spurs, some of them separated by deep clefts. C Company's left platoon (14 Platoon, under Lieutenant [Pyatt](#) ²) shared a prominent height with [19 Battalion](#)'s right-hand platoon, but was cut off from the rest of [18 Battalion](#) by a deep ragged gash in the hill, and could be reached only after a 45-minute scramble from Company Headquarters.

Farther east were A Company (on B Company's right rear just north of [Kastania](#)) and D on the right flank, a little farther back still, high up a bald mountainside, with some of its posts above the snowline. The snow was dry and powdery, and not unpleasant, but what the men found very awkward was that fresh snow fell nearly every night, blotting out the tracks by which supplies were carried up after dark.

Weary as the men were when they reached their positions, they had no rest that day. They dumped their loads, then immediately turned round and crawled back to [Lava](#) again for a hot meal and another load of gear. The second trip forward was a killer. Only those who actually trod the [Lava- Kastania](#) tracks will ever fully realise their endlessness, the aching lungs and leaden feet, the mighty relief when you reached the position and threw your load down before collapsing on top of it. The 10th April was only the beginning of the ordeal.

After unloading, most of the transport went back from [Lava](#) to a brigade park some miles back. Cookshops and a few other essential vehicles stayed at [Lava](#), dispersed in the shelter of stone huts and walls. The carriers went down into the Aliakmon valley and camped on the outskirts of [Servia](#) to act as outposts and keep an eye out for paratroops. The signallers ran out telephone cable from Battalion

Headquarters to the companies, but not to the platoons, which had to rely on runners for their communications. The isolated 14 Platoon had a signal lamp to pass messages to C Company headquarters—the number of times this method was used throughout the whole war must have been few.

Once more **18 Battalion** settled down to make its position as strong as possible in the time available. The companies dug themselves into the rocky slopes, and camouflaged the posts as well as they could with stones and scrub. Camouflage, both from the ground and air, was a most particular item of their orders. No more indiscriminate firing at planes—the men were to lie still, very still indeed, unless the planes had obviously seen them. They didn't like this restriction, but before long they were to discover its good sense.



18 Bn at Servia Pass

For the same reason unnecessary movement in daylight was forbidden. After 10 April all supplies—food, ammunition, wire, sandbags—were hauled up to the forward positions at night by carrying parties from **Lava**, helped by a few conscripted local donkeys. Breakfast and dinner became nocturnal meals, eaten in haste with your loins girded. For lunch you took away some bully and biscuits to eat at leisure in your barn or dugout.

The unit would have been hard put to it to keep the supplies up had it not been for the 'donks'. Acquired first on 10 April to carry gear up the steep slopes from **Servia** to the forward positions, they were later organised into trains which operated

forward from [Lava](#), and literally took a great weight off the shoulders of the nightly carrying parties. Some of them had owner-drivers who entered [18 Battalion's](#) employ for a wage of bully and biscuits; the ownership of others was shrouded in mystery, and best not inquired into. For a week they served the [18th](#) well, and when the battalion left [Serbia](#) their final duty was to bring out some of the heavier gear, which otherwise would have been left behind.

There was one battery of New Zealand guns supporting the battalion—29 Battery of [6 Field Regiment](#), the same one that had been behind the [18th](#) at Mikri Milia. It had pulled out from there the evening before the infantry, came straight to [Lava](#), and laboriously hauled its guns into position behind the town on that fearfully wet evening of 9 April. The battalion's own mortars were placed behind the crest of the hill, just above [Lava](#). The anti-aircraft Brens were dug in round [Lava](#) to give what protection they could to Rear HQ and the artillery. The [18th](#) had no anti-tank guns this time, as there was no chance of tanks getting up that precipice.

Things soon began to liven up. The scratch force ahead of [4 Brigade](#) took a terrific hammering from the Germans, and from 11 April Aussies and Greeks began arriving back at [Serbia](#) in disorder, some without arms, units mixed up and tangled with swarms of civilian refugees. For [4 Brigade](#) this was a disheartening sight, for who was left now to stop the German Juggernaut? Just as disheartening was the mournful stream of refugees from [Serbia](#) and farther north, women and children mostly, carrying on their backs as much of their possessions as they could. Some climbed the hill in [18 Battalion's](#) area and sought shelter in caves; others plodded on back through the lines and were lost to sight. The Kiwis, while desperately sorry for these people, at the same time eyed them askance, for what would be easier than for a few Fifth Columnists to slip through with them? There were already strong rumours that the countryside was full of spies.

The refugees also brought back news of the German advance, the first news that the men in the companies had—the Germans were 20 miles away—ten miles—they were close behind. The battalion speeded up its digging, and metaphorically spat on its hands and tensed itself for the onslaught. The carriers were recalled from [Serbia](#) to [Lava](#) after a couple of days; the valley was so swarming with people that they couldn't have done much against paratroops. They came back in a snowstorm that blinded everyone that evening and left a coating of white on the ground next

day.

This snow, and the rain before it, following so closely on the long dry period in [Egypt](#), had one unfortunate effect—a lot of boots disintegrated. The Q staff, luckily, had built up a reserve of several sacks of boots, not only enough to see [18 Battalion](#) through the emergency, but also to give some help to 20 Battalion, which was not so fortunately placed.

On 11 and 12 April, while the fugitive stream was at its height, [18 Battalion](#) could see and hear bombing away to the north, and gradually getting nearer. The 13th (Easter Day) brought the war at last, quite suddenly, right to the battalion's doorstep. ³

It happened early in the afternoon. A little earlier a couple of enemy reconnaissance planes had flown overhead without attracting more than brief attention. Now, suddenly, the sky directly above the battalion was split by a mighty roar, and down swooped a long file of planes.

This was the men's first personal acquaintance with the [Luftwaffe](#), and it was anything but admiration at first sight. Low over B and C Companies they swooped, with a snarl that turned every heart upside down—'We were sure they had us', commented one man. But they didn't go for [18 Battalion](#). They dived over the brow of the hill one after the other, vertically downward it seemed, and sent their bombs crashing into [Servia](#), which disappeared in smoke and dust. The battalion's forward companies couldn't have had a better view. They were not yet hardened to death and destruction; [Servia](#)'s agony horrified but fascinated them. It was over in a minute or two. The planes made off, and the smoke cleared over [Servia](#), revealing jagged ruins where the bombs had hit, and here and there fires burning.

Events moved fast for the rest of the afternoon. Barely an hour after the raid the Aliakmon bridge beyond [Servia](#) went up with a roar, the first indication [18 Battalion](#)'s forward troops had that they were now in the front line, with no protection between them and the enemy. A little later word was passed down that digging in daylight was to stop, as the Germans were expected very soon and the positions would be in full view. Late in the afternoon the first shells of the [Servia](#) battle whistled overhead as the artillery began to register targets beyond the river.

About teatime the planes arrived again, as suddenly as before, and gave [Serbia](#) another pasting. This time, to [18 Battalion](#)'s surprise, they were greeted by anti-aircraft fire from the rear, an unheard-of thing. This heart-warming support continued next day (14 April), but then fell silent, to everyone's disgust. Later the men heard through the grapevine of a Yugoslav anti-aircraft troop which had come in among the New Zealand field guns near [Lava](#), but after only a day's firing had run out of ammunition. It would have relieved a sore need later on.

From daylight on 14 April every eye was strained northwards, towards the road that twisted away among the hills. There wasn't long to wait. Quite early in the day, away in the distance beyond the river, appeared a line of dots, which as they advanced took the unmistakable shape of troop-carrying trucks, with tanks following. Behind the leaders came more and more. This was no mere patrol or advance guard—this, as an [18 Battalion](#) man said, looked like the whole bloody German army arriving at once, arriving in a confident, unhurried way, almost as if they were on a picnic. About 10 a.m. a car came down the road towards the river; it stopped, and the occupants got out, but a salvo of New Zealand shells made them hop back in and drive away smartly. The battle was on.

For the rest of the day the forward troops had nothing to do but sit and watch, though the Germans were still so far away that few details could be picked up. About 2 p.m. a column of trucks came forward nearly to the river, where men debussed from them and began to move forward to the river bank. Despite the New Zealand artillery, which sent shell after shell in among them, the Germans reached the river and set about erecting a pontoon bridge. They certainly were no cowards. All afternoon, under shellfire, they battled to get their bridge across the river; but by nightfall they hadn't managed it. Everyone knew, however, that in the darkness they would cross. The night was a restless, alert one, with everybody on the jump.

The weight of the German air raids on 14 April was directed at the artillery. For the time being the Germans weren't interested in the New Zealand infantry, or perhaps hadn't discovered exactly where their positions were; but they did their best to prevent that annoying shellfire from interfering with their bridging. During the day there were several bombing and strafing raids on the guns. Eighteenth Battalion, obedient to orders, lay doggo and refrained from firing at the planes, except for the

'ack-ack' platoon and the carriers, which were uncomfortably close to the guns. They opened up with their Brens and gave the raiders as hot a time as they could. It took all the guts you had to stick to your gun and keep on firing when a dirty big black plane was diving right at you, with its guns belting away. That evening, too, the German artillery opened up for the first time, also firing at the guns, and the battalion was under its first artillery duel. Some stray shells fell in C Company's neighbourhood, cutting the company's telephone line.

These raids on 14 April, [18 Battalion](#) thought, were bad enough. But from a very early hour next day it became obvious that they 'hadn't seen nothing yet'. As soon as it grew light the German planes were over in swarms—'the sky seemed full of them', said one man. They bombed, they strafed; sometimes they dived vertically with an unnerving scream, which added to the horror and the strain on the nerves until the men realised that it was only noise, and didn't make the planes any more lethal. They were lethal enough anyhow. Now that the Yugoslav ack-ack guns had folded up they grew more daring and came down low, unhindered except by Bren fire. [Lava](#), the artillery and the main road all caught it. Not a single British plane put in an appearance, which was bewildering and depressing.

The shelling persisted on 15 April. The New Zealand artillery was under constant fire, which meant that the Bren carriers got their share. During the day the first shells fell on [Lava](#), and [18 Battalion](#) lost its first man killed in action, Private [Claude Finch](#)⁴ of the transport platoon. Of the forward troops, only 14 Platoon on the extreme left had any shelling.

During the night of 14–15 April a strong German force crossed the Aliakmon and moved up towards the New Zealand positions. The first attack, unexpectedly, fell on [19 Battalion](#), which trapped two companies of German infantry and captured them complete. Eighteenth Battalion, sitting on its ridge top, heard the firing over to its left, but didn't know till later what had happened, although C Company's forward posts got in a few cracks at odd parties of Jerries moving round on their front. There was nothing more to be seen straight down below, though all eyes were glued to the valley floor for signs of the enemy.

Late in the morning he reappeared. There was a lot of movement at the Aliakmon crossing, too far off for [18 Battalion's](#) weapons, and in a little while groups

of infantry came in sight, advancing among the trees, heading for [Servia](#). As they came within range the battalion's mortars opened fire, and a little later, as the enemy approached [Servia](#), B and C Companies went into action. It was ideal shooting, and quite a number of Germans dropped, but they kept on steadily, taking full advantage of the cover in the valley. About midday the first of them entered [Servia](#) itself. Early in the afternoon they got machine guns into position in [Servia](#), and some of B Company's posts came under fire.

The rest of the day was quite lively, both sides keeping up a steady fire with machine guns and rifles. Throughout the war there were to be few occasions when the battalion had such perfect conditions for sniping. For the moment it had every advantage of ground and cover, and it used them to the full. The Germans pouring across the valley towards [Servia](#) were harassed all the way with bullets and mortar bombs; the mortars in particular did good work, engaged the Jerries in [Servia](#) and kept their fire down. At nightfall, when activity slackened off, the honours were definitely with [18 Battalion](#), which had done considerable damage to the enemy with only one casualty of its own.

This man, [Private Rex Slade](#),⁵ was wounded on patrol down in the valley that afternoon. As the Germans approached [Servia](#), CSM McCormack⁶ of B Company got together a scratch patrol of half a dozen men, scrambled down the hill and went as far as the outskirts of [Servia](#), where they shot up the Germans at close range. Such a foray could depend only on surprise, and couldn't last long. The patrol didn't wait to be overwhelmed by numbers, but hit as hard as it could and then withdrew uphill followed by German machine-gun fire.

At nightfall, then, activity on the front died down. But not altogether. Both sides were jumpy and apt to put up flares and open fire at the least noise. A few more bold spirits from the battalion went snooping about the valley floor; Lieutenant Pyatt went as far forward as the river, but saw nothing except some guns going into position. The artillery duel, though it slackened off, didn't die out entirely—from time to time a few harassing shells went over in both directions. The tension in the forward posts was increased by rumours that Jerry patrols had climbed the cliff and were in the area. The rumours were groundless, but their effect was that carrying parties, or other groups of men moving about [18 Battalion](#)'s lines, had to make themselves known very clearly and promptly when approaching a position. Everyone

was glad to see daylight again.

The 18th had some cause for pleasure, too, as 16 April was a day of heavy fog and drizzle. A strange thing to rejoice at, perhaps, especially as the tracks in the area were pools of deep mud in places, but it gave the men a day's blessed freedom from air attack. It was a quiet day except for spasms of shellfire on Lava, the guns and C Company.

But again events were moving on a high level, and the battalion's stand at Servia was to be cut short. The Germans didn't look like making any headway there — 4 Brigade was full of confidence that it could hold off the whole Jerry army if need be—but elsewhere it was different. The line of the mountain passes was to be abandoned, and the whole Allied force pulled back.

¹ Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Timaru, 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Bde 1914-19 (CO 3 Bn); comd 4 Bde Jan 1940-Aug 1941; 2 NZ Div (Crete) 29 Apr-27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941-Dec 1945.

² Maj W. A. Pyatt; Wellington; born Gisborne, 4 Nov 1916; theological student; 18 Bn 1939-41; 18 Armd Regt 1944; 2 i/c 20 Regt Mar-May 1945; wounded 18 Apr 1941.

³ Appointments in 18 Bn on 13 April:

CO: Lt-Col J. R. Gray	9 PI: Lt R. G. Parkinson
2 i/c: Maj M. de R. Petrie	OC B Coy: Maj W. H. Evans
Adjt: Capt N. B. Smith	2 i/c B Coy: vacant
QM: Lt S. N. S. Crump	10 PI: 2 Lt C. M. Coote
MO: Capt J. Dempsey	11 PI: Lt K. L. Brown
Padre: Rev. F. O. Dawson	12 PI: 2 Lt W. H. Ryan
IO: 2 Lt C. G. Gentil	OC C Coy: Maj R. J. Lynch
OC HQ Coy: Capt A. S. Playle	2 i/c C Coy: Lt H. M. Green
Signals: Lt D. H. St. C. Macdonald	13 PI: Sgt E. G. Shucksmith (acting)
AA: Lt J. R. McGruther	14 PI: Lt W. A. Pyatt
Mortars: 2 Lt E. F. Kent	15 PI: Lt J. E. Batty

Carriers: Lt J. K. Herdman
Pioneers: 2 Lt R. F. Lambie
TO: 2 Lt O. B. Copeland
OC A Coy: Capt C. T. Kelleway
2 i/c A Coy: Capt W. J. Lyon
7 PI: Lt R. McK. Evans
8 PI: Lt P. R. Pike

OC D Coy: Capt R. S. Sinclair
2 i/c D Coy: 2 Lt D. L. Robinson
16 PI: Sgt C. O. McGruther (acting)
17 PI: 2 Lt J. C. Cullwick
18 PI: 2 Lt J. L. Harrison
RSM: WO I G. R. Andrews

⁴ Pte A. C. Finch; born Tuakau, 16 Jun 1916; dairy assistant; killed in action 15 Apr 1941.

⁵ Cpl R. C. Slade; Palmerston North; born Featherston, 7 Sep 1914; labourer; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941.

⁶ WO II E. J. McCormack; born NZ 24 Jun 1918; miner; killed in action 25 May 1941.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 8 – WITHDRAWAL FROM SERVIA

CHAPTER 8

Withdrawal from Servia

The idea of withdrawing from the [Olympus](#) and [Servia](#) positions wasn't a sudden or panicky move. It was another of those decisions made reluctantly by the leaders of the British forces in [Greece](#) simply because the enemy was too strong for them. As the German advance developed it soon became obvious that no line across northern [Greece](#) would be tenable for long, as there were not enough troops to hold it; and by 13 April, before the Germans even appeared on [18 Battalion's](#) front, a withdrawal had definitely been decided on. The next line to be held was at [Thermopylae](#), 90 miles south, where [Greece](#) narrows to an isthmus.

Fourth Brigade's part in the general plan for [Anzac Corps'](#) withdrawal was to stay in place until the Aussies were out, then to disengage and go back through a rearguard consisting of Divisional Cavalry at [Elevtherokhorion](#) (where the roads from [Servia](#) and [Olympus](#) converge) and [6 Brigade](#) at [Elasson](#), a little farther south. After that the brigade would go right back to the [Thermopylae](#) position, leaving the main road at [Larisa](#) for a secondary road round the east coast through [Volos](#).

Within [4 Brigade](#), [18](#) and [19](#) Battalions were to pull out under cover of darkness and walk back through the valley south of the [Servia Pass](#). The southern end of the valley would be held by [20 Battalion](#) as a rearguard, and a little beyond that trucks would be waiting to pick the men up. The night of the withdrawal was originally to be 18-19 April. On the 16th it was put forward to the night of 17-18 April.

Time was running short before the changed orders penetrated down to [18 Battalion](#). They were passed on verbally by Brigadier Puttick at [4 Brigade](#) Headquarters late on the afternoon of the 16th, and by the time Lieutenant-Colonel Gray had gone back to the battalion and got word to the companies it was too late to make any preliminary moves that night. The prospect of getting the whole battalion, plus equipment, back over the mountain goat-tracks and out of the valley in nine short hours of darkness was rather appalling, but nothing could be carried back in daylight, as the Germans, whatever happened, must not be given the least inkling of what was up. There was only one thing to be done. Colonel Gray reluctantly gave orders that nothing was to be brought out except weapons,

ammunition and essential gear. Everything else, including food, blankets, and the nice new two-man bivouac tents only received within the last couple of days, was to be left behind, and if possible destroyed.

The men's feelings on hearing the orders can be imagined. They were aghast. Here they were, prepared to hold firm for ever, and now they had to up sticks and get out, leaving a lot of their possessions for Jerry. Not only that, but they would have to get back over those breakneck tracks at a fast pace in the dark. No wonder that 17 April wasn't a happy day for [18 Battalion](#). The luckiest men were some in the foremost posts who didn't get word of the move until quite late in the afternoon, so didn't have so many hours to think about it.

The battalion's drivers were busy men that day. The ration dump from which they drew supplies had been abandoned the previous night, so the drivers spent the morning there, piling as much as they could on the trucks, destroying as much of the rest as possible. This seemed a sin, but, as one of them said, everything spoiled was a little less for Jerry. Trucks from other units were also there helping themselves, and also Greeks from the nearby villages, marvelling at this unheard-of windfall. Then after lunch [18 Battalion](#)'s transport was summoned up to [Lava](#) to load what gear was available, with orders to wait there until the companies came back after dark.

Up in the front line the morning was very quiet, with the mist still thick over everything. It would have been well for [18 Battalion](#) if it had stayed that way. But soon after midday it cleared, and the German artillery and planes began again.

The shelling had hardly begun when C Company suffered a grievous blow. Some incautious movement as the mist cleared must have been picked up by a sharp-eyed observer opposite; the Germans got right on to one of 15 Platoon's section posts, and landed a salvo of mortar bombs in the trench. The section was almost wiped out—four killed and two wounded. Stretcher bearers were on the job promptly, but took most of the afternoon to carry one man back along that fearful track to Battalion Headquarters, and were completely done at the end.

The front line, despite this calamity, didn't get very much shelling that afternoon, but [Lava](#) 'copped a packet'. As the mist cleared two 'recce' planes came

snooping overhead, and soon afterwards shells again began to fall on [Lava](#), followed by a bombing and strafing raid. The [18 Battalion](#) ack-ack men stuck to their guns and gave the planes what they could, but with no success. For the rest of the afternoon the shelling was continual, and several men were wounded in [Lava](#). The transport was sent away in a hurry without waiting for the companies, and ran the gauntlet of mud and shells all the way down to the main road.

Eighteenth Battalion's general orders were to withdraw on foot to the main road behind [Lava](#), and back through the valley to a spot just beyond its southern end, where ASC trucks would pick it up and head south for the village of [Molos](#), behind the [Thermopylae](#) line. The trucks were to leave one by one as they were filled. Twentieth Battalion would provide a company as rearguard, and the last people to leave the valley would be a party of engineers, who would blow a series of demolitions all along the road as they withdrew. They were to be clear of the valley by 3 a.m.

During the day the supporting artillery pulled out, and the infantry was once more on its own. By great ill-luck, the last of the guns were just moving out when the mist cleared, which undoubtedly helped to give the enemy the impression that something was afoot. Eighteenth Battalion's rifle companies, too, had to send carrying parties back in daylight from the forward positions with such things as mortars and spare ammunition. This was contrary to the original plan, but was the only possible way of saving this gear—the risk of being spotted by Jerry, observers had to be taken. It was doubly unfortunate because in the end most of the heavy gear was left behind anyway.

From the forward positions there were two possible ways back, one across the forward slope of the hill and through C Company's area on the left flank, and the other (the 'back track'), rougher, longer and rockier, steeply uphill from [Kastania](#) through D Company and round the reverse slope. Lieutenant-Colonel Gray's original plan was to send everyone except D Company out by the forward track, but late on the 17th he changed the orders. C Company was now to make its own way to [Lava](#) by the shorter track, while the other companies all moved out over the back track—B Company to pull out first and go back through A and D, then A to follow on, and D to come last as rearguard. Men of the Intelligence Section would guide the column on this track.

The forward areas buzzed with activity in the few hours before starting time. Company rendezvous and timings were arranged; runners took the orders round to platoons and sections. The men made ready, packed their most valued and important possessions, and burnt the rest, or buried them, or savagely slashed them with knives and bayonets. Blankets were torn to ribbons. The positions were a chaos of ruined gear when the men left. Everyone, of course, carried out his rifle, Bren or Tommy gun—orders for this were strict and stern. Besides their packs, the men carried picks and shovels, and sandbags containing what felt like tons of spare ammunition.

Back in the battalion's rear areas things were getting organised as well as possible, which wasn't very well. The trucks were hurriedly summoned back to [Lava](#) as night began to fall, but didn't get more than halfway, as the road was so deep in mud that they couldn't force their way through. Some of them stuck fast, and the carriers patrolled up and down the road to pull out any that got into difficulties. For half the night the carriers worked hard under shellfire; two of them shed tracks hauling one truck out of a morass, and had to be left behind. The rest were ordered shortly before midnight to leave for the south.

Most of the men from Rear Battalion Headquarters at [Lava](#) were sent away at 7 p.m., thankful to leave a village which in the course of the afternoon had been shelled almost to rags. Major Petrie with a handful of men stayed in [Lava](#) to help check the companies through. Another check post on



18 Battalion marches into Papakura

18 Battalion marches into Papakura

Filling palliasses, Papakura



Filling palliasses, **Papakura**



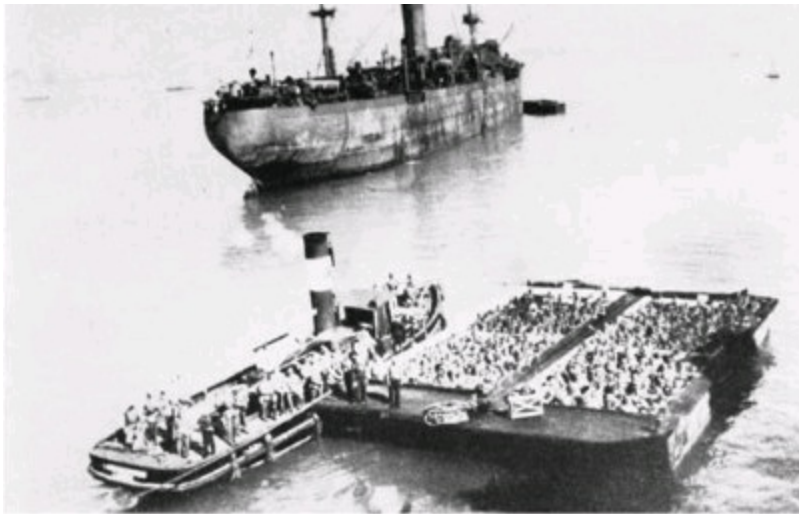
Troopship amusements—Boxing

Troopship amusements—Boxing

Troopship amusements—Race Day



Troopship amusements—Race Day



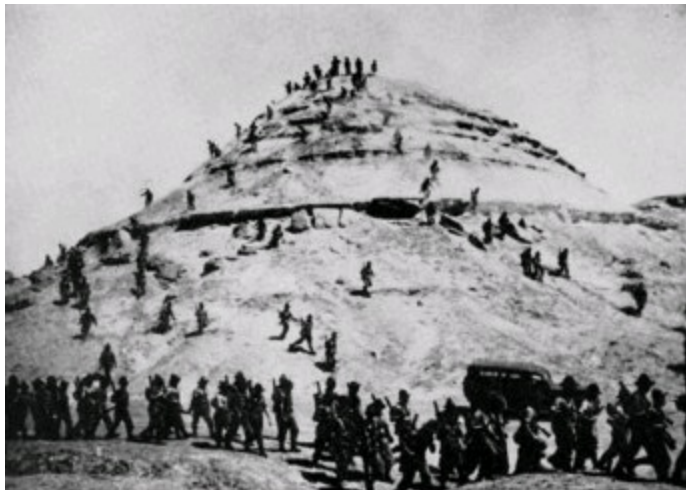
The battalion goes ashore at Tewfik

The battalion goes ashore at Tewfik

A Company signal office, Maadi, 1940



A Company signal office, Maadi, 1940



'Down the slope like a lot of sheep'—18 Battalion in the desert
behind Maadi Camp

'Down the slope like a lot of sheep'— 18 Battalion in the desert behind Maadi Camp

Battalion transport at Kasr-el-Nil Barracks



Battalion transport at Kasr-el-Nil Barracks

the road was set up by [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger](#)¹ of 20 Battalion, who, as commander of the rear party, was to ensure that [18 Battalion](#) was all gone before blowing the demolitions.

It was midnight before the first company appeared. This was C Company, which staggered into [Lava](#), a laden, gasping mob too weary even to curse.

The company had been delayed for an hour at its rendezvous by 14 Platoon, which for safety's sake had taken a rough, roundabout way back from its isolated hill, and had only been kept together by the efforts of Lieutenant Pyatt, who had stopped frequently to count heads and had then gone back to round up any

stragglers. Not long after the platoons left their forward positions shells began to fall on the track, which was under steady fire by the time the company was together and ready to leave. This was a tragedy—the walk back, everyone knew, was going to be as much as they could bear anyway, loaded beyond normal capacity and moving fast over those rocks and slopes. But there was no choice. The men set out in single file, stooping under their loads, grunting their way up the hill, diving to earth whenever a shell screamed close. They were downhearted, cold, wet and anxious—anxious because flares were being fired away down below in the valley, and the rumour spread that Jerry was following up hard on their heels. They reached [Lava](#) dog-tired, mud-caked, and so shaken by the shelling that [Major Lynch's](#) ² first words to Major Petrie were, 'For God's sake don't let us be shelled any more.'

Such a request wasn't easily granted. The German gunners, now free from all molestation by the New Zealand artillery, continued to plaster [Lava](#), the road, and the whole area impartially. C Company, after a short rest, shouldered their burdens and carried on, not down the track, but up a gully and across country in a vain attempt to dodge the shelling. To reach the road they had to cross a stream bed and crawl up an almost vertical 50-foot bank, quite a feat at any time, but a tremendous effort for tired, overloaded men. They hauled one another up the bank, and found themselves on the road by 20 Battalion's check post, with a worried [Colonel Kippenberger](#) asking anxiously about the other companies. Of course, nobody knew where they were, except that they were taking the back track and might by now be anywhere on God's earth. C Company pushed on down the road, breathing easier now despite the shelling.

Hard on its heels, and in much the same condition, came a party of fifteen from Battalion Headquarters under Captain [Smith](#), ³ and then the mortar platoon and Second-Lieutenant Ryan's ⁴ 12 Platoon of B Company, all of which had taken C Company's route out. No. 12 Platoon had had a man killed by the shelling, and five others had fallen behind (they were picked up by the Germans next day).

Not far down the road the waiting battalion trucks relieved the men of their gear, took it on another three miles to the ASC trucks, then came back to wait for the next load. The men walked the three miles, crawled into the ASC trucks, and most of them were asleep almost before the trucks moved off.

There was still no sign of the rest of [18 Battalion](#), and at 1 a.m. Major Petrie and the rest of Rear HQ pulled out from [Lava](#), assuming that the companies were somewhere up the hills on the back track and would probably miss [Lava](#). The rearguard company of 20 Battalion also pulled out, leaving [Colonel Kippenberger](#) and his small engineer party as [18 Battalion](#)'s sole covering force. Before the night was out [18 Battalion](#) was to have cause for eternal gratitude to them.

C Company's withdrawal, as has been seen, was a tough ordeal. But for the other companies on the back track it was only just short of impossible. Only the thought of Jerry behind kept many of the men from lying down halfway and giving up the struggle.

B Company was nearly three hours late coming back through [Kastania](#)—being so closely under the enemy's eye it hadn't been able to get its heavy gear back any earlier. By the time the company reached [Kastania](#) the men were already staggering. On they went, panting up the slope with their loads, with A and D following on behind. Luckily, the shelling that was plaguing C Company hadn't yet got over as far as the back track, except for a few odd ones now and again. Just as the last half of D Company was hauling itself over the top of the ridge a sudden fierce barrage fell on [Kastania](#) and the hillside they were leaving—only a few minutes too late to do any real damage.

Over the ridge the track led down through a sort of basin where the column was comparatively safe from shelling. But its troubles were only beginning. It was pitch black by now, drizzly and cold, and you could hardly see a yard ahead. As the battalion stumbled down the hill the night's culminating series of heartbreaks began.

The track, which wasn't much of a track to begin with, soon petered out among broken, rocky spurs and gullies. The guides lost their way, and small blame to them—as one said, 'It was a matter of sheer luck to find one's way in the dark without a track, up hills and down and round other hills etc.' There were delays as the guides sought desperately for the right way; there were false starts that took the column by roundabout ways over frighteningly steep country. Men tripped and fell over stones, staggered to their feet and reeled on, still dragging their sandbags of ammunition. Other men sat down to rest while the line went on past them, and the companies began to get mixed up. At the frequent halts some would nod off to sleep, holding

up those behind them and breaking the column—as it got near where [Lava](#) ought to be, the officers several times had to halt the line, go back to round up the strays, and push them forward to catch up. This took a lot of time. It was getting late, and though the officers fumed at the delays, swore, cajoled and bullied, they couldn't get the pace any faster. A few men sat or lay down and refused to go any farther.

Finally (it was after 1.30 a.m. by now, high time the whole battalion was out), Colonel Gray, who was in the lead with B Company, struck the mud track from [Lava](#) to the main road. This was largely due to one man, Corporal Fred Redfern, ⁵ who had taken over the guiding halfway and led the column confidently in the right direction. The leaders drew breaths of relief—and then it was found that only about a dozen of B Company were there. Somewhere back in the darkness the file had broken again, and only the head of B Company had kept up.

There was no point in going back or waiting. Down through the slush of the track the little party waded, and at the junction with the road found [Colonel Kippenberger](#). Gray told his sad story—two and a half companies were still somewhere up there, wandering in the dark, and he was afraid they would have to be abandoned. [Kippenberger](#) sent the group off down the road, arranged for the battalion trucks to ferry them down to the ASC park and come back for another load, then settled down again to wait, heedless of the impatience of the engineers, who were anxious to blow the demolitions and be gone.

The rest of the column waited about half an hour after losing the leaders, not suspecting that it was anything but another of those halts while the guides cast round for clues. Then, quoting Captain Kelleway:

A call came down the column for me.... To my consternation, I found on arrival that this was the situation—the twelfth or thirteenth man from the head of B Coy had gone to sleep, and the C.O. with Bill Evans and the guide had disappeared.... As the senior officer remaining, I had to make a quick decision—I knew the Pass was to be blown, I hadn't the faintest idea where we were, but had to do something, and Kelleway:

An impromptu conference of the nearest officers—Captain Kelleway, Lieutenants [Pike](#) ⁶ and [Evans](#) ⁷ of A Company, Captain [Sinclair](#) ⁸ of D, Lieutenant Brown ⁹ Second-

Lieutenant [Coote](#)¹⁰ of B—met to consider the situation. As they talked, occasional shellbursts silhouetted the hills across the valley to the right, and Brown recognised landmarks that, he said, should lie in the right direction. It was decided to change course and head straight across country in the direction of these landmarks, stopping for nothing. Kelleway gave the order to dump surplus gear—‘It was not until this stage,’ he says, ‘that the 3” mortars of B Company went, plus the useless 2” mortars the rest of us had.’ Then the column headed off as fast as their aching legs could carry them. Evans took the only compass to keep direction.

This part of the trip was the worst nightmare of all. The men had no idea what was going on, only rumours flying up and down the column that Jerry was chasing them. They were not only lost, but frightened. Some of them threw away everything. Quoting one of them, ‘The tension increased in bounds in an atmosphere of doubt and bewilderment. We pushed on leaving a sea of gear littered around.’ They slithered down hillsides, crawled on hands and knees up the other side. They were drenched with sweat, muddy, bruised, shaking with fatigue.

But they were going the right way. After about half an hour the leaders saw the dim outline of the road ahead, across a gully and up a steep bank, the same bank that had nearly finished C Company. On the road were lights, and men moving up and down, and a little farther on was the sound of truck engines, the friendliest sound the men had ever heard. The climb up to the road was almost more than they could manage, and some who had carried gear and rifles all night threw them away on this last little bit; but up they scrambled, clawing frantically at the earth. At the top helping hands lifted them to their feet. They were bundled into the trucks, where they collapsed in heaps. The time was 4 a.m., and the first signs of dawn were showing. When all were on their way [Kippenberger](#) ordered the engineers to blow the first demolition.

The explosion brought despairing cries from stragglers in the gully and back up on the hillside. There were a lot of them— nearly half of D Company, which had lost the column some time before, and odds and ends from the other companies who had been picked up en route. They arrived in little exhausted groups and stumbled off down the road. Even after the second demolition had gone up more men came in, the last few alone and almost out on their feet. It was 5 a.m. before all were clear.

Then, at long last, the rest of the demolitions were blown, and the rear party withdrew.

This was an epic night in [18 Battalion](#)'s history, a night demanding hardihood and endurance from all. Those who failed were few. The courage of the forward troops, some of them out on the hillsides for nine hours, was matched by the courage of the truck drivers, who stuck to their job all night through continual shellfire, and didn't leave until the whole battalion was safe. And the battalion could thank [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger](#) and the engineers, who would not abandon even the last few stragglers, but ensured the unit's safety at the cost of their own. They were cut off by German tanks as they withdrew, and had a perilous, hectic trip across country, suffering heavy casualties before they got clear.

Eighteenth Battalion's journey south was plain sailing at first, with a fairly fast pace. The road wasn't bad. It left the bare mountains for fertile valley lands, and south of [Elasson](#) passed through miles of vines and wheatfields bright with red poppies, a pleasant contrast to the rocks and snow of the [Servia](#) heights. Then down on to the Thessalian plain and through [Larisa](#), scarred by a recent earthquake and soon to be devastated entirely by the [Luftwaffe](#).

It was still dark when the first trucks carrying [18 Battalion](#) reached [Larisa](#). All sorts of units and vehicles were pouring south, most of them converging on the main road at [Larisa](#), and it was clear that there was going to be a pretty tight jam on that road later. The road through [Volos](#) had turned out to be unfit for heavy trucks, and the entire traffic of the Australian and New Zealand divisions was compelled to use the one narrow main road.

Just after dawn a flight of marauding Jerry planes came over, very low, bombing and machine-gunning up and down the road. A few trucks were hit; men scattered to the fields. When the planes had gone [18 Battalion](#) (such of it as was present) started up and got going again, but found itself in the middle of a jam of traffic that got worse every minute. There was New Zealand, British and Australian traffic all mixed up. Everyone knew that the Jerry planes would be back, and signs of panic were beginning to show here and there.

There was peace for an hour or two, however, while the traffic moved on very

slowly. As far ahead as you could see there was still the same solid line of trucks, sometimes two or three abreast. The delays seemed endless, and everyone's nerves were on the jump.

About 10 a.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Gray, intending to bring his battalion together again, pulled off the road, and as each [18 Battalion](#) truck hove in sight it was called in and dispersed in a field. The men were only too pleased to have a wash and a bite of bully beef, then most of them stretched out and dozed, feeling superior to all the unfortunates still crawling along the hot road. Suddenly the planes reappeared. There was another scatter, men ran vaguely here and there—and down came a plane, just above ground level, straight at them. There was no time to dodge. Some dived under the trucks, others didn't even jump out. A stick of bombs crashed along the field. One truck was hit direct, the bomb killing three men and wounding half a dozen more. Up and down the road swept the planes, bombing and strafing mercilessly. Their roar was appalling—they were so low that some of the bombs didn't even have time to straighten out, but slid along the ground on their sides without exploding.

Panic spread through the mass of traffic. Drivers speeded up and tried to jostle their way through the jam, heedless of all else. Some trucks ran off the road and capsized; some stalled and were ruthlessly shoved off the road. And still the planes strafed up and down at will. Men deserted their trucks and ran for the open country, others huddled in the ditches.

Compared to the rest, the Kiwis had little to be ashamed of. Most of them stuck to their trucks. Some grabbed their rifles and fired at the planes swooping overhead; it didn't seem to do them much harm, but it was a gesture of defiance and a relief to the feelings.

When the raid eased off and the traffic began to move the [18 Battalion](#) trucks were out on the road again, in the crush, crawling painfully south through the chaos of trucks and gear that lined the route. There wasn't a hope of any fast progress. The whole road was one huge jam, accentuated by bomb craters, broken bridges, and the abandoned trucks that narrowed down the free road surface.

The raids kept on, too. After the pass south of [Larisa](#) there wasn't much

bombing, but for the rest of the day, with scarcely a break, the accursed planes were overhead, savagely strafing the column. A truck containing half of [18 Battalion's](#) precious signal gear was hit and set on fire. Every truck had a spotter on the back, whose job was to hammer a warning on the roof of the cab whenever the planes reappeared. At first the trucks all stopped whenever this happened, and everyone tumbled out and took to the ditch. But it was clear that the convoys would never get anywhere that way. Colonel Gray drove along the road, ordering all [18 Battalion](#) trucks to keep going, raids or no raids, and just to drive round halted vehicles. This was better; the pace got a little faster, though it was still not much more than a fast walk.

It was nearly sunset before the raids stopped. The final one came when the battalion's trucks were in the last mountain pass before [Lamia](#), a fair-sized town just north of the [Thermopylae](#) line. It was so savage that the traffic had to stop until it slackened off. Then merciful darkness fell, and the battered convoys could go on in peace.

The battalion carried on through [Lamia](#), turned off the main road to the left, along the coast through [Molos](#), and about 11 p.m. reached its destination, which in daylight turned out to be a pleasant tree-shaded area by a stream. But when the men arrived that night they didn't give two hoots for the shade or the stream. They fell out of the trucks, flopped down on the ground, and slept like the dead. Most of the ASC trucks carrying the last of the battalion came in during the night and early morning, and also four of the carriers, which had very sensibly left the road during the raids and gone across country.

Next morning [18 Battalion](#) set to work to lick its wounds. It had had three killed and twenty wounded on the trip, the highest casualties of any New Zealand unit. It had lost only four trucks, which was a wonder. Far more serious was the loss of six carriers, one bombed and the rest broken down or bogged.

For the next few days the battalion rested in this nice quiet spot, while once more the war rolled southwards towards it.

¹ [Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger](#), KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); born Ladbrooks, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; I

NZEF 1916–17; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939-Apr 1941, Jun-Dec 1941; comd 10 Bde, Crete, May 1941; 5 Bde Jan 1942-Jun 1943, Nov 1943-Feb 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div, 30 Apr-14 May 1943, 9 Feb-2 Mar 1944; comd 2 NZEF Prisoner-of-War Reception Group (UK) Oct 1944-Sep 1945; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories, 1946-57; died Wellington, 5 May 1957.

² Lt-Col R. J. Lynch, MC; born Waihi, 24 Oct 1909; sales manager; CO 18 Bn 29 Jun-15 Jul 1942; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942; died of wounds while p.w. 26 Sep 1942.

³ Maj N. B. Smith, ED; Auckland; born Onehunga, 6 Nov 1909; clerk; wounded 16 Dec 1942.

⁴ Maj W. H. Ryan, OBE, m.i.d., Order of King George I and Silver Cross (Gk); Mangaia, Cook Is; born Auckland, 1 Jun 1911; civil engineer; 18 Bn and Armd Regt; CO 20 Armd Regt Oct-Dec 1945.

⁵ L-Sgt F. G. Redfern, m.i.d.; born NZ 30 Nov 1914; farmer; killed in action 25 May 1941.

⁶ Lt-Col P. R. Pike, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 1 Oct 1913; clerk; CO 24 Bn Apr-Jun 1944; twice wounded.

⁷ Capt R. McK. Evans; born Scotland, 27 Nov 1912; car salesman; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁸ Capt R. S. Sinclair; Te Awamutu; born Scotland, 22 Apr 1911; accountant; wounded 25 May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁹ Maj K. L. Brown, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Gk); Auckland; born Auckland, 22 Nov 1915; salesman.

¹⁰ Capt C. M. Coote; Whangarei; born Te Aroha, 27 Oct 1916; clerk; wounded 16 Apr 1941; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 9 – OUT OF GREECE

CHAPTER 9

Out of Greece

The battalion had a couple of free, comfortable days at [Molos](#), undisturbed by the German planes that came buzzing round at intervals. It took the opportunity to tidy up a bit; the men lay under the trees and washed off their grime in the stream; they explored the nearby villages, and bought (or scrounged) food to supplement their rations, which were beginning to run short. Those who had strayed during the withdrawal went back to their own companies, and the names of those missing were sorted out.

And yet the short break wasn't really much of a holiday. The atmosphere was still jumpy and full of rumours. Jerry was hard on the heels of the retreating forces, and there was quite a likelihood that he might try to short-circuit the [Thermopylae](#) line by coming across the narrow Aegean inlet by which [18 Battalion](#) was parked. In that case, the battalion would have been right in the way. So on the evening of 20 April A and D Companies went down to a nearby bay to patrol and give warning if Jerry approached. Next day C Company took over the job, and on the 22nd the carriers joined the party. Nothing happened to disturb the peaceful course of these patrols.

On 21 April A, B and D Companies went much farther afield, out to the forefront of the [Thermopylae](#) line, to help the battalions of [5 Brigade](#) in their wiring operations. This was a lively enough job for those actually engaged in digging and wiring, but deadly dull for others who had to man standing patrols away out forward of the line covering the working parties. Next morning the companies pulled out again and went back to their quiet retreat at [Molos](#).

These few days had a wonderful effect on the battalion's morale, despite the shortage of food. Most cheering of all was an official story that from now on there would be more air support, backed up by the appearance soon afterwards of a handful of Hurricanes overhead. The report later turned out to be anything but justified; but at the time it gave everyone's spirits a badly-needed lift.

The 22nd April was a bitter day for the New Zealanders in [Greece](#), for in the morning the expected and yet incredible news came through— [Greece](#) was to be

evacuated, the whole force was to pull back to various embarkation ports, everything except weapons and ammunition was to be destroyed.

The Division was to withdraw through [Athens](#) and out to a number of small ports and beaches east of the city, where cruisers and destroyers would pick the men up. It was to go straight back from the [Thermopylae](#) line; [4 Brigade](#) was to leave first and take up a rearguard position south of [Thebes](#), some 60 miles back in a straight line, where the rest of the Division would pass through it.

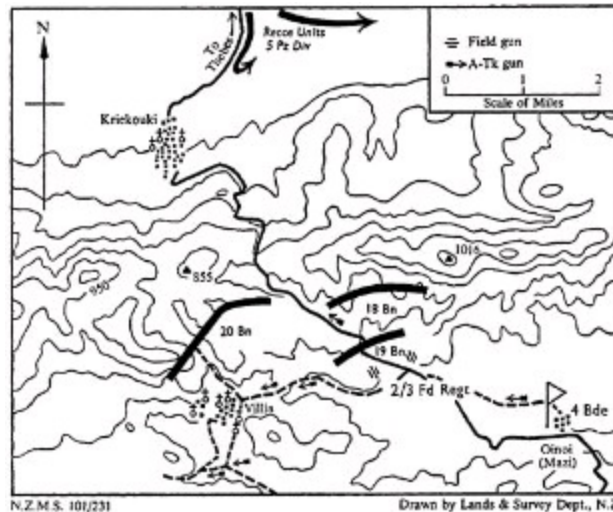
As usual, [18 Battalion](#) got short notice. Just before lunchtime on 22 April word came down to move that night, which meant fairly rapid preparation during the afternoon. C Company and the carriers were recalled from the beach, and the order went out to destroy everything except what was absolutely essential, and to keep only one blanket each. Everyone felt that this was a bit too sweeping, and events a few days later were to prove this true; but the gear had to be dumped, there was no arguing with the orders.

That evening the battalion set out on its travels again, moving in convoy eastwards round the coast. This time there was not the glut of traffic that there had been on the [Larisa](#) road, but for drivers and passengers alike it was a gruelling trip, without lights, over narrow roads that wound in and out, and later (when they left the coast and struck south) up and down. The pace was dead slow all night. Nobody knew where the battalion was going—the only destination given to it had been a map reference, and the CO and company commanders had gone ahead of the main convoy to look the place over. After a roundabout trip of 100 miles, during which the battalion passed through the ancient city of [Thebes](#) without caring a damn about it, the convoy met the advance party again in the village of [Kriekouki](#) (or Erithrai), nestling at the foot of a long steep hill over which the main road wound through a high pass between bare peaks.

Dawn was just breaking when the unit reached [Kriekouki](#). The trucks dispersed in and round the village, in gardens, under trees, beside houses and stone walls, and everyone settled down for the day, praying that the [Luftwaffe](#) wouldn't spot them. While daylight lasted there was no movement at all. It wasn't a comfortable day, as every now and then great swarms of German bombers roared over in the direction of [Athens](#), but none attacked [Kriekouki](#). The men idled the day away, lay in the shade,

or bargained with the villagers for eggs to add to their little store of food. **Kriekouki** was a pleasant, friendly little town, not yet touched by the war, and the battalion sighed with relief when dusk fell and the danger from the air passed.

It was on the heights above **Kriekouki** to the south, astride the main road, that **4 Brigade** was to take up its rearguard



4 BRIGADE REARGUARD IN THE KRIEKOUKI PASS, 26 APRIL 1941

4 brigade rearguard in the kriekouki pass, 26 april 1941

position. Eighteenth Battalion got its orders during the afternoon—move up the road that evening (strictly no movement except reconnaissance before dark), and take up a position on the mountain top overlooking **Thebes** and the approaches from the north. The battalion would be east of the road, with 20 Battalion to the west, an Aussie field regiment in support, Aussie anti-tank guns covering the entrance to the pass, and a platoon of Aussie Vickers gunners in the area. Support on this scale seemed princely.

As night fell the deserted road suddenly sprang into life. Every cranny seemed to disgorge trucks, which streamed off southwards in long convoys. At 9 p.m. **18 Battalion**, complete with weapons and what small amount of gear it still possessed, joined the throng and moved off up the winding hill. The transport went right over the pass and hid in wooded gullies six miles south. The rifle companies, after a hard climb up from the road, reached their position up in the clouds and did their best to settle down before daylight. They didn't altogether succeed—some groups got lost in the dark, and daybreak found A Company still out of position. There was a good deal

of moving and scrambling round after dawn until the companies sorted themselves out. Luckily the [Luftwaffe](#) wasn't on the job very early.

The position, once they got it straight, was a first-class one. The road twisted its way up a gorge, and after passing through the position lost itself in hills and hummocks to the south. The battalion had a wonderful view down the gorge towards [Kriekouki](#), over the plain to the north, and along the road by which Jerry could be expected to arrive. D Company, on the left, could look across the gorge to the road cut into the other side. Next to it was A Company, with C Company away out on the right, perched on a knoll, separated from A by a steep ravine. The companies were linked to Battalion Headquarters by telephone, laid hastily by signal parties early in the morning.

The lower slopes of the mountain were covered with a stunted scrub rather like broom; farther up was bare rock. Neither gave any cover to speak of. The battalion had to take hasty makeshift measures to hide before the [Luftwaffe](#) came snooping round. Men pulled off branches to cover themselves, and those high up above the scrub line tucked themselves in beside rocks, lay still, and tried to look as much as possible like bits of the landscape. By good fortune the camouflage succeeded. For much of the day little 'recce' planes were putt-putting low overhead, while every now and again a stray bomber would roar up and down the road, as one man put it, 'looking for something to play with'. But not once was [18 Battalion](#) attacked—a tribute to its steadiness and lack of panic. One man losing his head could have brought merry hell down on the whole unit. But nothing of the sort happened. The men lay stock still, hating the [Luftwaffe](#).

Fourth Brigade's orders had been to hold this position for twenty-four hours, but the unit wasn't to get away so easily. On the afternoon of 24 April came word to stay for another twenty-four hours, to give other formations more time to get away. So [18 Battalion](#) hung on, though short of food and water, and chilled to the bone at night without enough blankets to go round. Luckily, it didn't rain. The days were anxious ones, everybody lying doggo for fear of those pitiless planes; the nights were alert, reconnaissance and standing patrols out farther down the hill, ears pricked for any suspicious sound from the north. The road, deserted by day, filled with traffic at night, as New Zealand convoys moved hastily over the pass to get as far south as possible before dawn drove them into hiding, and gangs of Aussie

pioneers came out from nowhere to work on demolitions in the road just below the battalion.

Anzac Day passed in much the same way as the 24th—and again that afternoon the battalion's hopes of getting away that night were dashed when orders came to cling on for yet another twenty-four hours. This order, though it sounded like another good old army muck-up, had reason behind it. The original plan to embark the Kiwis from east of [Athens](#) had been changed, and the Division was now to go west instead, cross the [Corinth Canal](#), and embark from handier ports in the [Peloponnese](#). The extra day's stand at [Kriekouki](#) by [4 Brigade](#) would let [6 Brigade](#) (the last formation to pull out from [Thermopylae](#)) get right through and over the canal, with every chance of being unmolested.

Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way. A German paratroop landing at [Corinth](#) early on 26 April put it right out of the question for [4 Brigade](#) to get through to the [Peloponnese](#). During the day the [4 Brigade](#) battalions got hasty orders to pull out that night, and to make as quickly as possible for [Porto Rafti](#), east of [Athens](#).

Before these orders came through, [18 Battalion](#) had been enjoying its only bit of excitement since coming to 'Twenty-four-hour Hill'. Late on the morning of 26 April the German spearhead (motor-bikes and tanks followed by troop-carrying trucks) could be seen in the distance, moving through [Thebes](#) and well down the road towards [Kriekouki](#). They were too far away for [18 Battalion](#), but the unit had a fine view of the havoc wrought among the force when it came within range of the supporting Aussie guns. These fired fast and accurately, and the Jerries retired hurriedly through [Thebes](#), leaving knocked-out trucks sitting there at all angles. Shells followed them all the way, and they seemed to have no wish to come back for more.

A few hours of quiet, and then the battalion saw a much more disturbing sight—long German columns turning east off the main road at [Thebes](#) on to another road leading well away from [Kriekouki](#). This was more than ominous, it was the end, for this second road led round the eastern flank to [Athens](#), outflanking [4 Brigade](#) altogether. There was nothing the battalion could do about it, only pray that it would be ordered back before its retreat was cut off. This order, as has been said, came through during the afternoon, and it was hailed in [18 Battalion](#) with sighs of mighty

relief.

This withdrawal did not compare with the [Serbia](#) nightmare, but for tired, hungry men it was bad enough—a scramble of anything up to an hour through rocks and scrub to the road, then a six-mile march down to the transport. The Aussie guns were still firing flat out as the battalion left. The future was a bit worrying. Nobody knew how far Jerry had gone on his flanking move towards [Athens](#), or whether the paratroops from [Corinth](#) had come up to cut off the withdrawal. You could only get going as fast as possible, and hope that you didn't run into trouble. The trucks had already taken down all their canopies, to give the passengers clear fields of fire in case of a scrap.

By 11.15 p.m. the battalion was on its way. Over the first few miles of curly roads and ragged hills the pace was deadly slow, so, abandoning all idea of caution, Lieutenant-Colonel Gray gave the order to put on headlights, and away went the convoy, full speed for [Athens](#), 30 miles away. One truck whose lights fused was wrecked and pushed off the road with no ceremony. Only one more range of hills, thank Heaven, and then the road flattened out and became comparatively straight. At 2 a.m. the convoy reached [Athens](#), and sped on through the deserted city, without stopping, shattering every speed limit ever imposed. About 15 miles past the city the trucks stopped and dispersed in an orchard, and the men thankfully crawled out and went to bed. The first signs of dawn were just glimmering in the sky.

For a few hours all was peace. The cooks scratched up some breakfast, and everyone relaxed—until 9 a.m. when, without warning, along came news that rudely woke the battalion. German tanks were already in [Athens](#). The battalion was to turn to at once, destroy its transport and everything not portable, and get away on foot as soon as possible to Porto Rafti, six miles east. There it was to join [19](#) and [20](#) Battalions in a defensive position to hold Jerry at bay for the day, and the Navy would probably pick everybody up that night.

There wasn't much time to reflect on this news. The destruction of the trucks was a matter of minutes—all spare parts had already been smashed at [Kriekouki](#), and now the drivers proceeded to break windscreens and headlights with spanners and lumps of wood, to rip tyres, to drain the sumps and run the engines till they seized. From this slaughter one truck for each company was spared, and on these

was thrown the little essential gear that remained. The signallers still had some precious telephones and cable, but apart from that there wasn't much left now except weapons and ammunition. The men had very little to carry, only their rifles, what few personal possessions hadn't been dumped, and as much food as they could get hold of. Most of them still had their gas masks.

As soon as the destruction was complete [18 Battalion](#) moved off. The companies soon shook out into open formation, the men going along lanes and through the vines and olive groves, using all the cover they could find, while the remaining trucks used the road, along with the Aussie field guns which had done so nobly at [Kriekouki](#).

It wasn't much over a mile to [Markopoulon](#), the last town of any size that the battalion was to pass through in [Greece](#). Here took place one of the most touching scenes the men ever saw. All [Markopoulon](#) was out in the main street to see the battalion pass; the people wept, called down blessings on the soldiers' heads, pressed on them gifts of flowers, water and wine. This display made the men feel as if they were running away, deserting these kindly people, leaving them to the mercy of the Germans. So there wasn't a man in the battalion who didn't feel depressed and sad, and all the less able to bear what came next.

What came next was the [Luftwaffe](#). The battalion was just leaving [Markopoulon](#), with a swarm of children still running alongside, when four Messerschmitts suddenly swooped out of the blue and dived on the road. The men ran desperately for open country, but the trucks and guns couldn't do that. They were caught with no cover handy, and didn't have a chance. The planes (now joined by about fifteen more) strafed along the road, concentrating on each vehicle in turn till it went up in flames. Then they machine-gunned at random over the surrounding country, where the men were lying huddled in furrows or under trees as inconspicuously as possible. Some men stood their ground and fired back, but without success. Incendiary bullets set alight a dry field of grain in which Headquarters Company had taken refuge, and the men had to move out in a hurry.

It seemed hours that the planes were overhead, but actually it was only ten minutes. They left a shambles behind them, burning trucks all along the road, an ammunition truck going up in countless small explosions. In [18 Battalion](#) six men had

been killed and twelve wounded. The battalion was so scattered that it took some time to reassemble; then it moved on again, across a flat tree-studded plain that ended four miles ahead in low hills hiding the Promised Land of [Porto Rafti](#). Abandoned weapons and gear littered the countryside, and at one spot the men saw dozens of trucks sitting smashed and desolate among the trees, just like the ones they themselves had left.

The defensive position the battalion took up consisted of a dispersed line of men lying quietly among the olive trees north of the road, covering nearly two miles of front; a thin



Cooking in the field. Note the drip-burner stoves—see p. 36

Cooking in the field. Note the drip-burner stoves— see p. 36

Wadi Naghamish. 18 Battalion at work



Wadi Naghamish. 18 Battalion at work



Dinner time, Baggush

Dinner time, Baggush

Dinner time, Mikri Milia, Greece



Dinner time, Mikri Milia, Greece



Pause on roadside, Greece—Lt-Col Gray on the left

Pause on roadside, Greece—Lt-Col Gray on the left

Looking down on Servia



Looking down on **Servia**



Crete—7 General Hospital after a bombing raid

Crete— 7 General Hospital after a bombing raid



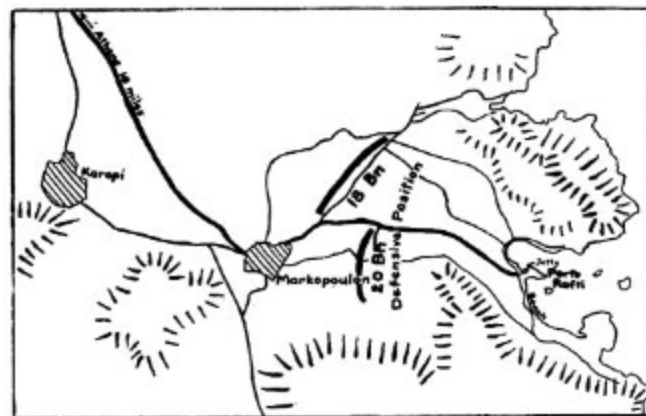
German troops on the
march towards Sfakia

German troops on the march towards Sfakia



CRETE

line indeed, only one man to every twelve yards in the forward companies. For the rest of the day they lay there, though at first the men were savage at the delay, as they didn't know the reason for it. Longing eyes were turned seawards, and as the day wore on hearts sank lower and lower.



18 Bn AT PORTO RAFTI

18 Bn Porto Rafti

In the afternoon the action flared up again. First of all the field guns opened up, and men looked at each other and wondered, 'What's this?' Then from somewhere in the distance the mortars joined in. And then, soon afterwards, the rumour went round that Jerry was in **Markopoulon**, a big force of tanks and infantry. It looked as if they might be caught right at the finishing post, because, despite plenty of will to

fight, they had nothing much now with which to stop Jerry tanks.

But the miracle happened—the enemy didn't stir past [Markopoulon](#), and [4 Brigade](#) finished the day undisturbed, which was more than it had hoped for. All that happened was that some more planes came over about 5 p.m., and roamed round uselessly strafing empty boats off the coast.

We know now that the German force was a small, lightly equipped flying column of one motor-cycle battalion with no tanks and no means of launching a really heavy attack, and that it wasn't really directed on [Porto Rafti](#) at all, but on Lavrion, a larger port some miles south. But even at that, [4 Brigade](#) owed its escape to Jerry's providential lack of radio communication. Let the German report speak for itself:

The battalion left ([Athens](#)) for Lavrion at 1400 hours. The advance company had no contact with the enemy, and advanced through [Markopoulon](#) towards Lavrion, but while the battalion commander was at [Markopoulon](#) the report came in that between [Markopoulon](#) and [Porto Rafti](#) there were English troops who were abandoning their vehicles and fleeing towards the coast.

[3 Coy](#) was instructed to pursue them. Just east of [Markopoulon](#) the company came under accurate fire.... A fighting patrol immediately went out, and reported that the heights between [Markopoulon](#) and [Porto Rafti](#) were strongly held, and that the enemy line curved right to [Porto Rafti](#) bay.

As our heavy weapons and artillery were not up with us, the battalion adjutant was sent to contact the Corps Chief of Staff to ask for Stukas. The companies were ordered not to go further forward than [Markopoulon](#) so that the Stuka attack could take place. The adjutant did not arrive at Corps HQ, till 1730 hours, and therefore Stukas could not then be made available for the same day. By the time the adjutant got back it was dark, and therefore impossible for the battalion to mount an attack.

At daybreak a fighting patrol was sent out and reported that the enemy had disappeared....

And now, after this brief peep over the fence, let us return to [18 Battalion](#), sitting among the trees outside [Porto Rafti](#) Late in the afternoon the order that the unit was praying for arrived. It was to be the first of the battalions to withdraw,

moving after dark to [Porto Rafti](#), where the Navy would take over and do the rest. The word went swiftly round. When darkness fell the companies assembled and moved off, each one separately, on the last four miles of their trek through [Greece](#). The Aussie guns were still firing, but nothing came back in return.

There wasn't much to [Porto Rafti](#)—a cove with a jetty, two or three buildings, a few fishing boats drawn up on the beach, and that was about all. But waiting for [18 Battalion](#) was a team of efficient naval officers and New Zealanders, who now stepped in and took command.

Their first order was a familiar one—all surplus gear to be thrown away. The ships were going to be jammed tight with men, as tight as they could be, and there wasn't room for gear, beyond rifles, small haversacks and greatcoats. Everything else had to go. By now the men had little that could be called surplus, but there was a mess and a scramble in the dark as they shoved the most indispensable items into their small packs. Then big packs, gas masks, a few odd blankets that had escaped the previous purges, all were tossed aside. Colonel Gray commented later that this was 'criminal and scandalous'—but the beach staff had its orders, men before equipment, so the equipment had to go. A few men kept their Brens, and the signallers somehow managed to sneak on board a few telephones, an exchange and some coils of cable. Very little of the New Zealand Division's signal gear was rescued from [Greece](#), and it was quite a notable feat for the [18 Battalion](#) 'sigs' to talk their way on to the ship with this.

There were still two hours to wait before anything was due to happen, and a long two hours they were, with the thought still in all minds that a sudden onslaught by Jerry, or failure by the ships to keep their appointment, might yet cook the whole thing and put them all 'in the bag'. The men sat, stood, or strolled aimlessly round, silent and on edge.

They needn't have worried. Punctually at 11 p.m. small boats appeared out of the dark, and things began to move. Some of the men were taken off by a big barge, no wet feet, no discomfort. Others had to wade out to small boats, some of them into two feet of water, and one party, after embarking, had to get out again and push their boat off the bottom. As each boat was filled it moved quietly out to the ships lying offshore, and the men hauled themselves clumsily up landing nets to the

decks, helped by sailors whose kindness was tinged with good-humoured, tolerant contempt for these landlubbers. The men peeled off their wet clothes, appeased their raging hunger with biscuits and treacle and cocoa, then settled down to sleep wherever they could find a spot. When the ships got under way most of [18 Battalion](#) was 'out cold'.

The battalion's old friend [HMS Ajax](#) took off most of the men; others were on the destroyers [Kimberley](#) and [Kingston](#). The convoy headed south-east at full speed, and at 10 a.m. next day reached [Crete](#) and anchored in [Suda Bay](#).

That was how the main body of [18 Battalion](#) left [Greece](#). But there were other small parties as well, who got separated from the unit somehow or other and had a variety of adventures before getting away.

There were, first, the four remaining carriers. On the evening of 26 April, when the [Kriekouki](#) position was abandoned, they were ordered to the [Corinth](#) Canal to rescue a party of Kiwis stranded there (or, for all anyone knew, captured by the German paratroops). Corporal [Owsley](#),¹ who was with this party, reports: 'After travelling a few miles we came to a small village ..., and from an old house ... a "welcome" of rifle & machine gun fire was very heavily turned on us. Lucky for us it was dark or the result would have been finish for all of us, but we got through.' The carriers filled themselves up with the New Zealand party plus an odd assortment of Aussie and Cypriot stragglers (all starving), then ran for it, the crews holding their breath as they passed the danger point. Luck was with them. They caught the tail of [4 Brigade's](#) column before it reached [Porto Rafti](#); there the carriers were destroyed, and the bereaved crews embarked on [HMS Kimberley](#) in the evening.

Next there was an advanced group of eight under Major Petrie, which had left [Kriekouki](#) for the [Peloponnese](#) on 25 April, before the [Corinth](#) landing put the lid on [4 Brigade's](#) embarkation plan. This little party got as far as [Corinth](#) by the morning of the 26th, and had a grandstand view of the paratroop drop. They were chased by Jerry planes all the way south to [Monemvasia](#), at the south-east corner of the peninsula, and were evacuated from there along with a hotchpotch of New Zealand engineers and stragglers from all sorts of units.

There were others, too, who lost the battalion somehow or other in the

withdrawal and made their way south, mostly small groups mixed up with men from other units. Some joined an organised stragglers' company, which got as far as [Kalamata](#), away down on the south coast of the [Peloponnese](#); but here they were trapped, and most of them were captured by a German column before the Navy could take them off. Among them was [Bill Flint](#),² of the 'I' section, who later became a persistent escaper from German prison camps. Another of the party, of whom [18 Battalion](#) is not proud, became one of the very few New Zealand prisoners to collaborate with the Germans.

Some [18 Battalion](#) men were included in a group of several hundred who, when the Germans broke through, were in hospital at [Athens](#) or convalescing at the New Zealand base camp. They were sent off by train or truck to [Megara](#), just east of the [Corinth Canal](#), where they spent three uncomfortable, hungry days in hiding while waiting to be evacuated. About half the party was taken off by ship on the night of 25 April. The rest were out of luck; they were picked up by the German paratroops at [Corinth](#) next morning. Two [18 Battalion](#) officers, Lieutenants [Matheson](#)³ and [Foot](#),⁴ were among the unlucky ones, and also Private [Jack Hooper](#),⁵ who escaped to the hills and spent the remaining war years with the Greeks.

A few others also succeeded in escaping from German hands and rejoined the battalion after varying adventures. There was, for instance, Lieutenant H. B. J. Sutton, who was in hospital in [Athens](#) when the Germans arrived. He later crawled under the wire of the [Athens](#) convalescent camp, and, along with eighteen others, was evacuated to [Egypt](#) in a fishing smack with the help of the Greek 'underground'. [Bill Pritt](#),⁶ of 12 Platoon, had an even shorter captivity—he escaped after only two days, accompanied the German army south dressed in Greek uniform, and was back with [18 Battalion](#) inside two months. Lieutenant Foot made a break from [Corinth](#), sailed a small boat to [Piræus](#), and rejoined the battalion at [Porto Rafti](#).

Eighteenth Battalion had a reinforcement company in [Greece](#), mainly 4th Reinforcements drafted to the Division just before it left [Egypt](#). This company was camped near [Athens](#) with the other New Zealand reinforcements, and spent its time guarding dumps and installations of various kinds in [Athens](#) and [Piræus](#)—a dull job, brightened up occasionally by air raids on [Piræus](#) harbour.

On 25 April all the New Zealand reinforcements were ordered to [Navplion](#), in the

[Peloponnese](#), for evacuation. Shipping losses made this impossible, so the group was sent farther south to [Kalamata](#), where most of it was captured. Some sixty of the battalion's reinforcements suffered this fate, but the rest, under Second-Lieutenant [Nelson](#),⁷ commandeered a fishing boat and escaped to [Crete](#) after a five-day trip. They were received with open arms by [18 Battalion](#), which was crying out for reinforcements to fill some of the gaps left by the Greek campaign.

For [18 Battalion](#), as for the rest of the Division, the Greek campaign was the most disappointing they were ever to experience. The men had started out full of confidence and high hopes; they finished up disillusioned and depressed, feeling that they had been pushed round to no good purpose and hadn't even got a good crack at Jerry. Their main impression of the campaign was one of backbreaking loads and perpetual weariness, of hostile planes snarling overhead, and (in the later stages) of nagging hunger. The battalion had lost 23 dead, 42 wounded, 117 captured. Every company had its losses, and they were all the heavier because they seemed to have been in vain.

But the men had also learnt an invaluable lesson. They were blooded now. They had seen the artillery in action and admired the way the gunners stuck to their posts under direct air attack; they had blessed the friendly ASC drivers, who were so generous with the spare rations they always seemed to have on their trucks; they even had words of praise for the provosts who braved the bombs to keep the traffic moving. The battalion was to approach its future actions in a different frame of mind, not so cocky, better aware of its role as one piece of the intricate formation that was the New Zealand Division.

¹ [Sgt I. E. Owsley](#); [Hamilton](#); born [Auckland](#), 5 Sep 1910; salesman.

² [Pte W. Flint](#); [Invercargill](#); born [Invercargill](#), 27 Jan 1919; civil servant; wounded 28 Apr 1941; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; escaped Jun 1941; lived 1½ years in [Greece](#) before being recaptured; made several escapes in [Germany](#), but was recaptured.

³ [Capt I. McD. Matheson](#), ED; [Whangarei](#); born NZ 1 Jan 1906; stock agent; p.w. 26 Apr 1941; Maj, Nth Auck Regt, Terr Force.

⁴ Lt S. E. Foot, m.i.d.; born [Auckland](#), 31 Aug 1915; bank clerk; killed in action 25 May 1941.

⁵ Pte J. D. Hooper; [Kaitaia](#); born NZ 31 Aug 1917; farmer; wounded 16 Apr 1941; served with ELAS guerrillas; p.w.; escaped to [Egypt](#) via [Turkey](#), Mar 1944.

⁶ Cpl W. J. Pritt, Silver Medal (Gk); born [England](#), 19 Sep 1914; farm labourer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁷ Maj G. B. Nelson, DSO; [Auckland](#); born [Ngaruawahia](#), 13 Aug 1917; clerk.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 10 – AIRBORNE INVASION

CHAPTER 10

Airborne Invasion

Crete, at first sight, was very like southern Greece, only drier. Square white houses, rolling hills covered with olive trees and vines. The bleary-eyed ragamuffins who crowded off the warships into tiny steamers and barges in Suda Bay weren't in the mood just then to appreciate anything much, so the beauty of the island held no charms for them. All they wanted was food, a clean up, and sleep. The short march from Suda, which normally they would have thought nothing of, was a weary drag that day, the feet leaden, the road dusty and rough. They viewed Crete, the Army and the world with disfavour.

Their way led from the wharf to a transit camp, if a piece of ground studded with olive trees can be so named. It was really a temporary clearing depot, where units arriving all mixed up were sorted out, fed, and sent on their way to their own camps. The meal provided was only bread and cheese, oranges and stewed tea, but it raised the spirits wonderfully. Later, in 18 Battalion's own camp, the cooks triumphed over their lack of gear and produced a hot meal, which the men wouldn't have swapped for an eight-course banquet at the Ritz.

The battalion area, five miles west of Suda and only two miles from Canea, was a good spot, under shady trees, beside a sparkling stream in which you could wash off your grime and cool your feet. By evening the men were feeling fit to face the world again. A night's sleep helped, too—they lay on the bare earth, mostly with no covering, but everyone slept soundly despite the chill of the night. The few blankets and greatcoats that had survived the embarkation were shared round as widely as possible, usually three men to a blanket or two to a greatcoat.

The battalion was allowed only one blissful lazy day here, and early on 30 April it was on its travels again. There was work to be done, a line to be manned, positions to be prepared in expectation of an airborne attack which, the 'high-ups' said, was bound to come within a few days. The battalion was fairly well armed, and with a few days' respite would be on top of its form again, and ready to give Jerry a hostile reception.

'Fairly well armed' means that everybody had a weapon of some sort. It had

been a point of honour with most to keep their rifles, no matter what else went. According to a census taken a few days later, the battalion had 547 rifles, 36 pistols, 37 Bren guns, 27 Tommy guns, one 3-inch and one 2-inch mortar, nine anti-tank rifles and two flare pistols. For all these there was a fair amount of ammunition. But apart from that the battalion was destitute—no transport, no tools, no cooking gear, very little personal equipment or clothing. There was the precious signals gear that had found its way on to the ships, but that was soon lost; [Divisional Headquarters](#), which was desperate for signals gear, took over everything except one phone which was to link [18 Battalion](#) with [4 Brigade Headquarters](#).

By 30 April the disposition of the forces on [Crete](#) had been roughly decided. The Aussies departed for points east. To the Kiwis fell the sector west of [Canea](#) along the north coast, the part nearest [Greece](#), an undulating, thickly cultivated stretch of country.

From [Suda Bay](#) and [Canea](#) a fairly good road followed the north coast westward through Maleme airfield, and just west of [Canea](#) another one, known as the Valley road, ran south-west through a low-lying stretch to the inland village of [Alikianou](#). Two and a half miles west of [Canea](#), and a mile from the coast, rose a cluster of bumpy hills crowned by the villages of [Galatas](#) and [Karatsos](#). Near the Valley road, a mile south of [Galatas](#), was a group of solid white prison buildings, and farther south this road passed [Lake Aghya](#), which supplied much of [Crete's](#) electric power. These were the salient features of a landscape which otherwise was a mass of olive groves and vineyards, with high snowy mountains rising to the south. It was a pleasant, picturesque district, and it was to be the scene of one of the New Zealand Division's grimmest battles.

The first dispositions were [5 Brigade](#) at [Maleme](#), [4 Brigade](#) round [Galatas](#). (Sixth Brigade had gone straight back to [Egypt](#).) So on 30 April [18 Battalion](#) marched five hot, dusty miles to its battle position on the ridges just west and north of [Galatas](#), its right flank on the coast, its left overlooking 'Prison valley', [19 Battalion](#) to the east. Here it was to deal with either an airborne or a seaborne attack. This sounds ambitious, but the immediate work involved was negligible, as with no tools but bayonets the battalion couldn't do much to improve the position. There were defences of a sort there already, but nobody thought much of them—they consisted of unconnected single pits, or of section trenches six feet wide, which the company

commanders encouragingly labelled 'death traps'. Some were inexpertly sited and poorly concealed. A little wire had been strung in front of them, but it was most inadequate.

Two mornings later 4 Brigadier handed over to the ad hoc 'Oakes Force' (several hundred artillerymen and ASC drivers acting as infantry), and moved a little farther east, in reserve, with a counter-attack role either towards Maleme or up Prison valley. The word 'reserve' probably wouldn't mean much, since if Jerry attacked from the air everybody would be front-line troops anyway. But it was thought better to give 4 Brigade (the trained infantry formation) the role that might require more complicated manoeuvring. Brigadier Inglis, ¹ as yet in Egypt, was sent for to command 4 Brigade; Brigadier Puttick was in temporary command of the New Zealand Division, Major-General Freyberg having taken over all the forces on Crete.

Eighteenth Battalion's reserve position was among olives and cacti not far from the tents of 7 British General Hospital and 6 Field Ambulance, just east of the junction where the road to Galatas left the coast road. It was within easy reach of the sea, and, though the Mediterranean was still a bit cold for comfortable bathing, the sand was lovely and warm to lie on.

For the first few days there wasn't much to do except pickets and beach patrols, but from 6 May a strict routine was decreed by Lieutenant-Colonel Gray, with two hours of work a day, mostly 'spit and polish' parades, weapon training and inspections; also daily stand-to periods morning and evening, and an NCOs' school. All this called forth some muttering from the ranks, but it had the effect intended, which was to shock the battalion out of its post-Greece lassitude. Mere lying round, thought Gray, would be the worst thing possible in the circumstances.

The unit was as yet hardly ready to meet an invasion, but it was as ready as it could have been with so little equipment. More came in about the middle of the month, but not much. Enough blankets to give everybody one each, a little more clothing, ammunition, a few picks and shovels; two Bren carriers and three 15-cwt. trucks (more transport was promised, but never arrived). But the supplies that could be brought in by the available ships and unloaded at Suda in the face of daily air raids were a drop in the bucket compared with the shortages. So 18 Battalion, in common with every other New Zealand unit on Crete, was woefully under-equipped,

with no means of moving except on foot, and relying almost completely on the individual soldier with his rifle or Bren.

The shipping difficulties also meant that food was short— for most of the time units were on half rations, which, said an [18 Battalion](#) man, seemed like quarter rations. Luckily it was a good time of year for living off the country. Eggs and oranges were abundant, and potatoes, beans and tomatoes grew in small patches among the vines. All fairly cheap, in fact sometimes free, if the rightful owner was absent. So nobody starved. Most of the cooking was done in the platoons, and the men ate and drank out of whatever they could scratch up, largely bully beef tins.

Hungry men perked up amazingly on 10 May, when a big letter and parcel mail (the first for months) arrived from New Zealand. Never did food parcels arrive at a better moment. They replenished the tobacco stock, which was right down to zero. The YMCA ran a canteen in [Canea](#) for cigarettes and other goods, but the supply could never keep pace with the demand. For some days before the parcels arrived men were smoking tea leaves wrapped in airmail paper.

Luckily, the weather was mostly fine and mild, so the lack of shelter and blankets wasn't the hardship it might have been. There were occasional light showers, but [18 Battalion](#) never got really wet as it had in [Greece](#). Health was good, apart from a mild outbreak of diarrhoea, caused perhaps by eating too many oranges. Returning fitness, swimming, and leave to [Canea](#) revived the spirits very effectively; by mid-May nobody would have recognised the mob of tramps who had crawled ashore three weeks before. They weren't keen on the idea of facing an airborne invasion, which was something quite new and therefore vaguely worrying, but they felt that Jerry would get a terrible shock when he came.

From the beginning of May the prospect of invasion was Rumour No. 1. Various dates were confidently given as The Day, though nobody could say where the information came from. Then there was the other school, the wishful thinkers, who had heard from a reliable source that the Kiwis would all be going back to [Egypt](#), or that the Germans had given up the idea of invading [Crete](#). This last yarn gained ground in the battalion when the training began. That, said the experts, proved that there wasn't going to be an invasion—how could there be, with the cream of the New Zealand Division doing one-stop-two all over the place?

But Jerry's interest in [Crete](#) was clearly more than academic. He was not the one to waste bombs, and he was certainly dropping a lot of them on [Crete](#). The battalion didn't come in for any personal attention, and wasn't greatly disturbed by the raids, which for the first half of May fell almost entirely on [Suda Bay](#). When the battalion first landed it had seen evidence of these raids, bomb damage in [Suda](#), the dismal sight of the cruiser [York](#) aground and heeled over in shallow water. Never a day passed without its raid. The ack-ack batteries were very active, shot down a number of planes and kept the rest high, so the damage was not as great as it might have been; but [Suda Bay](#) was a most unhealthy place, and the raids were all too successful in cutting down the flow of supplies to [Crete](#).

From 13 May the raids were stepped up, and Maleme airfield and [Canea](#) began to get more. This was the 'softening up', the classical prelude to attack. A few days of it silenced the most optimistic anti-invasion prophet; everyone was convinced now that Jerry was coming all right, and pretty soon.

The 18th and 19th May were fierce days. The planes were over in swarms from early morning to late evening, paying their loathsome attention to [Maleme](#), [Canea](#) and [Suda](#). The Junkers 88s ('the clumsy bull-nosed bastards') that had at first monopolised the skies were now joined by ugly gull-winged Stukas and vicious little Messerschmitt fighters, which roved the sky spraying the whole place with machine-gun fire. The ack-ack guns were firing flat out for most of those two days, and the air was full of smoke and shellbursts. There was no opposition from British planes—previously there had been a few, but they were all out of action by 19 May, after an heroic fight against impossible odds. The Kiwis fumed and chafed at having to sit down under all this, and their mutterings broke out into loud but vain execration on the 18th, when a plane bombed [7 General Hospital](#), killing and wounding some of the staff and patients. But for the present there was nothing useful anybody could do about it.

B Company had a sudden call away from [18 Battalion](#) on the 18th, to guard no less a person than the King of [Greece](#), who had escaped from the mainland and was now living near the transit camp south of [Canea](#). His Majesty's safety was a matter of political importance—when the invasion came on 20 May he had to leave in a hurry (along with his Prime Minister and a party of eleven others) and tramp over

the mountains to the south coast. The escort on this arduous trip was Second-Lieutenant Ryan's 12 Platoon. Some of the platoon were sent back from the top of the mountains and rejoined the battalion later, but the rest carried on to the south coast with the royal party, and were evacuated from there to [Egypt](#). A composite platoon of unemployed from the carrier and pioneer platoons under Second-Lieutenant Ray [Lambie](#) ² (known as 5 Platoon) replaced Ryan's platoon in B Company.

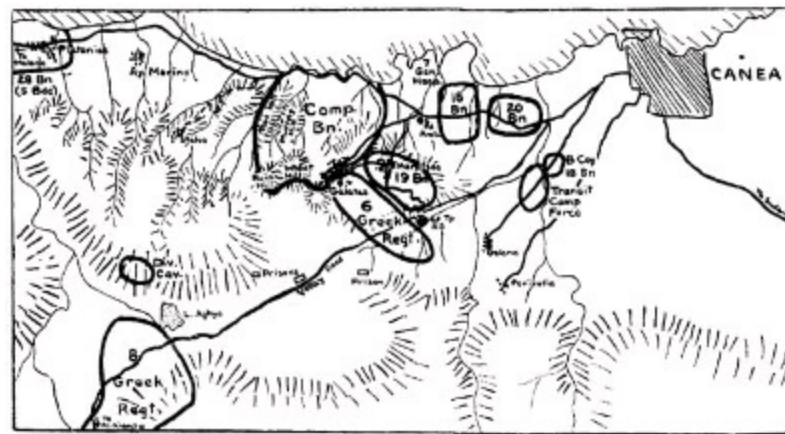
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Nobody who was on [Crete](#) will ever forget the morning of 20 May. It was a privilege to have been there, though that didn't occur to anyone at the time. In fact, if you had put the idea forward you would justifiably have been thought crazy. The defenders of [Crete](#) were far indeed from thinking themselves privileged. But they witnessed something unprecedented that day.

It began just like any other day, German fighters overhead strafing from the crack of dawn. There seemed more of them than usual, but not so many as to make any special impression. The men of [18 Battalion](#) got their breakfast, spooned it down, and were dispersing again when they realised, quite suddenly, that the 'feel' of the air attack had changed. The noise had risen to nightmare volume, and the planes, almost shaving the trees as they passed over, seemed to be trying to attract all possible attention, like boys showing off. They bombed and strafed, apparently at random. Then in the midst of this uproar appeared gliders, slow, majestic and ominous. Silently they passed eastwards towards [Suda Bay](#). Hot on their tails lumbered a group of about twelve big Junkers transports, and from their bellies plunged little white and coloured dots, which opened out into parachutes, each bearing a man or a container of equipment.

Eighteenth Battalion knew in an instant what it was—had known for days what to expect—but that didn't prevent it from being momentarily stunned, gazing up in disbelief, thinking that surely it would wake up shortly. This dazed indecision lasted only a few seconds. Then everyone hopped out of the slit trenches, seized rifle or Bren gun, and began with one accord to blaze away feverishly at the dangling figures now approaching earth. It was like shooting sitting ducks.

The battalion's position ran along a low north-south ridge, covering a front of three-quarters of a mile, with the coast road cutting right through the middle. The forward companies (facing west) were A Company on the coast, with 4 Brigade Headquarters just in front of it; then D, with Battalion Headquarters on its left; then C on the left flank. Headquarters Company (its men acting as temporary riflemen) was in reserve at the coast end behind A Company. All the companies were well concealed in the olive trees, but there were big gaps between them, and it wasn't easy to see or find out what was happening in other areas. This mattered little as long as the paratroops were in the air and everyone could see them, but once they landed 18 Battalion was fighting more or less blind, and found it impossible to act with any cohesion.



DISPOSITIONS IN GALATAS AREA
20 MAY 1941

Dispositions in Galatas Area 20 May 1941

Under the circumstances it was just as well that only a small force—three plane-loads, totalling about forty men—came down near the battalion. They dropped right on the western edge of the unit's area; many of them didn't reach the ground alive, but those who did fell among tussocks, vines and olive trees on the next ridge forward of Battalion Headquarters and D Company.

Lieutenant-Colonel Gray didn't hesitate. Gathering up about twenty of the nearest signallers and Battalion Headquarters men, he ran forward to meet the Germans, and a tense little sniping battle took place among the olives. The paratroops were caught at their worst moment, just after landing, before they could link up. The 18 Battalion men hunted them from tree to tree, and several who had

survived the descent were shot within the next few minutes. The fight wasn't all one-sided, though. Four of [18 Battalion](#) were wounded, including the RSM, WO 1 George Andrews, who went back for medical treatment, but came forward again the same evening and stayed to do a first-class job over the next five days.

Men from C and D Companies, complete with 2-inch mortar, came forward to help in the hunt, but after the first success the position became a sort of stalemate. A few Jerries, apparently out of touch with their main body, established themselves in cover about 300 yards ahead of the battalion, put out snipers, and refused to be dislodged, though for the time being they couldn't do much harm. For the rest of the day both sides were cautious and watchful, the silence broken only by the occasional rifle shot as someone saw (or thought he saw) a fleeting target. Men from D Company and Battalion Headquarters went carefully out and collected what food and gear they could find from the dead paratroopers—in quite a small area they counted seventeen bodies.

These paratroopers were part of 10 Company of III Battalion, 3 Parachute Regiment, whose orders had been to capture what the Germans referred to as the 'tented camp' (7 General Hospital). In the German plan the whole battalion was to have dropped near the [Galatas](#) road turnoff, in which case [18 Battalion](#) would have found itself mixed up in a much fiercer battle than it did. But, as it happened, only 10 Company dropped in the right place. The rest fell south of [Galatas](#), got tangled up in fighting there, and didn't come near the hospital, which fell to the survivors of 10 Company, those who had dropped out of range of the battalion.

The planes screening the attack didn't spare the hospital, which was bombed and machine-gunned for an hour and a half, losing some more of its staff and patients and quite a number of its tents. Then the paratroopers arrived and captured the whole place without opposition. The hospital was marked with large red crosses, and it seemed inexcusable for any pilot to ignore them. This operation appeared, to all who saw it, to show Jerry up as a dirty fighter.

But it is hardly credible, looking back, that Jerry, in a campaign where he as a rule respected the [Red Cross](#), should wantonly make an exception here. It now seems probable, in fact, that he had not previously recognised the hospital—such of his orders as have survived all call it a 'tented camp'. And the dust and smoke of the

air raids on 20 May could well have blotted out the red crosses by the time the planes turned their attention to the hospital. So the charge of 'German frightfulness' is by no means proved.

However this may be, the paratroopers who captured the hospital behaved not too well. Some of the patients and orderlies were left where they were, but most of them were herded over the road to [6 Field Ambulance](#), not far from where the odds and ends of 10 Parachute Company were playing cat and mouse with [18 Battalion](#) Headquarters and D Company. Soon after midday the Germans, realising that they were out on a limb with little chance of help, began to move up the road towards [Galatas](#), taking their 'prisoners' with them. D Company sped them on their way with Bren fire at long range, and soon they disappeared out of [18 Battalion's](#) life, leaving D Company seething with rage at what it took to be a deliberate attempt to use the hospital patients as a screen. It certainly looked like that. But we will never know for sure whether the Jerries had any such idea in mind. They very likely thought they were moving away from trouble, not into it. Had they known what lay ahead of them they would have been wiser to abandon their prisoners and get away across country as inconspicuously as possible.

The further history of the party is brief and bloody. Near the outskirts of [Galatas](#) it walked into [19 Battalion](#), and after a short fight the Germans were almost wiped out, and the surviving patients and hospital staff rescued.

To return now to [18 Battalion](#). Although [7 General Hospital](#) was only a few hundred yards ahead of the battalion, intervening ridges hid it from view, so nobody knew of its capture until Captain Kelleway went forward to [4 Brigade](#) Headquarters to find out what was going on. He was ordered to take A Company forward and retake the hospital. Then, Kelleway reports:

I returned to the Coy. and we advanced as follows—7 and 8 Pls forward in open formation ... and 9 pl. following in the rear, to take up a position covering us from a rise when we hit the flat hospital area.

We had not gone far, when my runner was killed beside me— some of the opposition were in trees.... We killed the few tree dwellers, and went down and through the hospital to find the place empty....

After proceeding about 800 yards past the hospital, and seeing no further opponents, we returned, and occupied the low ridge commanding the hospital, from the road, right down to the sea.

While A Company was moving forward Colonel Gray arrived back at Battalion Headquarters from his hunting expedition, and hearing from a Brigade Headquarters runner what had happened he at once ordered Headquarters Company and the two carriers forward in support. Headquarters Company moved up to A Company's old area. The carriers nosed forward quite close to the mingled crowd of patients and paratroopers at [6 Field Ambulance](#), but decided that everybody was so mixed up that they couldn't do anything helpful.

A Company's new line covering the hospital was about 600 yards ahead of the old one. Late in the afternoon the rest of the battalion moved up level with A Company, and at the same time extended its line half a mile south to cover a vacant gap between it and [19 Battalion](#). Headquarters Company came in beside A Company, just south of the [Galatas](#) road junction. Next was D Company, and C was on the left, its front reaching as far as the Valley road.

This road, and the heights between it and [Galatas](#), had been the scene of confused fighting that day. Paratroopers had landed all along the valley, captured the prison and the [Aghya](#) reservoir, and established themselves in a strong organised body (most of 3 Parachute Regiment) holding a big stretch of the valley floor. Very serious from the New Zealand point of view was the loss of four British howitzers—half the artillery in the [Galatas](#) area—which were sited beside the road near the northern entrance to the valley, and had been put out of action that morning by paratroopers who landed right on top of them. The fighting here was very obscure, and nobody knew where anyone was, either friend or foe. It was about 4 p.m. before the loss of the howitzers became known, and [Brigadier Inglis](#) at once ordered [18 Battalion](#) to send a company up to retake them.

C Company was chosen for the job. With both the battalion's carriers and its one and only 3-inch mortar in attendance the company left its position and began to advance south-west along the Valley road, which here runs along a hillside sloping down from [Karatsos](#), with a riverbed running parallel on the left. One carrier, commanded by Second-Lieutenant [Herdman](#),³ led the advance; then the company,

with 14 Platoon in the lead; the mortar brought up the rear. It wasn't any Charge of the Light Brigade—the company moved forward slowly and carefully, very much on the alert, not knowing when Jerry might pop up in its path. It was barely a mile from the starting point to the objective, but the country was pretty broken, with lots of cover.

The company was about halfway when Jerry machine guns and mortars opened up from in front. [Herdman](#)'s carrier snooped up the road, but injudiciously put its nose out from behind a building and stopped a burst of fire which knocked the carrier out, wounded the driver and killed [Herdman](#)—the first [18 Battalion](#) officer to die in action. Most of 14 Platoon took to the ditches beside the road, and the whole company was held up by the fire. Jerry had a good position in thick trees, almost impossible to get at by a frontal attack. The best C Company could do was to sit down where it was, exchange fire with the invisible enemy, and send out a scouting party into the stream bed to try to find a way round the flank. This party (two sections of 13 Platoon led by Corporal Ron [Ferguson](#) ⁴) got up close to the Germans and had a little fight on its own account, but the enemy was too strong, and eventually the patrol had to pull out with one man killed, rejoining the company as it was beginning to withdraw. By then it was getting dark.

In the meantime the main body of C Company had kept up a sniping match with the Jerries, both sides wary of showing themselves. The company lost a few wounded, and the enemy undoubtedly did too, though C Company couldn't see just how much damage it did. There seemed to be little point in staying there, however, and no chance of getting forward to the objective; so as dusk fell Major Lynch sent a runner to recall [Ferguson](#)'s party, and then pulled the company back, complete with two prisoners picked up quite early in the scrap.

The battalion's front was quite peaceful that night. It was well away from the main scene of action on the hills south and west of [Galatas](#). That area was the key to [Canea](#) and [Suda Bay](#), and if Jerry were allowed to get a firm grip on it the outlook would indeed be dangerous. Tenth Brigade and 19 Battalion held the front there, while the Germans strove to consolidate in the prison valley below.

Tenth Brigade, a scratch formation under [Colonel Kippenberger](#), consisted of ' [Oakes Force](#)' (now renamed the Composite Battalion), Divisional Cavalry and some

hundreds of assorted Greeks semi-organised into two regiments. For a fortnight before the invasion six men from [18 Battalion](#) and two from 20 Battalion had been attached as instructors to 8 Greek Regiment near [Lake Aghya](#)—this area got the full benefit of 3 Parachute Regiment's parachute drop, and the New Zealanders found themselves isolated, with Germans all round them. Four of the [18 Battalion](#) men were trapped, and spent a miserable night and day inside a hilltop pumping station, waist-deep in water, before being captured. The other two, Lieutenant K. L. Brown and Sergeant L. V. [Smith](#),⁵ took to the hills—Smith later joined up with Second-Lieutenant Ryan's royal escort, and Brown was captured on 21 May, made his escape the same day, and spent nearly a week in the hills, rejoining [18 Battalion](#) on its withdrawal from [Suda Bay](#).

Surprisingly, 21 May was fairly quiet for [18 Battalion](#), which woke up expecting fireworks but didn't get them. There was a little bombing and strafing (not as much as expected), and no fresh paratroopers dropped near, though from their positions on the ridges the men could see little clouds of white dots drifting down like snowflakes to the west, and could hear a continuous reverberating roar as the [Luftwaffe](#) hammered 5 Brigade at [Maleme](#). Apart from a little mopping up of isolated snipers, the battalion's day was just a matter of patrolling and keeping eyes open all round. At nightfall B Company came back from the transit camp and took over HQ Company's old area east of [7 General Hospital](#).

Until B Company's return [18 Battalion](#) had had no news of its doings. On 20 May the company had had a little fun of its own. It took a severe strafing from about 8 a.m., and half an hour later a planeload of paratroops dropped right in its territory, in and round the grounds of the house where the Greek king had been. Patrols went out immediately to hunt the invaders, killed some and captured all the rest, who were taken to the house under guard. Later in the day 10 and 11 Platoons both sent patrols out eastwards to where some paratroops were worrying a company of British troops, and had little skirmishes in the trees with machine guns and 2-inch mortar bombs. The engagements were not heavy and cost B Company no casualties, but several more paratroops were killed and wounded, and the rest retired. At dusk B Company pulled back into the house grounds, protected by the walls, where it stayed until ordered back to the battalion next afternoon.

The night of 21–22 May is notable in [18 Battalion](#)'s history as being the only

time the unit ever had a grandstand view of a full-dress naval action. From about 11 p.m. to nearly dawn the northern horizon was dancing with gun flashes, and the sound of firing came dully across the water to liven up the job of the beach and coast-road patrols. The battalion was alerted to deal with any landing, and Rumour had a night out, especially when four ships obviously on fire were seen away out to sea. By morning the excitement had ceased and there was nothing in sight, but the story was soon circulating—the Navy had been on the job again (good old Navy!) and had 'fixed' Jerry's invasion convoy. There would be no sea landing to repel in the meantime.

The whole [Galatas](#) front had been pretty quiet on 21 May. The 3rd Parachute Regiment had clung grimly to its perimeter, expecting a counter-attack from hour to hour, while the Kiwis sat tight, not daring to turn on a counter-attack which, if it failed, would leave them more vulnerable than before. As we know now, a bold counter-stroke would probably have cleaned out 3 Parachute Regiment, and might have changed the whole course of the campaign, but battlefield tactics can't be judged in the light of what we learn later. As it was, the risk was thought too great, so there was no counter-attack that day.

And by next day the situation was worse. Jerry had had a wonderful respite, and had consolidated his position so well that when [19 Battalion](#) attacked southwards on the afternoon of 22 May it was knocked back. Eighteenth Battalion supported this attack by sending two platoons of B Company up the Valley road and into the hamlet of [Galaria](#) on the slopes east of it, to clear away any enemy that might threaten 19 Battalion's flank. No. 10 Platoon captured three snipers hidden in vineyards overlooking the Valley road, so well hidden that the men almost trod on them before seeing them. No. 5 Platoon had no trouble at [Galaria](#)—it occupied the village for two hours, then came back without having seen a single German.

This excursion, thought B Company, had been a 'fizzer'. So it wasn't too pleased when the order came through, just about dusk, to go forward along the Valley road again and mop up some Jerries who were established in a group of houses and were cramping [19 Battalion's](#) style. Once more the platoons (10 and 11 this time) had a long walk for nothing. Near their objective they met some hilarious bandits who turned out to be Greek soldiers and civilians, very pleased with themselves because

they had beaten the Kiwis to it and cleaned out the Germans. The platoons stayed for a while in case they were needed, but were ordered home at 11 p.m., having had nothing to do but feel superfluous. Meanwhile the Greeks and some of the Composite Battalion had beaten back a German attack on [Galatas](#).

No other companies moved on 22 May, but they had a disturbed day. For one thing, the [Luftwaffe](#) was overhead all day, looking for targets to strafe, so that anyone moving round in the open did so at his peril. There were still a few lone snipers in the area, too—sometimes there would be an hour or so of peace, and then firing would break out again as someone located a sniper and exchanged compliments with him. This was a wearing kind of warfare, harder on the nerves than anyone had imagined, for you never knew when or from where some accursed sniper might have you in his sights. A few of them had occupied two houses forward of C Company, and though they caused no casualties they were a nuisance until cleaned out by a C Company patrol on 23 May.

Hunger depressed the spirits even more. Since the invasion there had been no hot meals, not even a cup of tea, because the German planes made it impossible to light fires. The men had subsisted on cold rations, plus whatever German supplies they had, or the little they could scrounge off the country. On 20 May food, weapons and ammunition, medical supplies, all had been dropped with the paratroops, and a number of containers had found their way into [18 Battalion's](#) welcoming hands. But this source of supply had now dried up, and with the battalion's own supply system disrupted by snipers and odd groups of paratroops in the rear, the outlook was bleak.

Bleak, indeed, and not only for supplies. Bigger things were being decided on 22 May. The whole fate of [Crete](#), which had hung in the air for two days, now began to move to the German side. Jerry, getting his second wind, promptly grasped the initiative. From Maleme came the main body of 5 Mountain Division, circling round south of the New Zealand positions and then striking east to cut off [5 Brigade](#). And up from the prison valley, through a gap in the hostile ring, came a small but determined detachment from 3 Parachute Regiment, skirting the [Galatas](#) hills to the west, pushing north to cut the coast road between [5 Brigade's](#) rear and the Composite Battalion. If these two groups met, it would be the end of 5 Brigade, and the Germans would be able to build up overwhelming strength against [Galatas](#),

Canea and Suda Bay.

There was little the New Zealand Division could do about it now. If **5 Brigade** stayed out at **Maleme** it would beyond a doubt be cut off, all of it, by 5 Mountain Division's detour through the foothills. Fourth and 10th Brigades were too heavily engaged at **Galatas** to help. The Division had thrown all the troops it could into a counter-attack at **Maleme** that morning; it failed, and after that there was nothing left but to withdraw **5 Brigade**, fatal though this course was bound to be in the end. So dawn on 23 May found **5 Brigade** back east of the Platanias River (halfway between **Maleme** and **Galatas**), packed into a thin strip of ground along the coast, in contact to the east with the Composite Battalion. The danger of Jerry getting in behind **5 Brigade** was averted, but on the other hand Maleme airfield was now abandoned, and Jerry could build up there unmolested for a heavy attack eastwards.

Meanwhile, the defenders of **Galatas** were doing what they could against the threat from 3 Parachute Regiment. By the morning of 23 May the paratroop detachment had penetrated a long way up towards the coast road and seemed likely to cut it. The Composite Battalion was ordered to push its front out westwards to meet this move, and B Company was detached from the comparatively fresh **18 Battalion** and sent over in a hurry to help clear out the northernmost pockets of enemy, establish a line on the ridges west of the Composite Battalion, and keep Jerry off the coast road to protect **5 Brigade's** withdrawal. The battalion's lone 3-inch mortar went with the company.

B Company didn't know when it set out exactly what it was going to find, except that it would probably be trouble. It moved due west, parallel to the coast, well dispersed under cover of the trees, right through the Composite Battalion's forward positions, then along a cart track towards the village of **Stalos**, perched on a narrow ridge. Down in the gully below **Stalos** was a Composite Battalion patrol, briskly engaged with the enemy on the ridge. Its commander took Major Evans forward and pointed out the state of affairs to him—the Germans were in strength in and round **Stalos**, and the patrol had already held them for an hour or more and had knocked out two machine guns.

Major Evans decided to go for **Stalos**. The mortar dropped a few rounds into the village, 10 Platoon gave covering fire, and 11 Platoon set out straight up the hill.

Jerry was for once caught unawares, not expecting such a spirited foray. The men of 11 Platoon closed in, cleaned out two machine-gun posts after hand-grenade battles, and pushed on through the village to the last house, where they found another machine gun opposing them. But just as they were preparing to tackle it, word came up from Major Evans to pull out of [Stalos](#) and come back to the company.

This was galling for 11 Platoon, who had cause to pat themselves on the back for having chased away several times their number of Germans for the loss of one killed and one or two wounded. Corporal Alf [Voss](#),⁶ a member of the platoon, comments:

This was one of the strangest orders I can recall ever being given; Maj Evans even chastized 11 Pl on their return for not being able to capture [Stalos](#). Knowing Maj Evans' dynamic offensive spirit it was apparent he had not been given correct information as to what had happened.

So back came the platoon with no very good grace. B Company now took up a line on the next ridge north of [Stalos](#), and spent the rest of the day exchanging fire with Jerry across the gully and watching for any advance north towards the coast.

But the Germans kept pretty quiet, and didn't venture out from [Stalos](#) till dusk, when they made a small, unsuccessful foray towards a monastery on B Company's right flank, possibly looking for food or loot. Evidently they weren't in sufficient numbers to try strength with B Company.

The rest of [18 Battalion](#) had relative peace on 23 May, broken only by the odd brush with a sniper, mainly in the gap between [18](#) and [19](#) Battalions. Even the [Luftwaffe](#) was quieter, except for a force of Stukas which came over suddenly about midday and hit the [Galatas](#) area with great ferocity. So concentrated was this bombing that everyone felt sure it was the preliminary to an attack. A Company, which was right in the way of the bombs, lost Captain Kelleway and three others wounded. Captain Lyon took over the company.

It has already been seen how the general position was deteriorating. As 23 May wore on, Jerry's outflanking move from [Maleme](#) became more and more dangerous, and it seemed that this thrust might yet link up with the 3 Parachute Regiment party

at [Stalos](#) and make [5 Brigade's](#) new position untenable. So during the afternoon [Divisional Headquarters](#) issued new orders— [5 Brigade](#) to withdraw again through the Composite Battalion into reserve east of [Galatas](#), [4 Brigade](#) to take over from [10 Brigade](#). There would then be nothing to prevent the two German forces from linking up, but they would no longer be able to split the Division in two.

The Composite Battalion's line ran from the coast to a prominent height (named [Ruin Hill](#) by the Kiwis) some 1000 yards west of [Galatas](#), and to another round-topped hill ([Wheat Hill](#)) a little farther east. It was almost the same line as [18 Battalion](#) had taken over at the end of April, and now the battalion, the only reasonably fresh New Zealand unit left, was to take it over again.

Everyone knew that the Composite Battalion had had a bad time there. When [18 Battalion's](#) company commanders went forward to reconnoitre that afternoon they found out why. Jerry was quite close up to the forward line at the south end, his snipers and mortars were uncomfortably active, and his planes seemed to be paying personal attention to everything that moved round this particular area. The Composite Battalion had had little opportunity to improve the defences— the wiring across the front was still scanty, the wide, badly sited trenches still in use. In front of the position the broken, wooded country offered splendid cover right up to the foremost posts.

So there was cause for pessimism, particularly as the unit's front was to be 2400 yards—far too long for an infantry battalion down in numbers and short of equipment—and Jerry was apparently squaring up for an attack there to complete the linking of his two groups. The only thing to do was to site the companies to cover the front as best they could, but there would be inevitable gaps, wide ones, between companies and platoons. So thin would the line be that Lieutenant-Colonel Gray decided he would have to leave [Ruin Hill](#) unmanned. This was unfortunate, especially as he apparently did not report it. [Ruin Hill](#) was a commanding point in that gently rolling countryside, overlooking the ridge to the north ([Red Hill](#)) and [Wheat Hill](#) to the east, where the forward companies were to go.

Nothing could be done before dark. At 9 p.m. the companies began to move up as silently as possible. At the [Galatas](#) turnoff they had to pass a house brightly in flames from a bomb hit, and the light falling on the road made everyone feel horribly

exposed, but nothing happened. By the early hours of 24 May **18 Battalion** had taken over the sector, with D Company holding a 500-yard front inland from the coast, then C on **Red Hill**, and A on **Wheat Hill**. B Company came back from **Stalos** and took up a reserve position in the centre. Headquarters Company was on the next ridge behind D, with the 'ack-ack' platoon a little way ahead giving D Company direct support. The **Luftwaffe** had disappeared with the daylight, but Jerry's mortar crews, evidently in no need of sleep themselves, were out to ensure that nobody else got any. The position gave every promise of being a tough spot, and the men were very soon to realise that, for all the sniping in their old area, they 'hadn't seen nothing yet'.

¹ **Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, VD, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk); **Hamilton**; born **Mosgiel**, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn, 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn, Dec 1939-Aug 1940; comd 4 Inf Bde, 1941–42; Armd Bde, 1942–44; GOC **2 NZ Div**, 27 Jun-16 Aug 1942, 6 Jun-31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, **Germany**, 1947–50; Stipendiary Magistrate.

² **Capt R. F. Lambie**; **Palmerston North**; born **Ashburton**, 4 Feb 1911; salesman and storeman.

³ **Lt J. K. Herdman**; born **Scotland**, 18 May 1905; car salesman; killed in action 20 May 1941

⁴ **Maj R. H. Ferguson**; **Whangarei**; born **Whangarei**, 15 Jun 1915; clerk; wounded 2 Dec 1943; company commander 27 Bn (**Japan**); CO Northland Regt (Lt-Col) 1948–52.

⁵ **WO II L. V. Smith**, Gold Medal (Gk); **Raglan**; born **Otorohanga**, 6 Sep 1913; carpenter; wounded Nov 1941.

⁶ **Maj A. J. Voss**, MBE, MC, DCM; **Auckland**; born **England**, 3 Oct 1918; farmer; wounded 3 Jun 1944; OC Regular Force Depot, Army Schools, 1959-

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 11 – THE CRETE DEBACLE

CHAPTER 11

The Crete Debacle

Daylight on 24 May showed [18 Battalion](#) just how grim its situation was. The men had toiled through a sleepless night to improve their positions, but couldn't do much in a few hours with hardly any tools (tin hats and bayonets were the chief implements, with the few picks and shovels shared round as fairly as possible). Now that it was light, they found themselves facing an invisible enemy tucked away on the wooded slopes opposite and still throwing mortar bombs round lavishly. This was the battalion's first real taste of mortar fire, and most unpleasant it was. You couldn't hear the bombs coming until they burst with a 'stinking double crack' as one man put it, scattering jagged hunks of metal all over the place.

The Germans (100 Mountain Regiment from [Maleme](#)) had also got machine guns up on to [Ruin Hill](#) during the night, and from there were spraying the forward companies with fire. Lieutenant-Colonel Gray must have bitterly rued his failure to occupy [Ruin Hill](#). It put C and D Companies in a particularly bad spot, under machine-gun fire from both front and flank besides the mortaring. Nobody could do much about it, for the battalion's own supply of mortar bombs was almost down to zero, and Jerry's mortaring prevented the machine-gunners from fighting back as much as they would have liked. Before long the battalion was having casualties, not a great number, but a persistent flow of ones and twos all along the line.

To add a little more unpleasantness, the planes began to appear again quite early in the day, and right through till dark there was at least one on the prowl nearly all the time. Fighters were operating from [Maleme](#) now, only a few miles away, so it was easy for Jerry to keep up a constant patrol over the New Zealand lines. The battalion's orders were to stay hidden and not to shoot at the planes—an order that nobody felt like contravening.

The atmosphere throughout [4 Brigade](#) that day was tense, but nowhere more so than in [18 Battalion](#), which expected to be attacked at any moment. Small bodies of men were continually moving up along the coast road and disappearing into the thick country forward of the battalion, an unmistakable sign of impending attack. So the companies, though largely confined to their pits, kept very alert, not only on

their own fronts but to the flanks as well. They had no telephones, and no means of passing on news except by runner, a risky method in such a situation. The battalion's only telephone was connected with [4 Brigade](#) Headquarters, but it didn't help much, as the line was cut several times by mortaring. Anyway, Battalion Headquarters couldn't guarantee up-to-date news from the front line.

Never had the battalion felt so much out on its own. It had very little artillery support. Though there were six Vickers guns on the front (two with A Company, two with C and two behind D), their fire could not be controlled or co-ordinated—they just had to shoot at what appeared on their own fronts, and some of them had no tripods. Nevertheless they were to prove the greatest comfort to [18 Battalion](#) in the action that followed.

The first test came early in the afternoon. An enemy party tried to push its way into A Company's position, and the battalion had to expend some of its priceless mortar bombs to get rid of them. Two hours later they tried again at [Red Hill](#), a more determined effort this time—artillery, mortars and the machine guns on [Ruin Hill](#) all pounded the ridge, and things got so bad that some of the C Company men left their pits and went back over the brow of the hill. Runners went racing back to Battalion Headquarters for help. Colonel Gray came forward and set about organising a counter-attack, but soon discovered that there was no need for it. The Vickers and Brens had made the pace so hot that Jerry couldn't take advantage of his success, and had been forced to retire from [Red Hill](#) again.

C Company had won the first round, but the second wasn't long in beginning. As dusk was falling a crescendo of fire again blinded the company, and before they realised it the enemy had closed in and was right through behind the forward posts on [Red Hill](#). The platoons, under fire from all directions, were forced back off the hill; the Germans followed, but were halted on the crest by determined fire from the next ridge ([Murray Hill](#)), where the whole company was now clustered round Company Headquarters. The company wasn't getting off lightly this time—the fire was still heavy, and men were being hit.

Help was on the way, however. The transport platoon of HQ Company, under Second-Lieutenant [Copeland](#),¹ came up to C Company, climbed [Red Hill](#), and chased the enemy off the crest after a brisk little fight. Here, again, was Colonel Gray in the

forward line, directing and encouraging. [Red Hill](#) was in our hands again, and the line was safe for a little longer.

But [Red Hill](#) was a most unhealthy spot, swept by fire from front and flank, and it was plain that there wouldn't be much of the transport platoon left if it had to stay there long. So Gray decided to abandon the hill. This was a hard decision, as it would leave D Company's left flank open—Gray had proposed to withdraw D Company too, but had been met with a blunt refusal from [Brigadier Inglis](#). All he could do now was to put as many men as possible on [Murray Hill](#), and make [Red Hill](#) so red-hot that Jerry couldn't have it either. C Company was ordered to stay in its compact position on [Murray Hill](#), and B Company (now under Captain N. B. Smith) was summoned forward to help. C Company was also to patrol [Red Hill](#) and keep it clear of the enemy. There was a danger spot on D Company's left flank, where a jumble of spurs and gullies offered a way in for Jerry, so Gray posted one extra Bren gun (all he could spare) to overlook this part.

B Company had been having a bad time in reserve. The fire on it had been nearly as solid as on the front line, and the company had had a bitter blow earlier in the evening when Major Evans was killed by a mortar bomb. In his twenty months as B Company's commander Bill Evans had won very high regard—a friendly, humane man, and as a company commander aggressive, reliable and imperturbable. There were few jokes or cheerful remarks as B Company went forward. The men were silent and savage, itching to 'get stuck into the bastards', a desire that was not to be satisfactorily fulfilled. As the company moved up it was mortared, and 5 Platoon lost one killed and two wounded.

B Company had to be split up in the front line—never an ideal arrangement, but better than shifting C Company now that it was more or less settled again. There were gaps to be filled on both sides. No. 10 Platoon went south of C Company, and the other two platoons north of it; 5 Platoon, on the right flank, was to patrol out to the right to contact D Company. The line was still thin, but the whole front had some sort of coverage. The move up took nearly all night; after the platoons were in position they could do no more than scratch themselves shallow holes before daylight.

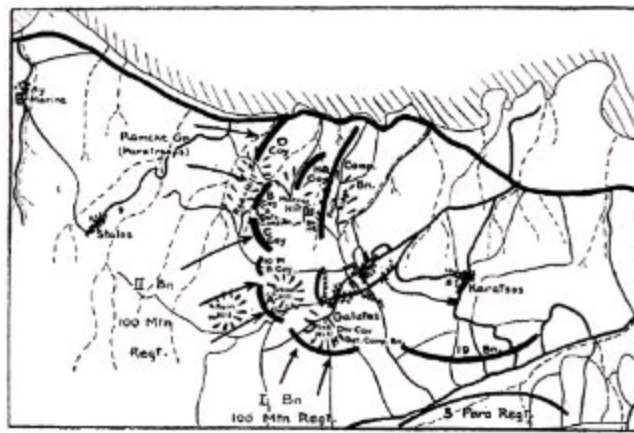
In the very early hours of the morning a welcome reinforcement arrived in

answer to an appeal by Gray for more troops. The 100 men who came up (two platoons of artillerymen under Captain [Bliss](#)² and one of Divisional Supply drivers under Lieutenant [Rawle](#)³) had already had several days of fighting with the Composite Battalion, but they were in good heart, and [18 Battalion](#) was delighted to see them. One of the artillery platoons went to [Murray Hill](#) on B Company's right, the other stayed back in reserve, and the ASC men joined C Company and 11 Platoon. Captain Bliss became for the time second-in-command of B Company. These newcomers, like B Company, had very little time to make any sort of positions for themselves. The whole force on [Murray Hill](#), in fact, was very ill protected, and daybreak on 25 May caught them in a bad situation, many of them still above ground with no decent holes to get into.

C and B Companies had had a fairly full night; but they found time for a little fighting as well. In the small hours of the morning three patrols (two from C Company and one from B) went out to [Red Hill](#) to make sure that Jerry didn't establish himself on the crest. The patrols ran into machine guns, lots of them, and put several out of action, at least one with hand grenades. B Company's party ran into a real hornet's nest of machine guns, and all its four men were wounded. One of C Company's got back undamaged, but the other was badly shot up by the company's own forward sections as it returned, looming up unrecognisable in the dark.

It need hardly be said that nobody in [18 Battalion](#) got any sleep that night, with all these comings and goings, with Jerry's machine guns pouring tracer into the defences, with mortar bombs and explosive bullets ceaselessly cracking in the trees. Back at Battalion Headquarters, too, everyone was alert for any sudden calls from the front. During the early part of the night the RAP had been working at top speed dealing with C Company's casualties. Later on this eased up. A truckload of wounded went back from the battalion to a dressing station near [Suda Bay](#), and the truck came back loaded up with rations and a little ammunition, including the last twenty-five mortar bombs that could be scrounged.

Then to these harried, sleepless men dawned 25 May, the blackest day of the whole war for [18 Battalion](#).



18 Bn
25 MAY 1941

0 200 400 600 800 1000 Yards

18 Bn
25 May 1941

There was no doubt that a full-scale attack was due that day. Jerry had brought artillery up during the night, and as soon as it grew light away went everything, small arms, mortars, guns and planes, in a hail of fire on **18 Battalion**, increasing in violence as the hours wore on. All morning the men grimly faced this fire, from minute to minute expecting the attack. The Vickers and Bren guns kept up a return fire, especially on **Red Hill** and along the coast road, where D Company had lots of targets too good to let slip. The forward companies would have swapped all they owned for more 3-inch mortars and bombs.

Very soon wounded men began to come back, first a trickle, then a continuous stream, too many for the 'Doc' and his staff to cope with. Even with the RAP divided, one section at Battalion Headquarters and one near HQ Company, the position quickly became chaotic. As a desperate gamble two trucks full of wounded were sent back to the dressing station, and by some miracle the trucks returned unscathed, having run the gauntlet of the **Luftwaffe** both ways.

The hardest hit was D Company, to whom Jerry seemed to have taken a particular dislike; during the morning it had nineteen casualties, more than a quarter of its whole strength. The Germans opposing it were remnants of the Assault Regiment, the cream of the airborne troops, violent and aggressive fighters.

Shortly after 1 p.m. the mortaring rose to a savage climax, and at the same time German infantry made their first appearance, not in great numbers, but

stabbing at the line here and there, testing for weak spots. By two o'clock they were coming forward in strength all along the front. The dangerous thrust seemed to be against A Company on [Wheat Hill](#), where both the Vickers guns had been knocked out, but the company clung on and fought the enemy off, and a handful of ASC men, all there were to spare, was sent off to [Wheat Hill](#) in a hurry.

Things were shaky on the right flank too. D Company was now so low in numbers that its hold on the ridge was extremely precarious. Its CSM, Leo Bulford,⁴ was dead. So was Lieutenant Foot, who had been at Company Headquarters with the 3-inch mortar. The mortar itself was damaged and useless. The company was being machine-gunned from front and flank. The reserve platoon of 'infantry' was ordered up to D Company, but couldn't get through the mortar barrage, and finished up holding a vacant stretch of ground on D Company's left rear.

In the centre the position seemed a fraction easier. The Vickers guns here were still in the fight, and B and C Companies' Brens were doing well, sweeping the crest of Red Hill and keeping Jerry at bay for the time being. One party of Germans got in close to C Company, but was fought off by 15 Platoon. A few men from Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company came up to thicken the line.

By 3 p.m. the whole line was patched up in the meantime, and no more could be done until the next assault came in. When that happened it could only be a question of digging your toes in, as there were no more reserves except the 'ack-ack' platoon of HQ Company, which was fully occupied backing up D Company. There wasn't long to wait.

The knockout punch fell just where it could least be withstood, on D Company, pitifully weak in numbers and lacking cohesion and directions. A paratroop party, moving up one of the gullies on the company's left, got in between the platoons and Company Headquarters, and almost simultaneously there was a heavy frontal attack. The story of how the company went down has been told by Corporal Ernie Howard,⁵ a Bren-gunner in 16 Platoon:

Fire from the enemy had become more intense and the ground shook to the blasts of mortar bombs and shells. I saw some enemy activity behind a knoll, they were not quite hidden. I opened fire but could observe no results. Suddenly one of

the NCOs yelled out to cease fire as D Coy was surrendering. As this was uttered the whole enemy ground became alive with advancing troops. The beach too. They advanced in fairly close order along the open beach towards the wire. I opened fire and got several. Again the order came to cease fire and on looking along the brow of the hill I saw one of the boys climbing out with his hands up.... I ceased fire. Then followed a short period of doubt and indecision for which we were all to blame. Were we entirely surrounded? Could I have got away had I made a break? These are questions for which I shall never have an answer. Two men did make a break but were shot as they got over the hill so if we were not entirely surrounded Jerry certainly commanded the whole field of fire in our rear. The advancing Jerries were now on the road and signalling us to come down. We climbed out and with our hands in the air walked down towards them.

From a runner who made the perilous trip back, Battalion Headquarters heard of the infiltration. At once Colonel Gray collected a few men from near at hand and led them forward through HQ Company, yelling to others to join them in a bayonet charge. By the time they reached D Company headquarters the party had snowballed to about three dozen. But there Gray had to leave them and hurry back to Battalion Headquarters, and the incipient counter-attack fizzled out. 'A few,' said Eric Sworn,⁶ the D Company CQMS, 'came up to Coy HQ, and a few reached Cpl. Leith's⁷ platoon on the right flank, but no bayonet charge was made and they all drifted away again....' Company Headquarters was now on its own, and for a while didn't know what had happened to the platoons.

Shortly before Jerry got in among the forward positions Captain Sinclair had been wounded. His successor, Second-Lieutenant D. L. Robinson,⁸ went forward after the abortive bayonet charge to find out the story up front, but was killed by a hand grenade. The Germans were now right in front of Company Headquarters and very near to it. The six men remaining at Headquarters were obviously no use where they were, with no field of fire, and would inevitably be overwhelmed, so Sworn took command and ordered them back to Battalion Headquarters. The way lay across 50 yards of open field under vicious fire from a machine gun on the flank— another man was hit, and the survivors scattered, reassembling when they reached cover. The Vickers guns, which had been firing all this time, pulled back about the same time, covered by the 'ack-ack' platoon, whose Bren-gunners carried on the



Crete survivors—8 Platoon, A Company

Crete survivors—8 Platoon, A Company

Combined training—Assault Landing Craft on HMS *Glenroy*



Combined training—Assault Landing Craft on HMS Glenroy



Combined training—landing from the Assault Craft

Combined training—landing from the Assault Craft

Gambut airfield



Gambut airfield



18 Battalion convoy being shelled

18 Battalion convoy being shelled

Belhamed—18 Battalion advances on the German pocket



Belhamed— 18 Battalion advances on the German pocket



German prisoners at Belhamed

German prisoners at Belhamed

18 Battalion Signal truck after hitting a mine



18 Battalion Signal truck after hitting a mine

work and kept Jerry off the crest of D Company's hill in the meantime. Some of HQ Company who had gone forward to D Company were cut off when the others withdrew; a number of them got clear after nightfall and rejoined the battalion later.

D Company's surrender, of course, brought bitter reproach down on 18 Battalion after the campaign. But they had had to endure the unendurable—a man in HQ Company, who saw most of what went on, said of the surrender that he 'didn't blame the poor beggars as they had had a terrible time'.

But the position was not yet lost beyond repair. Colonel Kippenberger (now acting as a sort of unofficial forward commander of 4 Brigade) urgently called

forward two companies of 20 Battalion to reinforce the right flank; Lieutenant-Colonel Gray charged madly round gathering up odd groups of stragglers, and in a little while the line was intact again, a patchwork line, but fairly solid, running north-east from [Galatas](#) to the sea. Then Gray went forward again to his hard-pressed battalion.

While this was going on the Germans had struck again farther south. Back they surged towards [Wheat Hill](#), covered by a torrent of fire from [Ruin Hill](#) that kept A Company's heads very low. Captain Lyon, knowing the inevitable end, sent runners back asking permission to withdraw, but was refused. [Wheat Hill](#) was now a key point. Its evacuation would expose the flank of ' [Russell Force](#)' (Divisional Cavalry and some ASC men) fighting on [18 Battalion's](#) left, and would leave a hole for Jerry to push through to [Galatas](#) and smash the whole New Zealand line. So for A Company it was—hang on, cling to the hill at all costs.

But that was asking the impossible. The company was being battered to pieces, and the enemy was coming in close and would beyond a doubt overrun the position before long. Captain Lyon, rather than see his company wiped out, gave the order to retire, and the men fell back through [Galatas](#), with Jerry following up close behind.

This was the blow that broke the [Galatas](#) line. Forward from [Wheat Hill](#) swarmed the Germans, pushing through in pursuit of A Company right to the outskirts of [Galatas](#). Others set up machine guns in the gap and took [Russell Force](#) in the flank, forcing it back out of its line, and there too the enemy followed up hard after the retreating Kiwis. The tide swept over the hills into [Galatas](#), where the Germans halted, while the New Zealanders struggled to make a stand.

Only one centre of resistance now remained to disturb the German advance, and that was B and C Companies on [Murray Hill](#), with their attached Vickers guns, ASC and 'infantry', and a few remaining stalwarts of HQ Company on their right. With both flanks gone they were in a desperate and dangerous situation. The net was tightening round three sides of [Murray Hill](#), but the companies held their ground and refused to be crowded out, keeping up so sturdy a front against [Red Hill](#) that Jerry couldn't break the stalemate there. A lot of Germans died on [Red Hill](#) that afternoon, and a lot more in attacks on [Murray Hill](#). Lieutenant [Batty](#)⁹ of C Company describes the scene:

The Germans came fwd in great waves, walking stupidly fwd through the olive trees. They were shot in great numbers but they still came on through Bn HQ and B Coy.

B Company was the first to crack. The Germans, when they made their assault on D Company, had worked their way in between D and B, and from here they pushed south on to B Company's flank, at the same time making a frontal attack from the west. The full force of this double thrust hit 11 Platoon. Under cover of the mortar fire the Germans closed in to hand-grenade range. 'The fighting that ensued,' says Corporal Voss, 'was some of the most vicious in which B Company were involved throughout the war. There was no quarter given.' Only three men from 11 Platoon got away. Battalion Headquarters, just behind 11 Platoon, had to make a quick exit with the enemy right on top of it. No. 10 Platoon with the bayonet disposed of some Germans in its rear, then extricated itself without too much damage, though in the mêlée CSM McCormack was killed.

C Company was still suffering casualties who could not be evacuated, and the Germans on both flanks were now coming in closer and threatening to cut the line of withdrawal altogether. About an hour before dusk Major Lynch (who had already been refused permission to withdraw) reluctantly sent word to Lieutenant-Colonel Gray that he couldn't hold any longer, that the pressure was too hot, and that he was pulling out in another quarter of an hour. Even at that he nearly left it too late. His covering party (a section of 15 Platoon under Sergeant Archie Fletcher¹⁰) made a final stand at close range for the little time it took the main body to clear Murray Hill, then back it came too. At the same time the last of HQ Company and of the Composite Battalion men were forced back. For a few minutes all order was lost, the men streaming back with Jerry right on their heels firing everything he had. They dumped everything except rifles and ammunition. They ran as they had never believed they could. Back down Murray Hill and up to the next ridge, where Colonel Gray was shouting, swearing, rallying all comers to make a stand. The most resolute stopped there, lined a stone wall with rifles and Tommy guns, and held Jerry off for a few more minutes. 'The Huns,' said Gray later, 'were caught at 50 yds range and shot down in scores.' Then once more streams of fire came in from the flank as Jerry poured into Galatas, and back again the line had to go, every man for himself, through the outskirts of Galatas, where Colonel Kippenberger was rallying stragglers

from every unit and sending them back to man another patchwork line on the [Karatsos](#) ridge. Here also, until he was wounded, was George Andrews, the [18 Battalion](#) RSM, working quietly, tirelessly and without fuss, helping to divide the men up into groups under whatever officers and NCOs were handy. On the [Karatsos](#) ridge the depleted [18 Battalion](#) companies turned and faced [Galatas](#).

This moment was the lowest ebb in [18 Battalion](#)'s fortunes. For the time being it didn't exist as a unit, only as a number of mixed groups scattered among the heterogeneous collection on the ridge, tired to death, filthy with sweat, dirt and blood, shaken nearly out of their senses by continual bombardment, destitute of all possessions save their weapons and the clothes they wore. Nearly a hundred of their friends lay dead on the hills round [Galatas](#). Many more were wounded, and some of these had had to be left behind in the final scramble. Seventy were on their way to German prison camps. Some (not many) had lost heart and were not there at [Karatsos](#), but scattered through the country farther east, nobody knew where. The future was grim. Everyone knew that [Crete](#) was lost, and the knowledge was bitter.

And then out of the dull ashes of defeat there rose a flame, only a brief flash, but one that will be vivid in the memory of those who were there until their dying day. And that was the counter-attack on [Galatas](#).

This mad, defiant, reckless charge has become one of the New Zealand Division's epics. In the ditch at [Karatsos](#) a brief message arrived from [Colonel Kippenberger](#): 'Left and right are still holding and I'm trying to build up a line in centre.... Move your people forward into Galatos and build up a line covering Russell's (i.e. Div Cav's) left.' Lieutenant-Colonel Gray wasn't the man to balk at such a request. He hastily whipped together a scratch force, sixty or so of [18 Battalion](#) plus a few odds and ends from other units who happened to be there, and led the way into the east side of [Galatas](#) just as the main attack by [23 Battalion](#) burst into the village from the north-east. Forward from house to house went the [18 Battalion](#) men with bayonet and grenade. In those few minutes caution and reason went to the winds. Men did crazy, desperately heroic deeds that they couldn't remember later. Some died in the streets and houses and were left behind unnoticed in the onrush. Friend and enemy tangled together in the dark, and more than one New Zealander took a wound from a Kiwi rifle or bayonet. German fire was fierce at first, but by the time the [18](#) and [23 Battalion](#) parties met near the town square there

wasn't much coherent opposition left— here they paused for a breather, and sanity began to return. The town was a shell-smashed ruin, dead and wounded lying everywhere, men roaming round with no clear idea what they should do next; scattered, random shooting was still going on, one persistent German machine gun firing from beyond the square. Two [18 Battalion](#) parties, led by Lieutenant [Macdonald](#)¹¹ and Second-Lieutenant Lambie, set out after this gun; Macdonald's patrol got round behind it and attacked from the rear at almost the same moment as a [23 Battalion](#) party closed in from the front. The gun was destroyed, and the [18 Battalion](#) men pulled back to the square, leaving [23 Battalion](#) to patrol the western part of the village.

[Galatas](#) was pretty quiet now, and the Kiwis set about making a line in the town to prepare for the fresh attack that must surely come. But none came—Jerry, it seemed, was so jolted by this unexpected kick from a prostrate enemy that he had no immediate answer ready. For the time being the Kiwis were undisputed owners of [Galatas](#).

Gray now for the first time had leisure to think of [Colonel Kippenberger's](#) order to build up a line on [Divisional Cavalry's](#) left; but where was the Div Cav? Gray set out with a patrol through the town to find it, but ran instead into an unexpected machine-gun post, and Lieutenant Macdonald was wounded. The incident is described by Corporal [Baker](#)¹²:

We proceeded up the street to the crossroads on the outskirts and were discussing plans... when machine guns opened up, narrowly missing the whole party. We retreated down the street for cover and had no sooner started to discuss the position and what we could do when a machine gun... swept the street we were standing in, wounding the other officer.... Acting on Colonel Gray's orders and with him assisting we carried the wounded man and retired.

The [Divisional Cavalry](#) wasn't to be found, which was not surprising, as it had withdrawn to [Karatsos](#) before the counter-attack went in.

Then came orders to evacuate [Galatas](#) and move back eastwards.

This was intensely disappointing to the men in the town, who now held their

hard-won prize firmly and were confident that they could hang on to it. But the divisional and brigade commanders thought otherwise. Not only was [Galatas](#) an obvious bombing target, but there was nothing on the flanks to stop Jerry getting right round behind it, and there were no fresh units available to straighten the line. So a withdrawal it had to be. The new orders were: [5 Brigade](#) to man a line running south from [7 General Hospital's](#) old position, [4 Brigade](#) to pull back behind this line to reorganise its battered units.

[Eighteenth Battalion](#) was first ordered to concentrate one and a half miles east of [Galatas](#), just behind [5 Brigade's](#) new line; but this area was so congested with troops that about 4 a.m. it was sent on another couple of miles to the transit camp which had been its first halting place on [Crete](#). Here the battalion (or such of it as was present) settled down to wait for daylight, well hidden from the air among trees and scrub beside a stream. Most of the men were so dog-tired that they fell asleep there and then, but they didn't sleep for long, for there were continual comings and goings as the officers checked their absentees, and groups of stragglers arrived from goodness knew where. By morning most of the wanderers had found their way home, though some had tagged on to other units and didn't see [18 Battalion](#) again until it was back in [Egypt](#), while the battalion itself harboured others who had lost their own units. But though most of the survivors were now accounted for, [18 Battalion's](#) ranks were depressingly thin.

With the dawn came the planes again, buzzing back and forth over the olive groves like flies round a corpse, coming down low to strafe whenever they saw a target, and sometimes when they didn't, just for luck. Fortunately [18 Battalion](#) wasn't spotted.

At 11 a.m. came further orders, orders that dealt the final death blow to any hope anyone might still have of making a stand on [Crete](#). The battalion was to pull out and make its way east through [Suda](#), assembling again farther along the shore of [Suda Bay](#) for a withdrawal over the mountains to [Sfakia](#) on the south coast. This could mean only one thing—they were to get out of [Crete](#), and pretty soon too. Other battalions and brigades were to hold the enemy in check and make a fighting withdrawal, but [4 Brigade](#) was to head south at once.

The battalion moved off about midday, but not before it had loaded up with

tinned food—beans, milk, pineapple— from an abandoned dump nearby. This was the first time for a week that the men had seen food in any quantity. The wise ones carried away as much as they could; but, as CSM Harry [Lapwood](#)¹³ of HQ Company says:

It was quite obvious that a number were more interested in travelling light than catering for their food requirements, and accordingly these boys were the hungry ones when [Sphakia](#) was reached.

From the camp they set off for [Suda](#), moving across country in small groups, keeping well under the trees. The word was passed round that any groups losing the battalion were to head for [Sfakia](#) under their own steam.

But you can't move 300 men through several miles of straggly olive groves without occasionally coming into view. And overhead cruised the [Luftwaffe](#), watching its opportunity.

Suddenly two big Messerschmitt 110s whisked low over the treetops. Most of the men hit the ground among the vines, burying themselves deep in the foliage; but some, losing their heads, ran across open ground towards the shelter of some bigger trees. Down came the planes. Again and again they circled and dived, machine guns hammering away, peppering the whole area. A Company caught most of it before it could take cover. Captain Lyon and five others were killed, another half dozen wounded—a bad knock for A Company, already very short of men. The battalion could not afford to lose many like Captain Lyon, one of its few senior officers still on their feet. Though physically worn out by the Greek campaign, he had kept going on [Crete](#) and refused to give in, setting an example to many men younger than himself—he had dropped several years off his age to come overseas. He was the first New Zealand MP to lose his life in the Second World War.

When the planes finally left, it was a disjointed battalion that got up out of the dust and went on its way. Groups of men, scattered over a wide area, headed east with no apparent cohesion. Every little while they had to hit the ground again as more planes came roaring over, and once down among the vines some were reluctant to get up again. It took all the rest of the day to cover eight miles. It was a grim tramp, everyone silent and downcast, nerves frayed to snapping point. Once

more everything was wrong end up. Once more the British had had to abandon the field to Jerry, not because they were inferior man to man, but because they had been set to fight a hopeless battle, with next to nothing, against a well-prepared, well-armed, well-equipped force.

As dusk was falling the remnants of the battalion assembled near the [Sfakia](#) road turnoff—but not all of them. Some were missing, presumably somewhere ahead on their way to [Sfakia](#). B Company, with the remains of D Company attached, had missed the turnoff and gone nearly three miles on the wrong route (it rejoined the battalion two days later). Those who were there headed a little way up the mountainside and stopped for the night under some trees beside a stream. The murderous heights they were yet to surmount were still mercifully hidden from them.

Before it was fully light next day the battalion was on the road again. Most of the men had had the luxury of a wash and a shave in the stream, for many the first shave for a week and the last on [Crete](#). This stretch of the road was good, tarsealed at first, and not unduly steep. Southwards went [18 Battalion](#), away from [Suda Bay](#), marching steadily in threes—except when the planes came over, and then everyone disappeared by magic, melting into the tawny grass and rocks by the roadside.

The day's trek, though quite long enough for tired men on a steaming hot day, was fairly short, only about five miles, up and over the hill and down the other side to [Stilos](#), where 4 Brigade was to lie up till dark. Its hiding place was a large olive grove well off the road, already congested with all sorts and conditions of troops. As the men arrived a little food was handed out to them, the last proper meal they were to have for four days.

Prayers for a quiet restful afternoon were not answered. The [Luftwaffe](#) found the retreat in the olive grove—with thousands of men crammed into it, it was probably inevitable—and for nearly an hour and a half relays of planes went for it, lashing the area with bullets and almost shaving the treetops as they passed over. Cornfields, tall grass and even a few trees were set ablaze by incendiary bullets. There was nothing to do but crouch behind what shelter the trees could give; there were some casualties, but only three in [18 Battalion](#).

The Germans had been held up that day by a rearguard of Aussies and [5](#)

Brigade west of Suda; but this force was to pull back that night and make its next stand at Stilos, while 4 Brigade and the rest of the New Zealanders got as far back towards Sfakia as they could. It was a matter of life and death now to keep the Sfakia road open. Fourth Brigade was to head that night for the Askifou plain a mountain amphitheatre 17 miles south of Stilos), guard it against paratroop landings, and also watch a road coming in from Georgeoupolis, away on the north coast towards Retimo. Both these jobs, it was decided, would be 18 Battalion's responsibility.

At dusk the battalion moved off again with the rest of 4 Brigade, marching behind 20 Battalion, with four light British tanks bringing up the rear.

It is easy to say, '4 Brigade will move from Stilos to Askifou'; but the horror of that night's tramp just can't be put into words. To men in the last stages of fatigue those 17 miles were endless. From Vrises (eight miles from Stilos) it was uphill, uphill all the way, steep and winding. The road had now degenerated into a rough stony track, strewn with packs and equipment abandoned by those who had gone before, and with trucks which had carried men as far as they could, then 'conked out' and been heaved off the road. The men were stiff and sore, fighting their weariness all the way, their feet blistered and bleeding. Worse still was the torment of thirst; the night was hot and water scarce. And most dreadful of all were the stragglers, a panicky, undisciplined mob cluttering up the road, heedless of anyone but themselves, impeding everyone. Nerves were near enough to the surface without having this rabble to contend with.

The men would, they were told, be able to get water at a well just before the steep stretch of the pass began. But when they got there, in the small hours of 28 May, what did they find? One 18 Battalion man describes it:

Around this well were Greeks, Aussies, Tommies and N.Zeders all mad with thirst and I have never seen such a terrible and raving crazy mob. Rifle pullthroughs and anything in the shape of string were joined together to make a rope upon which tins, tin hats or anything that would hold water was tied and used to drag water from the well. As these were pulled up a hat would tip over only a foot from a reaching hand or a string would break.

Eighteenth Battalion, as an organised unit, was given water here, but only a pittance.

There were those who did not make the distance, flung themselves down to rest on the roadside, and couldn't or wouldn't get up again. A few, whose feet gave out entirely, managed to find clinging room on the few trucks still going south. For the rest, nothing but sheer guts kept them pushing one aching foot in front of the other all the way up that mountain. They lost all count of time or distance—some were literally walking in their sleep, not even conscious that they were still moving, senses dead to all about them.

It was at a time like this, in the last extreme of adversity, that Lieutenant-Colonel Gray rose to his greatest heights. His worst enemy would willingly pay him warm tribute for his work that night. He was, according to one man, 'a real tower of strength, at one stage leading the unit and next bringing up the rear. He seemed to be everywhere and endeavoured to raise the morale by singing in which we all joined.' The singing could better be described as a hoarse croaking, and soon died altogether; but [18 Battalion](#) was spurred by Gray's encouragement and bullying to march on as a unit, in a compact group, losing nothing by comparison with any other unit on the road.

At [Vrises](#) (or what had been [Vrises](#) before the [Luftwaffe](#) visited it) HQ Company split off from the battalion and stayed behind to guard the [Georgeoupolis](#) road. It was lucky. The rest trudged onwards and upwards, with ever another height in front of them and no sign of the top of the pass. At last, at 4.30 a.m., they halted, pulled off the road, and collapsed. Dawn was beginning to redden, and still there were more peaks ahead. They had already walked, they were sure, some hundreds of miles.

But actually the worst of the trek was nearly over. At 9 a.m. they were off again; quite a short haul up a rocky gorge, and there spread out below them was the [Askifou](#) plain, a patchwork of fields dotted with farms and little villages. It looked delightful.

It didn't belie its looks. When those weary men stumbled down the mountain to the flat below they found wells—lovely wells, scores of them, scattered all over the

fields. Water to drink, water to sluice over your face and head, water to bathe your feet. The men practically wallowed in it. German planes were miraculously absent, and for a while the anti-paratroop role had to wait on the good pleasure of the water.

Some small groups who had fallen behind during that nightmare march came in to the battalion during the day, and B Company (which had been plugging along several miles behind) caught up again. There was a continual trickle of troops, odds and ends, appearing over the northern heights and disappearing again over the lower mountain range at the south end of the plain; only 18 and 20 Battalions were there in position on the plain ready for action, with the four British tanks and three Aussie guns (antique Italian 75-millimetre pieces) that had by some miracle got as far as Askifou. There was no work to do yet, and a day of inaction was doubly welcome after the fearful march of the night before.

Naturally under the circumstances, Rumour had a hard day's work. The Germans, she said, were not far behind, and coming up fast in full strength. In this, as often, Rumour wasn't speaking the strict truth. The Germans were coming up, true, but many miles behind, delayed by New Zealand and British rearguards north of Vrises; and not in full strength, for their commander had providentially misjudged the direction of the withdrawal and sent a comparatively small force along the Sfakia road, while his main spearhead struck east along the north coast on a wild-goose chase towards Retimo.

Our plan of action was simple. Fifth Brigade and the British troops at present fighting rearguard actions away up north were to withdraw through 4 Brigade on 29 May; 4 Brigade was to hold the plain until that evening, then pull out in its turn and go back to the coast, while other British troops took up the rearguard farther south.

Plans for evacuation from Crete weren't so simple, for nobody knew exactly how many men the Navy could accommodate. There were at least 17,000 to get off from Sfakia alone. An evacuation programme was drawn up which, God willing, would have everybody off by the night of 31 May, but the arrangements couldn't be anything but tentative. Fourth Brigade's night was 30-31 May.

Early on the 29th 18 Battalion once more split up. Its main body moved a couple

of miles farther on, from the north to the south end of the plain, joined 20 Battalion in position there, and settled down for another day of comparative ease. A Company, under Major Lynch's temporary command, went back up the mountain to the north (where some of the men had sworn they would never go again) to help 5 Brigade block the entry. With the company was one of the four tanks, a few Vickers gunners who had happened to be tagging along, and a 3-inch mortar manned by the 19 Battalion RSM (who had lost his own unit) and a crew of volunteers.

A Company, jaded as it was, hauled its weary feet up to the top of the first peak north of the plain, and there spread out over a wide front, covering as much of the approach from the north as possible. As it climbed the hill the worn-out men of 5 Brigade were streaming down, the 'Cook's Tourists' of the Second Echelon, who had fought Jerry off all the way back from Galatas, and were now on their way to a well-deserved few hours' rest before moving on again. Ahead of A Company was still 23 Battalion and two Aussie battalions; they were to engage Jerry when he arrived, and then withdraw, leaving A Company to hold off the attack till dark. Quite an assignment for fifty dog-tired, hungry, dispirited men.

During the morning the German vanguard of two companies came toiling up the pass. Twenty-third Battalion engaged them vigorously until 4.30 p.m., then, according to its orders, withdrew down into the plain, followed by the Aussies; and A Company was there on its own, outnumbered four to one, with the responsibility for holding the enemy at arm's length for some hours.

As the shadows began to lengthen, the rest of 18 Battalion at the south end of Askifou plain could hear machine-gun, rifle and mortar fire from the north end, and after a while the deeper notes of shellfire. Things were evidently a bit hot up with A Company, but there wasn't a thing the rest could do about it, even if the company was overrun and wiped out.

But A Company was far from being wiped out. On the contrary, it was putting up a skilful defence against the Germans at close range. For three hours the enemy stabbed here and there, trying in vain to smash this stubborn ring of men who disputed their passage. To dispose the company to meet every threat Major Lynch had to keep on the qui vive, and sometimes move a section hastily to counter one of Jerry's thrusts. Of course, it was only a matter of time. Eventually Jerry swung wide

round the flank, dragged a machine gun over the hilltops, got it into position covering A Company's rear and the road down to the plain, and opened fire.

This could have been the end of A Company, but it wasn't. After 23 Battalion's withdrawal, when the situation began to get sticky up on the hilltop, [Brigadier Inglis](#) had sent the three Aussie guns up in support, and there they were, without much ammunition, but nicely sited to tackle the troublesome Jerry machine gun. The German fondness for firing tracer gave away its exact location, and the Aussie gunners 'gave it the works'. Under cover of their fire A Company began to retire downhill.

To Lieutenant-Colonel Gray must go much of the credit for the successful withdrawal. He had been largely responsible for turning the Aussie guns on to their target, and had himself acted as their spotter. He had also produced three trucks from somewhere, and had them waiting ready at the foot of the hill. A Company tumbled into them and set out for the south end of the plain, where the rest of the battalion was getting ready to move on again.

After the two days' rest in the [Askifou](#) plain [18 Battalion](#) was reasonably fit to face another night march. There wasn't much food left now that most of the [Suda](#) windfall had gone; but, hunger or no hunger, they still had the best part of ten miles to go to the coast. So off they set.

It was an arduous march, the men stumbling over the rough stones of the roadway, literally pushing at times through the mobs of leaderless stragglers that still blocked the track. Up a narrow, dark gorge between towering peaks; down the other side through [Imvros](#) (where a makeshift hospital had been set up in a church at the entrance to the village); two miles along a frightening cliff overhanging an abyss that in the dark seemed bottomless; then a series of hairpin bends down a steep face, and then suddenly there wasn't any more road, only a precipice covered with boulders, falling away down into nothing. Here [18 Battalion](#) dispersed off the road, lay down among the stones, and thankfully slept.

Here HQ Company rejoined the battalion. Since taking on its flank-guard job at [Vrises](#) it hadn't done badly for itself. Captain Playle ¹⁴ tells of its adventures:

I left Lt. [Crump](#) ¹⁵ and four or five men in [Vrises](#) to maintain a report centre, so

that we should have some sort of contact with the Force as it moved south. It was difficult, in the dark, to find a reasonable defensive position, but after marching some 2½ miles or more I put the Company astride the road.... On the morning of 28th May ... S.M. Lapwood and I made a reconnaissance as far as [Georgeopolis](#). There we found a party of sappers who had just prepared the bridge for demolition. Just north of the bridge were a number of British trucks, abandoned and partially destroyed.

We returned to the Company ..., but then decided to go back to the trucks and endeavour to salvage one or two of them, as they would be most useful in our withdrawal.... A quick inspection of the trucks showed that some of them were not beyond repair and with a certain amount of cannibalising we quickly had two of them running, and just managed to get them over the bridge before the sappers fired the charges.

During the afternoon Lt. Crump sent me word that the bridge on the main road at Vryses would be blown at about 2200 hrs., by which time all the Force was expected to be through.... When the bridge went up at 2200 hrs. I had still received no further orders, and as all the rest of the Force seemed to have gone, I put the Company into the two trucks and moved southwards.... Further south we were stopped by a Movement Control Post and ordered to abandon the trucks and bivouac until the following night.

Next day ... at 2000 hrs ... we joined the general move south. Up to this time it had been impossible to locate the Battalion, but at 0100 hrs., 30th May, we found them going into bivouac on the hills above Spakhia.

The battalion was finished with rearguard actions now. The units of [19 Australian Brigade](#) took up a position covering the mass of weary troops in the dispersal area at the end of the road, and with them a Royal Marine battalion and a Commando force. For the moment Jerry had fallen behind, but that was only temporary.

When dawn broke— [18 Battalion's](#) last dawn on [Crete](#)—the men could see where they had got to. The hillside was alive with men, and all round them the ground was strewn with gear of all descriptions. Nearby, at the end of the road, were

dozens of trucks and ambulances, abandoned and desolate, some of them smashed or burnt out, with bodies still in and round them. The precipice below fell away sharply for 500 feet to gentler slopes scored with deep watercourses. A mile and a half ahead was their safety, the sea. Their safety— perhaps. They weren't there yet; Jerry wasn't far behind, and there were thousands of men to get away. It wouldn't do to let your hopes soar too high. In the meantime you could only wait.

And what a nerve-racking wait that was! First of all, not very long after dawn, the inevitable plane flew over, up and down the road, having a good look at what was there. A lot more of his pals, thought everyone, were bound to follow, and everyone looked round for a decent cleft or rock for shelter; but miraculously there was no air attack. But there was hunger and there was thirst. And later in the day there were Jerry mortars, first cracking away in the distance up the road, then getting nearer until they were falling uncomfortably close to the dispersed troops. Jerry had followed down from the north and was here on the doorstep, with his shoulder to the door, pushing hard to get it open. Finding the door firmly jammed, he tried to get in the windows by sending forces down the two deep ravines that ran down to the coast on either side of the road. But the defenders had bolted the windows too. Neither outflanking party had any success—the eastern force was stopped by almost vertical hillsides, and the western, after pushing dangerously close to the foot of the Sfakiano ravine, was ambushed by 20 Battalion and mauled so badly that it had to give up.

It was early in the afternoon when this little battle took place on the western flank, and [18 Battalion](#) was there ready to lend a hand if need be. B Company, which had already spent two fruitless hours pushing smashed trucks off the road (most of them had come to rest on the next leg of the zigzag, some 50 yards below), was sent over to the eastern lip of the ravine, half a mile from the dispersal area, to back up the defence. This was, thanks to 20 Battalion, an unnecessary precaution, but it might very well have been necessary. B Company occupied its hillside eyrie for a couple of hours, and then, when the situation cleared, it was ordered back, rejoining [18 Battalion](#) down at the foot of the mountain.

Just about the same time that B Company was setting off for the Sfakiano ravine, the fate of [18 Battalion](#) was being decided. About 7000 men had already been evacuated to [Egypt](#) on the two previous nights. Now tonight four destroyers

were to come to [Sfakia](#) and take off another load, and it was to be [4 Brigade](#) that went. The previous evacuations had run along anything but smoothly—crowds of stragglers had tried to push their way aboard, some had succeeded, and there had been ugly scenes. This time, said [Major-General Freyberg](#), the beach was to be kept under strict control; every man going down to embark was to be identified, and nobody except those in the authorised units was to get on to the beach.

[Brigadier Inglis](#) summoned Lieutenant-Colonel Gray and passed these orders on to him. Eighteenth Battalion was to be the police unit with the unpleasant task of enforcing the orders. At 8.30 p.m. it was to go to the beach and form a solid, impassable human chain. Not one gate-crasher was to be allowed through, and the battalion was to use force if necessary to keep them out.

About 4 p.m. [18 Battalion](#) was ordered downhill. To the bored men lying listlessly in the dispersal area this order had an electric effect—hopes which had dwindled to a low ebb now rose sky-high again. The men slung their rifles, put on their web (most of them had nothing else to carry), and stumbled off down the slippery, rock-strewn slopes, past the shambles of trucks, corpses and gear. At the foot they were still a mile from the coast and nearly two from [Sfakia](#), but one more obstacle was behind them. They lay down again to wait for dark, some in a little gully incongruously bright with rhododendrons, some in caves in the mountainside, others just on the stones in the open. Here a little later B Company joined them.

It seemed to the men as if darkness was never coming, but at last it was 8.30 p.m., and time to move on. Along a narrow zigzag track, past a check post where every man was identified before passing, through the bare stone houses of [Sfakia](#), and out on to the beach just beyond. Only a little beach it was, a piece of sand 150 yards long and 20 yards wide—had it been any bigger, the small remnant of [18 Battalion](#) wouldn't have been sufficient to hold it securely. The men fixed bayonets, formed up shoulder to shoulder, and their evening's work began as the other [4 Brigade](#) units filed through on to the beach. Here again everyone had to pass muster before getting through the cordon. This didn't deter some stragglers from trying it, but after its experience on the withdrawal [18 Battalion](#) had no patience with stragglers. The officers had to present their pistols at some persistent ones before they would go away, and the men took summary measures too, throwing some

unfortunates bodily off the beach, stonily deaf to their pleading.

Second-Lieutenant Lambie recounts one incident:

One of my men reported that a party ... had appeared and were demanding admission to the beach and that one had got past the men. We hurried to the spot and each grabbed an arm of the intruder and literally tossed him off the beach. He picked himself up and spat stones and informed us that he was Col.... in charge of the beach and responsible for making contact with the Navy to get us taken off. The writer moved to the other end of the beach and kept very quiet.

Despite this misunderstanding the contact with the Navy was made all right. Towards midnight lights came flashing across the water, and then the silence was broken by the growl of engines as landing craft slipped in to the beach. Only two destroyers were there—the others had been forced to turn back to [Alexandria](#)—but on to those two (HMS [Napier](#) and HMAS [Nizam](#)) were crammed as many men as they could possibly hold: [19](#) and [20](#) Battalions, [28](#) Battalion, [4](#) Brigade Headquarters, all went, and somehow space was found for 400 extra men of various units. Last of all, [18](#) Battalion filed on to the landing craft and from them climbed thankfully up on to the destroyers. The Navy, as always, had everything a tired hungry man could desire—hot food, a wash, a sympathetic word, a corner to lie down in and sleep. By 2.40 a.m. the ships were under way, heading south at full speed, with [Crete](#), that island of ill omen, fading rapidly below the horizon.

It would have been a miracle had they reached [Africa](#) unhindered, as the [Luftwaffe](#) was concentrating a lot of energy on the traffic to and from [Crete](#). But they could have fared much worse than they did. In the middle of the morning eight bombers appeared out of the blue—a brain-shattering din broke out on the ships as every gun and rifle went into action, and in came the planes to the attack. Nobody could accuse the pilots of cowardice. Down they dived through the ack-ack, and the soldiers packed tight on the ships, unable to take cover, caught their breath as the bombs crashed all round. One slid between [Napier's](#) rail and deck and drenched the men on board as it exploded in the water alongside. But there were no more planes, thank God. The destroyers steamed on their way watchful but undisturbed, much slower now, as [Napier's](#) engines had taken some damage from that near miss. At last, after a long, long day, [Alexandria](#) rose out of the sea, and the jaded Kiwis bade

the Navy a grateful farewell and stepped, a weary ragged mob, on to the Egyptian soil which they had left in such high fettle not three months before.

'But not, not the six hundred.' Eighteenth Battalion had left for [Greece](#) 750 strong; it returned with 257. Of those who reached [Crete](#), 105 were dead or missing, 110 were prisoners, and of those who got away many were wounded and all destitute. But the battalion was still a unit, and every man able to walk had carried his rifle or Bren or Tommy gun off [Crete](#) with him—of that at least the battalion could boast.

Some of [18 Battalion's](#) wounded were caught when the Germans overran the [Suda](#) hospital, and the battalion saw them no more. But others (mainly the less serious cases) got away. Some were lucky enough to be evacuated from [Suda Bay](#) on HMS Hero on 27 May—others made the trip to [Sfakia](#), some in trucks and some perforce on foot, were evacuated before the main body of the battalion, and came back to it later. Of the unwounded, a few who had lost the battalion during the march to [Suda Bay](#) managed to make their way to [Sfakia](#) ahead of it and to get aboard the ships on 29 May. A resolute few who missed out at [Sfakia](#) escaped over the next few months, some of them in small boats, and eventually turned up in [Egypt](#), to the joy of those who had mourned them as lost. But the bulk of the old [18 Battalion](#) was gone. In its place a new battalion was to arise, made up largely of men who were never to know the bitterness of [Crete](#), but worthy successors, in campaigns to come, of those who had faced its dangers and hardships and whose names were now only legends in [18 Battalion](#).

¹ [Capt O. B. Copeland](#); Kaipara Line; born NZ 26 Dec 1912; farmer; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

² [Maj H. C. Bliss](#), m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 22 Sep 1914; dairy farmer; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

³ [Maj R. E. Rawle](#), MC; [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 2 Aug 1911; civil servant; OC Div Supply Coy Apr-Nov 1944; wounded 25 May 1941.

⁴ WO II L. V. Bulford; born NZ 21 Oct 1908; dairy-factory hand; killed in

action 25 May 1941.

⁵ Cpl E. A. Howard, MM; born Scotland, 28 Dec 1906; petroleum technologist; p.w. 25 May 1941; escaped 19 Aug 1941; killed in action 21 Jul 1942.

⁶ WO II E. E. Sworn, m.i.d.; Auckland; born England, 16 Nov 1899; insurance agent.

⁷ Cpl J. S. Leith; born Dunedin, 26 Sep 1914; clerk; died of wounds 25 May 1941.

⁸ 2 Lt D. L. Robinson; born Wellington, 17 Jan 1909; assistant town clerk; killed in action 25 May 1941.

⁹ Capt J. E. Batty, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Tonga, 17 Nov 1910; hardware assistant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

¹⁰ WO II A. Fletcher, DCM; born Taihape, 14 Nov 1911; service-station proprietor; died Puhipuhi, 5 Sep 1959.

¹¹ Capt D. H. St. C. Macdonald; Hamilton; born Auckland, 15 Jul 1915; shop assistant; wounded 25 May 1941; p.w. 27 May 1941; repatriated Oct 1943.

¹² Cpl E. Baker; Ruawai; born England, 6 Jan 1912; share milker.

¹³ WO I H. R. Lapwood; Rotorua; born Auckland, 1 Nov 1915; lorry driver; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

¹⁴ Lt-Col A. S. Playle, ED; Tauwhare; born Palmerston North, 12 Jan 1909; farmer; CO 18 Armed Regt Jun-Dec 1945.

¹⁵ Capt S. N. S. Crump; Palmerston North; born Auckland, 18 Dec 1916; bank officer.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 12 – RECONSTRUCTION

CHAPTER 12

Reconstruction

There is an old axiom that a soldier will always moan, and that there's something wrong if he doesn't. That is true, certainly. But it is also true that the 'moaning' is nothing but a pose, a veneer covering the fact that soldiers are really a light-hearted, resilient race, accepting what the day brings and shrugging off disappointment, hardship and discomfort. So it was with the men who came back from [Crete](#). They had been through very trying times, they had lost many of their friends and had seen the bitter day of defeat; but all they needed to bring them back to their old pitch of spirits and efficiency was a few days' rest, food and drink. And that is what they got.

From the moment they landed at [Alexandria](#) their most urgent bodily needs were attended to, effectively and without undue fuss. The welfare organisations, the [YMCA](#) and the Patriotic Fund people, excelled themselves. On the wharf, and at [Amiriya](#) transit camp, there they were, with the tea urn perpetually boiling, handing out cigarettes to men starved for a smoke, shaving gear and soap and toothpaste to men forced to go dirty and unshaven. A clean-up, a smoke, some food inside you, and it's wonderful how quickly your self-respect comes back, particularly when your worst rags are replaced on the spot with new clothes.

Little more than twenty-four hours after [18 Battalion's](#) arrival in [Egypt](#) it was on the move again, crammed on to a train clattering its way south to [Cairo](#). Only twenty-four hours, but what a difference! [Crete](#) was already something to be forgotten. The next campaign was somewhere hidden in the mist of the future, not to be thought of yet. In the meantime, they were still alive, and life was to be enjoyed.

Back in their old lines at [Helwan](#) they set about enjoying it. They had three days' holiday. [Cairo](#) beckoned, of course; there was general leave, and the boys had credits in their paybooks. So, like the Israelites of old, they sat by the flesh pots, and did eat bread to the full. Eating and drinking were the most important things in life just then.

They also made their first real acquaintance with the South Africans. When the

New Zealand Division went to [Greece](#) there had been few South African troops in [Egypt](#)—now the place was alive with them. South African trucks had carried [18 Battalion](#) from [Alexandria](#) to [Amiriya](#) camp, from there to the train, from [Helwan](#) siding to the camp. Now in [Cairo](#) began a friendship and rivalry that was to outlast the war. There the mythical book on rugby had its origins, the first international scrum went down in a [Cairo](#) bar, the first argument over the shapes of South African and New Zealand girls took place. The 'South Afs' were beyond a doubt the most exhilarating colleagues the Kiwis had so far met.

On 5 June [18 Battalion](#), as Corporal Dick [Bishop](#) ¹ recalls, was 'brought back to earth with a thud & given 2 hours drill'. Probably this was intended to knock some of the rust off its parade-ground technique for the [Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser](#), who next morning addressed the assembled remnants of [4 Brigade](#). 'According to him,' says Bishop, 'we are real heroes and he certainly put across a great line. He told us that he would do his very best to see that we had adequate air support next time we went into action and it's to be hoped he succeeds.' It was to be hoped, indeed!

But on the following day (7 June) nobody thought any more about such remote things as action or air support, for nearly everybody in the battalion drew pay and went off on a week's special 'survivors' leave'. Some went no farther than [Cairo](#) and revelled in its manifold luxuries; some, braving the air raids, went to [Alexandria](#) to escape the June heat and spend their time swimming; those with a taste for sightseeing went on tours to [Palestine](#), or to [Luxor](#) and Aswan. For that week the battalion's lines were all but deserted. Then the holiday-makers came back and real training began.

The 16th June might be regarded as the birthday of the new [18 Battalion](#)—that day more than 400 reinforcements arrived, and the old hands found themselves outnumbered. Some of the reinforcements were old members returned to the fold, but not many, and for the first time the unit numbered a sprinkling of South Islanders in its ranks. Among the officers was an old friend of HQ Company, Major Peart, who took temporary command of the battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Gray being away on special duty for three months.

The new [18 Battalion](#) did not spring ready-made into being without birth pangs and growing pains. At first some of the old hands were, naturally, apt to be a bit

cliquey, and to treat the reinforcements with some reserve. The barriers crumbled quickly, however, and by the time the unit next went into action, four months later, a stranger would never have picked the 'originals' from the reinforcements.

The programme of work from mid-June (mornings only) was not too strenuous. It couldn't be made very exacting in [Helwan](#) in June; it goes without saying that it was fiendishly hot, and the flies were abominable. The killing programme of route-marching of 1940 was not repeated, but there were two night marches a week, hard enough on the system even in the comparative cool of the evenings. On the off nights there was the good old [NAAFI](#) canteen well stocked with beer, and the picture theatre was right next door. You could still get Friday or Saturday evening leave if you wanted it. If you wished to explore farther afield, there were day trips to places like [Fayoum](#) and the Saqqara pyramids. And for a lucky few (about thirty-five at a time) there was seven days' leave; this was for men who had been in [Egypt](#) for over six months, and was quite separate from the [Crete](#) survivors' leave.

This routine went on for two months, with the emphasis always on weapon training, more and more of it. Little variety can be instilled into weapon training, and interest and attention are apt to get a bit perfunctory after a while. But there was small relief, except air defence duties (an air raid on [Cairo](#) in late July was faintly audible at [Helwan](#)), route marches, one or two company manoeuvres towards the end of July, and the occasional ceremonial parade.

These provided a few minor highlights. There was the church parade on 22 June, when Bishop Gerard ² (the New Zealand Senior Chaplain) conducted a memorial service for those killed in [Crete](#). Two days later there was an inspection by King George of [Greece](#), who paid the battalion a special visit to pin ribbons on those who had escorted him out of [Crete](#). ³ Then early in August there was a farewell brigade parade for Brigadier Puttick, and a marathon for [Brigadier Inglis](#), who kept [18 Battalion](#) on parade for three hours and was then sharply critical of its turnout. Somewhere in the ranks the remark was heard that this was a 'fighting unit, not a bloody spit-and-polish outfit'.

These two months, June to August, saw the New Zealand units gradually re-equipped. First, summer clothes (including ' [Bombay](#) bloomers') and the indispensable parts of a soldier's kit, big packs and haversacks, web equipment and

groundsheet, and cooking gear; then, as they came to hand, more Bren and Tommy guns, mortars, tools. The first few Brens (shades of Hopuhopu!) were kept in the quartermaster's store and lent out to the companies only for training.

Transport was scarcer still. At first the battalion had none, and daily needs were supplied by ASC trucks. In due course a few motor-bikes arrived, and then, gradually, new vehicles. Lovely new 3-ton and 15-cwt Fords and Chevrolets, fitted with the four-wheel drive that is essential for desert work— though some of the luckier of these trucks survived to give faithful service in the gluey mud of [Italy](#) more than two years later. One carrier reached the battalion in late July, and the other nine at the end of August.

The 'sigs' were starved for gear at first, but finally it arrived— telephones and line equipment, and (for the first time) wireless sets for use between Battalion Headquarters and the companies. These were No. 18 sets, carried on the operator's back, clumsy to lug round but simple in operation, with a working range of two to three miles. In Africa and [Italy](#) they were to prove their worth many times over.

On 14 August units of [4 Brigade](#) handed in base kits preparatory to leaving [Helwan](#) for the Combined Training Centre at [Kabrit](#), on the [Little Bitter Lake](#), to practise beach landings in assault landing craft from an invasion ship.

Everyone had been looking forward to this. Nearly all of the Division was already beside the [Suez Canal](#), and reported to be having an interesting time, with this novel type of training, less red tape than was thought necessary in [Helwan](#), and lots of good salt water to get into and dodge the heat. Rumour had it that the combined training was in preparation for a return visit to [Greece](#) or [Crete](#), but North Africa was more likely, for the enemy had pushed forward into [Egypt](#) and was gathering for a further advance.

On the evening of 16 August [18 Battalion](#) left [Helwan](#) with pleasant anticipation, hardly even spoilt by having to carry its gear the best part of four miles to the railway. The trip was painfully slow, and there was the usual epidemic of aches and pains after a night in uncomfortable carriages, but at 10 a.m. next day [4 Brigade](#) reached [Kabrit](#) to be met by trucks and taken to a new home, just vacated by [5 Brigade](#).

The training at [Kabrit](#) (even though interspersed with less popular items such as route-marching, digging and wiring) was fully up to expectations. The Combined Training Centre at Kabrit Point, two miles from camp, was equipped with a 9000-ton invasion ship (the [Glenroy](#)), a number of powered landing craft, and an assortment of other little ships and big rowing boats. The units practised first by companies on dummy landing craft known locally as 'mock-ups', then on the craft themselves. In the second week the battalions went on to practise as self-contained units, with Vickers and anti-tank guns and medical detachments all complete. One day was spent landing on a beach near [Kabrit](#) from rowing boats and launches towed by a Canal tug, and later in the week the battalion went aboard the [Glenroy](#) for a 24-hour cruise which included two landings (one at night) from the assault craft. Finally there was a landing by the whole brigade, with all weapons and equipment, attached artillery and a few carriers, on the eastern shore of the [Great Bitter Lake](#). All this was most interesting, an enormous improvement on 'square-bashing' at [Helwan](#).

Apart from the training, living conditions were only middling. The camp was reasonably well appointed, with water laid on and a picture theatre in the lines, but the flies and mosquitoes were damnable, and the [Kabrit](#) dust had a penetrating quality above that of any other dust. You couldn't get away from the place much, as (apart from the handfuls of men still going off on seven days' leave or for a few days at the divisional change-of-air camp) there was leave only on Sundays, for limited numbers, to [Suez](#) and [Ismailia](#), both involving long hot truck rides. Even the swimming was not really good, because the lake was shallow for a long way out, with a soft muddy bottom, and a cut or scratch from a shell or sharp stone was all too apt to turn septic. On top of these disadvantages, the local Wogs had theft down to a fine art, and rifles, equipment and personal gear vanished like magic from the lines. So, after three and a half weeks of [Kabrit](#), the news of a move away from the Canal was greeted with some satisfaction, mixed with dismay when the men heard their destination.

The rebirth of the New Zealand Division was now almost complete. Losses in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) had been made good, both in men and equipment, and reinforcements had been well absorbed into their units. The Division was more completely mechanised than ever. All that remained was to polish it up as a fast-moving, self-contained force probably soon to operate in the vast desert spaces of

Libya. So early in September the Division began a gradual move away from **Helwan** and the Canal, back to its old 1940 stamping ground, the **Baggush Box**, to train in the finer points of desert lore.

The prospect of going back to dirty, sandstormy **Baggush** failed to raise a cheer. Those who hadn't been there heard luridly embroidered tales from those who had, tales of the dust and the digging and the boredom. **Baggush's** only virtue seemed to be that it was several hundred miles nearer the enemy.

On 15 September (the transport had left two days previously) the battalion had an early morning march of a few miles to the huge ordnance camp at **Geneifa**, where it was herded on to the train for the 24-hour ride to **Baggush**. This trip for the first time gave some idea of the immense build-up of stores pouring into **Egypt**—beside the railway there were other camps which were nothing but giant dumps, chock-a-block with everything from tanks to toilet paper, from shells to shirts. If there wasn't some trouble brewing up in **Libya**, with all this stuff streaming into the country, there ought to be.

But nothing could have been much more peaceful than the **Baggush** scene; even the military convoys moving ceaselessly up and down the main road, and the planes (Hurricanes and Tomahawks) buzzing back and forth on patrol from nearby fields, could not remove the sense of remoteness that always seemed to hang over the desert and the **Mediterranean** coast. This was all the more pronounced because the Box had now gone underground. The tent settlements that had flourished in 1940 had disappeared, replaced by dugouts hewn from the rock, laboriously sandbagged up, most of them roofed with whatever scraps of material the architects could 'pinch'. Here and there weapon pits were still open to the sky, and in front of them tired-looking wire entanglements or the ominous single wire that denotes a minefield; but mostly it was only the vehicles that showed above ground to give evidence of occupation— especially on windy days, when everyone went down under if possible, to dodge some part of the flying dust.

The battalion went straight into the eastern sector of the Box quite near the coast and its 1940 camp site, and felt reasonably happy with this. But not for long. On the 18th it was rudely uprooted and transplanted to a much less desirable locality on the western side of the Box, a good two miles from the sea and horribly exposed.

'This,' said one man, 'is definitely the worst piece of desert we have yet been camped in.... The immediate environs of the cookhouse are particularly ghastly with dust lying inches deep and just waiting to be blown hither and yon by the veriest puff of wind.' The companies were scattered over a square mile of country, cut halfway by a cliff ('escarpment' in desert language); on top of this were B and C Companies, with the rest at the bottom.

The training during the battalion's seven weeks in this dust bath, luckily, was interesting and enjoyable, and had the great virtue of taking it away from camp for much of the time. The essence of desert fighting is ability to move swiftly and to be in the right spot at the right time; so [18 Battalion](#) practised and practised desert navigation, the art of finding its way across the featureless wastes by compass, or at night by the Pole star, or in the daytime by the sun compass (a sort of sundial fixed to the mudguard of a truck). Sometimes the battalion rode out to these exercises in comfort, while the drivers practised 'desert formation', a system specially adopted for the wide open spaces, all the transport moving in neat, regular parallel columns, with carriers and anti-tank guns in front and on the flanks making a screen for the more vulnerable 'soft-skinned' vehicles in the middle. At other times the companies marched a dozen or so miles inland from camp, an exacting distance over the rough stones, and took up practice positions or made night laagers, or simply followed their leaders as they wrestled with the complications of a three- or four-day compass march. These marches, by a strange coincidence, often seemed to bring the unit out to the coast road at [Daba](#), away to the east of [Baggush](#), where there were hot showers. Occasionally a platoon or company got lost, and then there was a certain amount of 'slinging off' by everyone else, but it all went to show how necessary this training was, particularly where night moves were concerned. These were nightmares for the drivers, groping their unlighted way over bumps and boulders, and also for the passengers, jolted and shaken from side to side until their joints felt loose. But this was what they had to expect in action, and it was no good growling about it.

The other big item in the syllabus was training with tanks. It had been emphasised in training directives that in the next scrap there would be tanks, hundreds of tanks, on both sides. You can't learn all about tanks until you have actually been in action both with and against them; but [18 Battalion](#) was given a

brief introduction to them. How to recognise your own and enemy tanks; how to co-operate with infantry tanks (I tanks for short) in an attack; what enemy tanks could and couldn't do, and how to deal with them. The officers and NCOs visited an armoured squadron at [Garawla](#) to look over the cruiser tanks that then comprised the main British striking force in the desert. One officer went to live for a week with 44 Royal Tank Regiment, two others went off on a course at the Royal Armoured Corps depot, and tank officers came to live with the battalion for a while. As if to drive home the lessons, [18 Battalion](#) from its camp could see trainloads of tanks and carriers heading away up westward towards the battlefield.

It must be admitted that a lot of the training with tanks was wildly optimistic, especially the bits about lying low in your slit trench while enemy tanks passed over you and then popping up and bowling them out with home-made bombs. Even in the safety of [Baggush](#) most men felt that there would be no future in that. The co-operation with our own tanks, too, was very nice in theory, but it didn't always work out that way, as the New Zealand Division was to find out at the end of November. Detailed infantry-tank training, mutual support, and intercommunication were hardly thought of in 1941—what co-operation there was was a hit-and-miss, affair. The capacity of infantry and tanks to work together was, it would be unjust to say taken for granted, but certainly overestimated, and we had to learn the hard way.

The training, though vigorous, was a bit sporadic, and sometimes left [18 Battalion](#) in camp with nothing much to do except a little guard duty on the railway, or maintenance of the Box defences. [Divisional Headquarters](#), remembering the boredom that had taken a lot of the ginger out of the work at [Baggush](#) in 1940, had tried with some success to see that the same thing didn't happen again. This time [Cairo](#) newspapers were brought up daily by air, and the recently established NZEF Times kept the men abreast of home and divisional news. Better still, a mobile cinema toured the units, coming round every fortnight or so. This later came to be an accepted practice in the Division, but in those days it was revolutionary, and immensely popular. Best of all, the change-of-air leave (which had stopped when the units left the Canal) began again in mid-October. As usual, this was for comparatively few people. Most of the rest, whenever they had free time, headed for the coast for a swim or a spot of gelignite fishing, a highly illegal sport back in New Zealand, but perfectly in order in the free-and-easy atmosphere of the 'blue'. By this

simple means men regularly supplied themselves with a welcome change of diet.

The food at [Baggush](#), as was inevitable away from the base camps, was a bit uninteresting, but there was no shortage. On 3 October, the second anniversary of [18 Battalion's](#) entry into camp, there was a magnificent dinner, followed by a party which was to become a byword in the unit. There was obviously no shortage of beer or more fiery liquors. Next morning a dummy wooden tank made by the pioneers for target practice was found high and dry on the roof of the orderly room, and quite a number were feeling decidedly uninterested in the day's programme.

There was one bad shortage, and that was water. The unit had been short of water before, but only for a few hours at a time. Now here at [Baggush](#), for the first time, water was rationed strictly over a long period, and in October the supply was cut still further to a gallon a day for each man, of which the man himself got a bottleful. This naturally caused some growling, but nobody could do anything about it, and the growls gradually died away as the men became used to husbanding their supply. Later everybody could exist quite happily on a water bottle a day (or less), and got quite expert at having a bath in half a mugful. It was just a matter of getting acclimatised.

From 14 to 16 October the training reached its peak in a full-scale brigade manoeuvre, a night move to an assembly area, an attack under live shellfire, and consolidation on two 'enemy' positions. The battalion, as reserve unit throughout this show, didn't see much of it or know much of what was going on, except for the mortar platoon, which was attached in turn to each forward battalion. The mortar boys were very pleased at the prospect of showing what they could do in action; but both times the exercise was called off when they had got only one or two rounds away. The finer points of the exercise, such as the co-ordination of a brigade in action, the timing of moves, the keeping of direction at night over rough routes lit only by dim lanterns widely spaced, the correct marshalling of a unit in an assembly area, were all lost on the men, whose opinion for the most part was that these big shows were apt to be 'fizzers'; you just tore round here and there without knowing why, frenziedly dug slit trenches whenever you stopped, then sat for a long time waiting for something else to happen.

It was about this time that two of the unit 'rebels', Privates Doug McQuarrie ⁴

(one of those who had escaped from a prison cage on [Crete](#) and crossed the [Mediterranean](#) in a small boat with a few other bold fugitives) and Cassidy Brown,⁵ deciding that they had had enough sham warfare when the real thing was not so very far away, made history by going aboard a ship on the [Matruh- Tobruk](#) supply run, and at [Tobruk](#) played a vigorous part in the unloading of stores under shellfire and air attack. A most illegal proceeding this, frowned on by those in authority, who at the same time probably felt a certain envy at not being able to do the same themselves. In the end no official action was taken against the pair, but the word went round that nobody else had better try the same stunt.

What little training there was in late October and the first few days of November was rather an anti-climax. More desert navigation; more night moves; wire obstacles; attacking and defending positions; as much range firing as possible, on a nice little range set up by the pioneers in the safety of a deep wadi. But these weren't strenuous days for anybody. The effects of the battalion's desert training were now obvious. Convoy drill was better than ever before, with all the fiddly details automatically attended to and done right. It had some idea how to act as a self-contained force with supporting arms attached. It 'had sand in its ears', which means that it could cope with desert conditions which would baffle a raw unit. It was trained along with the rest of the New Zealand Division for the mobile, mixed-up desert war which is like no other type of warfare.

Then, on 12 November 1941, [4 Brigade](#) left [Baggush](#) and headed for the battle.

Like all operational moves, this was a strict secret, and as usual nobody was fooled. The Division was to assemble in the desert south of [Mersa Matruh](#), ostensibly on manoeuvres; but who could have failed to grasp the meaning of all the preparations that had been going on, the differences between the make-believe and the real? The air had been sizzling with excitement for weeks. Nearly half of the battalion's officers had been up to have a look at the battlefront. Only the exalted few knew just where the Division was going, though there were lots of rumours, the most popular being that the South Africans were going to make a push in [Libya](#) with the Kiwis in support. Maps that seemed to cover about half of North [Africa](#) had been handed out to units. Last-minute issues of kit had been made, including winter woollies, and shortages had all been made up. And on 11 November the first LOB⁶ camp was established at [Baggush](#), under the second-in-command, Major [McGregor](#).⁷

The purpose of such a camp is to form a nucleus for a new unit if the existing one is wiped out—though of course it is always unthinkable that such a thing might ever happen to your unit. But you wouldn't go to the trouble of establishing an LOB camp just for a manoeuvre, would you? No, [18 Battalion](#) was off into it all right this time.

And the battalion was leaving behind it the man who had done more than any other to make it what it was. On 8 November Lieutenant-Colonel Gray, very much against his will, was sent off to hospital, and the reins were now in Lieutenant-Colonel Peart's hands. Gray left with the forcibly expressed intention of being back in time to lead [18 Battalion](#) into action, but the coming campaign was long past and done with before he saw the unit again.

The personality of John Gray had been the paramount influence in [18 Battalion](#) from its first day, and his imprint lingered in the unit long after he was gone. He couldn't help playing the star part—his rare drive and leadership were unquestioned. Twice he was midwife to the battalion. In the early days he drove his officers to breaking point, bullied his battalion and shouted at it, sometimes led it into trouble. Very few men did he ever recommend for decorations—he expected superhuman deeds as a matter of course, and such was his personal force and example that those deeds were done. Fierce and infectious was Gray's pride in [18 Battalion](#).

After Crete the guiding hand, though just as firm, was more tolerant. Out of those dark days sprang a new, better relationship, a greater mutual respect between Gray and his battalion. 'He'd found [18 Battalion](#),' said one subaltern, 'to be as good as the other units; we'd learnt to admire his bravery.' The same men who had cursed him when he marched them off their feet at [Maadi](#) in 1940 were his great admirers after [Galatas](#) and the [Sfakia](#) trek. Nobody who was there will ever forget his 'Remember, you're the [18th](#)!' coming when things were at their blackest, encouraging worn-out men to rise above their weariness.

¹ [Sgt R. T. Bishop](#); [Auckland](#); born Hampden, 16 Nov 1908; herd tester; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

² [Rt. Rev. G. V. Gerard](#), CBE, MC, m.i.d., Rotherham, [England](#); born Christchurch, 24 Nov 1898; Lt, The Buffs 1918-19 (MC); SCF, [2 NZEF](#), May

1940-Nov 1941; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; repatriated Apr 1943; SCF, 2 NZEF (IP), Apr-Dec 1944.

³ 2 Lt Ryan was awarded the Order of King George I and other members of the escort received gold, silver and bronze medals of the same order.

⁴ Pte D.N. McQuarrie, MM; born NZ 12 Jun 1918; timberyard hand; wounded 25 May 1941; escaped Jul 1941; died of wounds 2 Dec 1941.

⁵ Cpl I.N .Brown; born NZ 9 Jan 1914; labourer and shearer; wounded May 1941; killed in action 23 Jul 1944.

⁶ Left out of battle.

⁷ Maj R. R. McGregor, ED, m.i.d.; born Wellington, 22 Jun 1893; company director; died Rotorua, 12 Apr 1954.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 13 – ATTACK IN THE DESERT

CHAPTER 13

Attack in the Desert

The offensive to be launched by the brand-new **Eighth Army** in the **Libyan Desert** had one simple but sweeping main aim, to chase the enemy out of **Cyrenaica**. For more than two months material had been piling up and men had been training, and now everything was nearly ready. It was important that the balloon should go up soon, because there were signs that the enemy intended an offensive too.

The position in the desert was now more or less static. In general the Axis forces were in **Libya** and the British in **Egypt**; but at the coast end of the frontier, near **Bardia**, the enemy possessed a small slice of **Egypt** stretching east from **Sollum** to **Halfaya Pass** and south to **Sidi Omar**, 23 miles inland. In **Libya** the British clung to **Tobruk**, isolated and hard pressed by the encircling enemy. Most of the Germans and Italians were within 25 miles of the coast; south of this was a vast desert, empty but for a few oasis garrisons and some 'recce units' snooping round the countryside.

Eighth Army planned first of all to come to grips with the main force of the enemy, destroy his armour and relieve- **Tobruk**. To this end the British armoured corps (**30 Corps**) was to make one of those 'left hooks' which later became the classical British move in North Africa, thrusting through the desert well inland, then swinging northwards towards **Tobruk**.

When the time was ripe most of **13 Corps** (New Zealand Division, 4 Indian Division, and I Army Tank Brigade) would cross the frontier south of **Sidi Omar** and advance north between **Tobruk** and **Bardia** on a minor left hook, to protect **30 Corps'** supply line and cut off the enemy on the frontier. Fourth Indian Division was to attack positions known as the 'Omars' at the south end of the enemy line, keep the enemy occupied and prevent interference with the New Zealand Division, which was to take a wider swing, push nearly 50 miles north, and cut the main coast road west of **Bardia**. The westernmost New Zealand brigade might later be required to carry on towards **Tobruk** to help **30 Corps**.

The rush and bustle of last-minute preparations was not so pronounced this time as usual. For once **18 Battalion** had several days' warning of the move. On 8 November the men were given battledress and an extra blanket; the 10th and 11th

the battalion spent getting ready, distributing three days' food and water to every truck, completing its full ammunition supply, 'topping up' petrol and oil. The morning of 12 November was taken fairly leisurely. The trucks were packed by 10 a.m., and at midday, after an early lunch, the convoy headed west along the main road. From [Mersa Matruh](#) the route led south along the desert road towards [Siwa](#), and then west again. The trucks bounced over a dozen miles of rough stones and dust before reaching their allotted place in the north-west corner of the divisional assembly area. It was 8 p.m. before the convoy arrived.

It would be natural to think of an assembly area as a mass of vehicles, troops and guns, all together in a compact group. But not so in the Egyptian desert. The Division was all together in a group, but far from a compact one—it covered nearly 100 square miles, and some units could see their neighbours only dimly, if at all. The trucks were widely dispersed, and round them the desert was pimped with 'bivvy' tents covering the narrow 'slitties' which for a day or two were all that the men could call home.

Here [18 Battalion](#) spent two slightly fretful days lying in the sun, wishing that it knew what was going on. The men were inclined to grudge time spent idly at this stage. They were looking forward to going into battle on equal terms with Jerry, and, they hoped, giving him one in the eye to make up for [Greece](#) and [Crete](#). Most of the time British planes were overhead, travelling west towards the battle, holding out hopes that this time the [Luftwaffe](#) would not have things all its own way. So when the time came for the Division to move off again on 15 November everyone was eager to get cracking.

All day they travelled due west over stones and scrub. 'The Division moving forward on the broad expanse of desert plain,' said one [18 Battalion](#) man, 'is a real marvellous sight;



Battalion Headquarters on Belhamed, Lt-Col Peart with microphone

Battalion Headquarters on Belhamed, Lt-Col Peart with microphone

Section post, Belhamed



Section post, Belhamed



18 Battalion Headquarters in the escarpment below Belhamed

18 Battalion Headquarters in the escarpment below Belhamed

'Fishing' in the Orontes



'Fishing' in the **Orontes**



Route march in the Syrian hills

Route march in the Syrian hills



Alamein line—after the
Stukas left

Alamein line—after the Stukas left



B Company platoon post, Alamein line

B Company platoon post, Alamein line

Armoured training at Maadi—Gunnery class



Armoured training at Maadi—Gunnery class

trucks on the left, right, front and rear, as far as the eye can see, just rolling steadily forward.' For the moment there was no hurry, so for the sake of the springs and tyres the pace was kept slow. It was pitch dark when the battalion reached its night's bivvy area, and was directed in by the advance party which had gone on ahead the previous day.

The Division was now south of [Sidi Barrani](#), only some 55 miles from the frontier. There were rumours that enemy tanks were within striking distance, and there were counter-rumours that the enemy was pulling out and that the Division, once it got going, wouldn't stop before [Benghazi](#). Nobody was unhappy either way. The whole division, [18 Battalion](#) not least, had its tail up and was ready to tackle

anything in the way of Jerries. As for the 'Ities', well, they just weren't worth worrying about. ¹

Fifty-five miles sounds only a step in terms of peacetime motoring, but the Division took three bites at it. After 15 November the moves were all at night, with the pace dead slow, only four miles in the hour. The drill was: leave after dark (about 7 p.m.), grope your way along the dim line of green lamps until midnight or 1 a.m., then stop and sleep till daybreak, then get the trucks dispersed and slitties dug, pull the heavy camouflage nets over the trucks, set up ack-ack Bren guns, and make yourself as much like part of the landscape as possible for the day. The Division was now on a complete battle footing, no lights or smoking at night, stand-to periods morning and evening. What cooking there was (the rations were mainly bully beef and biscuits) was nearly all done in platoons over open petrol fires, and of course only in the daytime.

The camouflage nets were new. These huge, wide-mesh cord nets, dark in colour and threaded with irregular strips of scrim and cloth, did not claim to confer invisibility, but, by softening the shadows and blurring the outlines, they made vehicles harder to spot from above. They had other uses, too— as the sun rose higher they provided welcome shade and relief from the glare (though they weren't proof against the fine swirling dust), and one morning, after a heavy dew, they did duty as impromptu shelters under which lines of blankets were hung to dry.

Under the conditions of the move, 25 miles a night was not bad going, and every night some vehicles got lost, or had punctures, or broke springs. During the second night move there were thunderstorms away to the north; no rain, but vivid lightning displays that spread strange shadows across the desert and made it fatally easy for drivers to veer off course. Next morning, for the first time, [18 Battalion](#) heard a distant growling away to the north-west, quite distinct from the night's thunder. For most of the battalion it was the first sound of guns in action. But it was still nothing but a sound, except for half a dozen carriers, which for two or three mornings escorted artillery observation officers out towards the fighting. No shells actually fell near them, but they could clearly see the bursts and smoke of gunfire on the enemy's positions at Sidi [Omar](#).

The 18th November was D-day for the [Eighth Army](#)'s attack, and at 9 p.m. [18](#)

Battalion at last crossed the frontier. The crossing was unexciting—earlier in the day sappers had cut a great gap in the frontier barbed-wire fence, and the convoy passed through quietly and quickly. After being keyed up to their first invasion of enemy territory the men felt that the reality was a bit of a flop. 'The first thrill...soon died away,' said one. 'Except for ourselves there wasn't a soul to be seen and the country was just the same barren desert....' The gunfire was nearer, but not very near yet. It was the coldest night since **Greece**; men wrapped themselves up in greatcoats and scarves and huddled together on the trucks, and still shivered.

Next day, the first on Italian soil (or rather sand), was equally disappointing, grey and dismal, causing a spate of outspoken criticism of everything Italian. At first it promised to be a repetition of the last three days, with nothing to do, but later it turned out reasonably eventful. The YMCA truck arrived with a supply of canteen goods, and relieved a threatened tobacco shortage. Soon after lunch, as a relief from the endless streams of British planes still patrolling overhead, appeared a handful of cheeky Messerschmitts; they did not attack **18 Battalion**, but the men could see and hear them strafing some unfortunate transport a mile or two away. The ack-ack Brens opened up at them, and some of the carriers had a crack with their guns, but nobody could see any results, for the planes were over and away too fast.

This excitement had barely died away when the battalion had to be up and doing at short notice, pack its trucks and race away north-west across the desert. It was only a short move of 11 miles and was over in an hour, but it was in the right direction—the unit stopped much nearer the gunfire. All that night the rumbling went on, and those who woke during the night could see flares going up on the horizon ahead.

This sudden move was to pull up level with 4 Indian Division, which had made good progress that morning against very little opposition. Not far away to the north-west the nearest British armoured formation (4 Armoured Brigade) had clashed with the German **21 Panzer Division** that afternoon, and had kept possession of the battlefield after a drawn battle. The New Zealand Division was now lying ready to push north on its original plan of cutting the coast road, with **4 Brigade** as its spearhead.

But this promising move led to nothing better in the meantime. All day on 20

November the Kiwis champed at the bit, waiting in vain for orders to push on. From time to time sounds of battle came down from the north, where both 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions were spending the day in inconclusive actions against 4 Armoured Brigade. Rumours flew—at one stage the Indians had been roughly handled and the Kiwis would have to go to their rescue; at another there were 200 enemy tanks heading straight for 4 Brigade, a yarn which caused the dirt to fly as men hurriedly dug their trenches a little deeper. But no tanks appeared. The only sign of the enemy all day was one lone bomber which came over at breakfast time, ran into a whole skyful of Hurricanes, swung round smartly and made off home, helped along by cheers from 18 Battalion just below.

By next morning the general situation had changed. The German armour had gone, hurrying west to deal with 30 Corps' dangerous thrust towards Tobruk, and everything was quiet up north. During the morning 13 Corps was ordered to carry on with its northward push. This news, when it penetrated down to the lower levels, was met with glad approval. The enemy, it seemed, was on the run, and the Division was going to follow up and be in at the kill. It was a keen, optimistic, fighting fit division that packed its trucks, oiled its weapons, swallowed a hasty lunch, and made ready to set out.

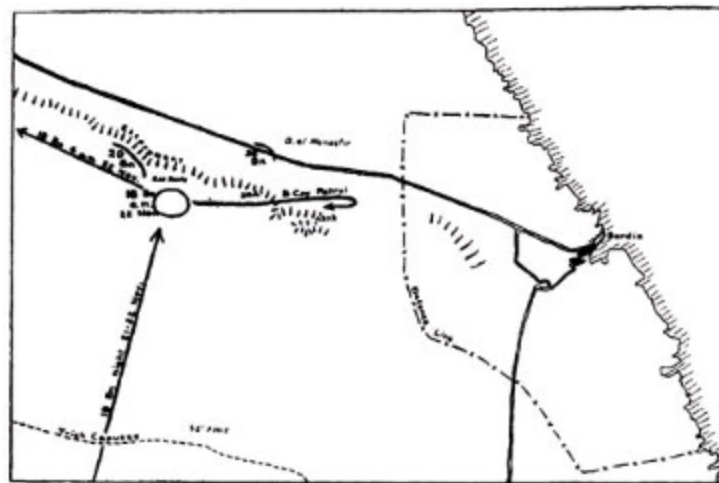
The brigades were to advance at first along the same axis, then to deploy something like a flower unfolding— 5 Brigade, in the lead, was to wheel to the right and tackle the enemy in the frontier forts; then 4 Brigade was to push straight through, cut the coast road eight miles west of Bardia, and take a firm grip of the escarpment overlooking that road; last would come 6 Brigade, which would swing west and eventually move on to support 30 Corps near Tobruk.

It was 1.30 p.m. on 21 November when 4 Brigade moved northwards on its 33-mile run to the escarpment west of Bardia—it was nearly daylight on the 22nd when it arrived. Even during the afternoon the brigade couldn't get into top gear, as 5 Brigade, just in front, was manoeuvring for its right wheel; to the men, not knowing what was happening ahead, the pace was maddeningly slow, and harsh, unjustified things were said about the incompetence of those responsible. But after dark the difficulties really began.

Desert navigation on a pitch black moonless night is hard enough in itself. But

on top of this, recent rain had turned stretches of normally dry ground into swamp. At 7 p.m. **18 Battalion** struck trouble somewhere near the **Trigh Capuzzo**

(a wide east-west desert track). Many of the trucks stuck in soft slush, and either fought their way out or were ignominiously dragged out by the carriers or some nearby tanks. Others, in dodging the worst parts, lost their place in the convoy; it took several hours to sort it out again, and fresh patches of marsh kept cropping up to cause more confusion. Later in the night the unit struck another snag, a half-finished anti-tank ditch crossing the line of advance where no ditch should have been. Here again most of the trucks found themselves floundering in the mud, and again the unit's workhorses, the carriers, turned to and toiled to haul them out. D Company, travelling in the rear, was lucky enough to find a way round to the right of the mud, and a small procession of other vehicles followed round the same way and reached firm ground beyond the ditch. They were only about eight miles from the objective now, and the trucks moved on in any sort of order, assembled and formed up again as best they could a little distance ahead. Everybody was haggard with the night's exertions with shoulder and shovel, sleepless except for fitful dozing between halts, and achingly hungry, for there had been



18 BN AT BARDIA, 22 NOVEMBER 1941

Scale 0 1 2 3 4 Miles

18 Bn at Bardia, 22 November 1941

no meal the evening before. A quick breakfast was now thrown together and eaten wolfishly, but there was no chance of sleep. Within an hour **18 Battalion** was on the move, sorting itself out into desert formation, pushing on towards the escarpment in the first light of dawn.

The unit halted a good mile short of the escarpment, too far back to enjoy the turmoil caused by supporting artillery among German supply troops camped on the plain below; but in any case it would probably have paid little attention, for it was occupied with an interesting diversion of its own, nothing less than a German ordnance depot and transport repair park handed to it on a plate. This was first discovered just after dawn by the carrier platoon, as recounted by Corporal Dick Bishop:

Our section moved out with Capt. [Atchley](#)² of the artillery. We stopped to boil up a few hundred yards out and found as the light improved, that we were right alongside a recently vacated (as we thought) German camp. While we were boiling up Capt. Atchley wandered off...and walked right into a small party of Huns who promptly grabbed him and made off. By the time we set out to look for him he was well away and there was not a Hun in sight. We had noticed dozens of them standing about at the other end of the camp and could easily have rounded up a hundred or more of them. We did at any rate get a certain amount of loot and spent an hour or two rummaging through the packs and bivvie tents.

Almost simultaneously the rifle companies, having debussed and moved forward to dig in, found the camp right on the spot where they were to go, and hastened up to investigate just as the Jerries, coming to panic-stricken life, evacuated the place in cars and trucks, some in pyjamas, some half dressed, leaving everything behind, including their hot breakfast stew. Apart from a few sluggards, no prisoners were taken, but there were more stores than [18 Battalion](#) could ever hope to carry away. This was the first time the unit had ever got in among the loot to any extent, and some of the boys overdid it a bit, carrying off heavy articles such as typewriters that had to be discarded later.

Twentieth Battalion was now lining the escarpment on [18 Battalion's](#) left, with a company across the main road down below. There seemed little serious opposition on the immediate front. Eighteenth Battalion was directed to stay where it was, but was to send a strong patrol to clean up a pocket of Germans thought to be holding the escarpment at Point 216 (two miles east), and to reconnoitre farther on towards [Bardia](#).

At 8 a.m. B Company, plus a section of carriers, rode out east with orders to go

ahead till fired on, then to keep up the advance on foot. It was impossible to drive fast, as the ground was rough and cut with little wadis running down to the escarpment, but there was nobody at Point 216, and 10 Platoon descended the escarpment and pushed on towards the wire defences of [Bardia](#). Surprisingly, even here it was not fired at; the platoon took a good look at the defences from 200 yards away, and reported back that there were outposts every two chains behind the wire and a working party out in front. Later in the day B Company had a few shells tossed at it, but returned intact to the battalion just in time to join the next move.

Shortly after B Company had left, the other company and platoon commanders also went out to 'recce' routes to [Bardia](#), on orders from [Brigadier Inglis](#), who planned a quick attack on the position. The 'recce' parties went to a point where they could overlook the [Bardia](#) defences, but came under fire, and got back to find that their labour had been wasted, as there would be no attack after all. The general feeling among the officers who had been forward was one of great relief; those defences had looked pretty formidable, and the idea of a frontal attack on them had not been at all attractive.

Apart from these excursions the battalion spent the day idly, feeling that the party had gone flat after a promising opening. The artillery kept on banging away, and later in the day return fire came from enemy guns somewhere away to the north-east; and the men could hear interesting noises down below the escarpment, where 20 Battalion had some lively exchanges with a German rearguard. Eighteenth Battalion, well back from the cliff top, could take no direct part in this activity, but could only wait for something to happen. If this was desert warfare, thought [18 Battalion](#), there was not much to it. Some of the boys were even kicking a football about. For the first time since the battalion had entered [Libya](#) there weren't many planes to be seen, only an odd few, both British and German, overhead from time to time.

It was after 3.30 p.m. before anything happened, and then it was most unexpected—orders from [4 Brigade](#) to move westwards at once. Westwards, right away from [Bardia](#), which had so far been the focus of attention. There was no time to speculate on the meaning of this about-face. Orders flew out to companies, men snapped out of their afternoon lethargy, and by 4 p.m. the battalion was on its way.

What had happened was this: **6 Brigade**, to the west of **4 Brigade**, had had a sudden call westwards to **Sidi Rezegh**, south-east of **Tobruk**, where advance troops of **30 Corps** were in serious difficulties now that the German armour had moved across. Sixth Brigade had to move that night straight for the danger area, disregarding any enemy it might meet on the way. **Major-General Freyberg** then ordered **4 Brigade** to back up **6 Brigade**, clearing out opposition as it went, particularly at **Gambut**, halfway between **Bardia** and **Tobruk**, where the **Luftwaffe** was still using a landing ground. This meant that the attack on **Bardia** had to be shelved, but **20 Battalion** was to stay meanwhile and keep an eye on the **Bardia** defences, and **5 Brigade** also was to remain at the frontier.

To **Gambut**, as the crow flies, was 26 miles, but any self-respecting crow would fly much faster than a convoy could make its way across the broken ground on top of that escarpment. That afternoon **18 Battalion**, jolting along behind **19 Battalion**, covered ten miles (half of them in the dark), then stopped for the night, not yet knowing what it was to do next day.

Anyone suddenly transported to **18 Battalion's** laager at daybreak on 23 November would have been hard to convince that the unit was in the middle of a bold advance through enemy territory. Everything was quiet, hardly another vehicle in sight except **19 Battalion** away on the western horizon, not even a plane anywhere except a crashed British bomber. The move did not begin again immediately; there was time to have a leisurely breakfast, during which the day's orders arrived, closely followed by two heartening squadrons of British Matilda tanks (**44 Royal Tank Regiment**) and a squadron of Divisional Cavalry's light tanks. Three-quarters of an hour later **18 Battalion** moved off, now leading **4 Brigade**, going into action for the first time behind an armoured screen.

The column really looked the part now. First a line of light tanks, then one of big, businesslike Matildas, then the battalion carriers scurrying round the desert like terriers, then more Matildas preceding the lorries which carried C and A Companies. Battalion Headquarters was in the middle of the rifle companies, followed by B, D, and the rest of HQ Company. The battalion was to make straight for **Gambut** airfield, occupy it and consolidate there, while other troops pushed north from it and cut the coast road. Halt, said the operation order, only when forced. C and A were to be the

assaulting companies, going forward on foot if necessary to capture the airfield, after which the rest would come up.

Not far from the starting point the force took a winding track down an escarpment (lower and less steep than farther east) and set off across a flat stony plain as straight as possible for where [Gambut](#) should be. The airfield, so the map said, was 16 miles away, near the top of another abrupt escarpment which fell away to the north. But they hadn't gone much more than six miles when enemy guns suddenly opened up from the top of the southern escarpment, and shells began to burst among the trucks.

Being shelled in vehicles, any infantryman will tell you, is one of the most unnerving of all experiences, more frightening than lethal. Only very heavy shellfire does much damage to a well dispersed convoy. But sitting away up there on the back of a truck, without the friendly protection of a slit trench, you feel naked and terribly exposed, and there is nothing you can do about it. This was the first time it had happened to [18 Battalion](#), and many a prayer was muttered that it might be the last.

There were only three or four guns and a few armoured cars on the escarpment, but it was enough to delay [4 Brigade](#) for an hour. The vehicles stopped, the men gratefully tumbled out and scratched themselves shallow holes in the ground. 'Before I could say debus,' says Lieutenant [Phillips](#),³ 'my Platoon was out and in formation faster than they did during training!' Then the brigade's supporting artillery went into action; the first shots landed fair and square among the enemy on the skyline, and he ceased fire almost at once and pulled back westwards. A [19 Battalion](#) patrol followed and reported the way clear. Eighteenth Battalion had had two men killed in those first few sticky minutes, but the trucks had only a stray hole here and there.

From there it was plain, though dusty, sailing to [Gambut](#). The tanks and carriers could see ahead a few groups of trucks, evidently caught unawares by the advance, hurrying off in disorder, but this sight was hidden from the riflemen, whose horizon was limited to the little squares of sky and desert visible through the back of the lorries. No more shells came near, though the men could hear occasional outbreaks of firing from behind them whenever our artillery opened up, and from the left, where [19 Battalion](#) was having a continuous running fight with the German

rearguard all the way along the escarpment.

Three miles from the airfield C and A Companies left their lorries and covered the next half mile on foot. There was still an ominous silence ahead; at any moment, thought everyone, the Jerries who were sure to be defending the airfield would open fire. But they did not. Divisional Cavalry, patrolling ahead, found only a few enemy detachments, who, so far from offering fight, withdrew hastily at sight of the tanks. Lieutenant-Colonel Peart thereupon ordered his companies back into the vehicles again, for why walk when you can ride? The ease of it was quite disconcerting to [18 Battalion](#), who had been all keyed up for a fight. Before long the companies were riding on to the airfield itself, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the rows of German planes, silent and innocuous, which stood deserted there.

By 4 p.m. the battalion was consolidating on the airfield, occupying old German positions on the western boundary with C Company to the north and A to the south. Divisional Cavalry was still patrolling westwards. C and D Companies had cleared the control buildings on the northern edge; D Company was now occupying them and lining the escarpment, which fell away 100 feet just beyond the buildings. B was in reserve on the open field left of D. On the escarpment edge were the carriers and an attached section of Vickers guns, all firing downhill at enemy posts on the main road and a small side road which wound down the escarpment from the airfield. A troop of 25-pounders farther back was also in the party. German mortars and small-calibre guns were firing back, but it was only speculative shooting and fairly harmless, as Jerry had no observation over the airfield.

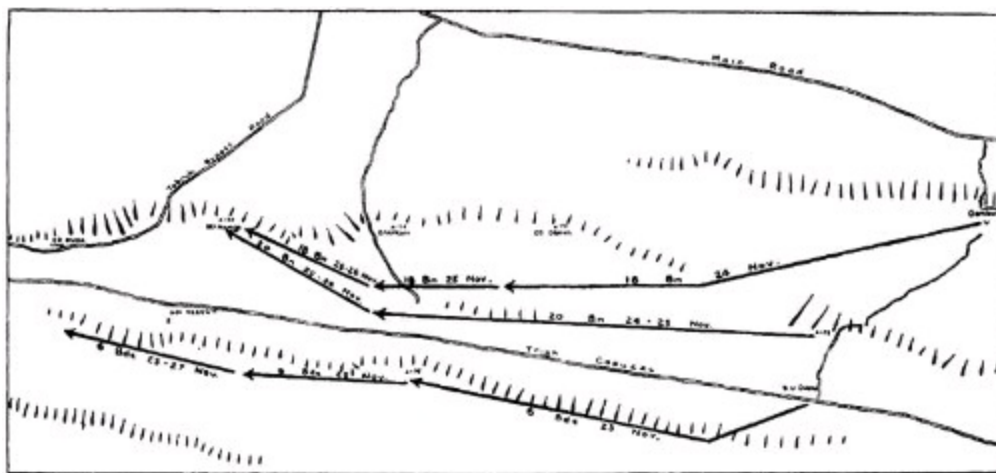
The triumphal entry into [Gambut](#) is described by RQMS [Jack Richards](#) ⁴:

The show was absolutely deserted when we drove in. It was a noble sight, we passed thousands of neatly stacked bombs then drove over the airfield to the tents and buildings on the other side. Someone started shelling us from the road so we debussed and the Coys. went forward while the rest of us started investigating. Near the repair sheds there were about 30 damaged German planes.... Some had obviously crashed and had been brought in probably for spare parts but many had been damaged on the ground by our R.A.F. because you could see bomb holes and shrapnel all over the place. But our natural instinct for loot and booty soon led us into the many tents and dugouts round the area. In half an hour most of us were

running round in a weird assortment of German and Italian clothing. All of us were smoking German or Italian cigarettes or cigars. Others had got abandoned lorries, cars and motor bikes going while some fortunate few had bagged automatic pistols. We had a marvellous time and although looting is not in accordance with army regulations we were allowed a fairly free rein.

Richards adds that when **18 Battalion** left **Gambut** its transport was 'supplemented by one German breakdown truck, an Opel car, and a couple of motor bikes'.

There was leisure that afternoon to have a good look around. C Company had captured a disabled car whose occupants had departed in a hurry, leaving everything behind. The control buildings were a rich prize, full of every kind of gear, and men from all the companies flocked there. Many of them scored cameras, binoculars and Luger pistols, always the most valued items. There was plenty of water, brackish but perfectly good for washing; and there was food enough to more than satisfy a battalion which had existed for a week on light rations. These were the kind of pickings that every good Kiwi dreams about.



18 Bn's Advance to BELHAMED
24-26 NOVEMBER 1941

18 Bn's Advance to Belhamed 24-26 November 1941

The shooting died down that night. The battalion had pickets and roving patrols out, but all was peace until morning, when the shelling began again. This time there was one awkward heavy gun somewhere over the southern escarpment, which lobbed an occasional shell into C and D Companies, but it was not heavy shelling,

and there was only one casualty. A watchful eye was kept on the enemy down by the main road, and there was little trouble from that direction.

The next move was unknown. There was a pretty general suspicion that the unit had 'had' [Bardia](#) and was to carry on westwards, but this speculation was not confirmed till just before noon on 24 November, when orders were sent out to the companies to move on that afternoon. The general situation had changed very much for the worse— [30 Corps](#) had met with disaster at the hands of the German armour, and the [Tobruk](#) ball had been thrown to the New Zealand Division.

At 3.30 p.m. [18 Battalion](#) left [Gambut](#), still at the head of [4 Brigade](#), moving as usual in desert formation, with the tanks out in front and the carriers on the right flank skirting the top of the escarpment.

The afternoon's advance was over a particularly flat, deserted, featureless stretch, the sort of ground on which it is impossible to tell just where you are. One kilometre from the day's objective (or, anyway, from where it was thought to be) the men debussed, left the transport to laager where it was, and walked the rest of the way, grumbling at having to pad the hoof when there wasn't a German within miles. Circulations were livened up for a while by this short walk, but by morning everyone was very cold, and enthusiasm for desert warfare was definitely on the wane, even more so when the battalion had to climb on to its lorries again and move on without breakfast.

Fourth Brigade, all together again now and still led by [18 Battalion](#), was moving along a sort of step in the desert, a flat plateau three to five miles wide, bounded by one escarpment falling away to the north and another (the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, now famous in the New Zealand Division's history) rising in a long line to the south. On top of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment was [6 Brigade](#), still a little way ahead, but involved in furious, costly fighting which from time to time could dimly be heard from down below. Fourth Brigade's job was now to draw level with [6 Brigade](#) and press on westwards to break the enemy ring round [Tobruk](#) and join up with its defenders. Just how hard this was going to be nobody knew yet— [4 Brigade](#) was sure to strike trouble not far ahead, just as [6 Brigade](#) had, and would have to butt its way through that trouble, unless some miracle happened.

The early morning advance on 25 November, though only three miles, brought [18 Battalion](#) into populated country again, and to the beginning of its troubles. From a depression on the right flank the screening tanks rounded up a band of bewildered Jerries, about 150 of them, and passed them back to [18 Battalion](#), who received them gladly, briefly looked them over for any binoculars or watches that the tankies might have missed, then packed them off back to Brigade Headquarters. Things were looking up when perfectly good Germans surrendered without a fight; the prestige of the tanks was for the moment very high.

It soon became obvious that this happy state of affairs was not permanent. Shells began to fall among the lorries; [Lieutenant-Colonel Peart](#) ordered the companies down on to their feet, and forward they went across the bare ground, spreading out into open formation as they did so, C and A Companies leading, D and B behind. Suddenly the tanks on the left flank ran into a well hidden anti-tank gun over a ridge of high ground which ran diagonally across the line of advance. The carriers hastened up and joined in the fight from behind the crest of the ridge, but almost at once came under mortar and machine-gun fire from among the stones and camel thorn ahead. Here, obviously, was a resolute little group which might take some dislodging—several tanks and a portée already bore scars as evidence of the anti-tank gunners' skill.

But there are times when infantry can do what armour cannot, and this was one of them. A and B Companies lined the ridge while the carriers retired; the battalion mortars sprang into action and plastered the enemy; and forward to the attack went two platoons, 8 Platoon of A Company heading straight for the enemy and 10 Platoon of B Company working round to the left. The Germans, far from being intimidated, let loose a fusillade that forced 8 Platoon to the ground, but 10 Platoon, in Sgt Bill Kennedy's ⁵ words, 'kept on in excellent training style, one section down while two advanced and even the 2" mortar in action. The mortar men... dropped their first round slap on one M.G. position.' There was also a 3-inch mortar in support, with RSM Eric [Firth](#) ⁶ directing its fire. No. 10 Platoon was now round the flank, and with both platoons converging on them the defenders broke and ran, leaving their wounded and their heavier equipment and weapons. About thirty prisoners were rounded up. The action had been short, swift and unexpected. The German prisoners were unkempt and hungry, but the anti-tank gun (though now

useless after a direct hit from a Matilda) was a prize indeed. A hard-won prize, for 8 and 10 Platoons had lost a lot of wounded, including Second-Lieutenants [Rawley](#)⁷ and [Christianson](#).⁸

The enemy, it seemed, wasn't prepared to carry on a stand-up fight here. Under shellfire he slowly retired west, but his own long-range shells kept whistling in, dozens of them. For a while the situation was most uncomfortable. But the morning advance had evidently caught Jerry on the wrong foot. The shelling gradually eased off as he withdrew. The [18 Battalion](#) carriers, feeling forward later in the day, picked up a few stray prisoners but met no opposition.

Jerry did not withdraw far. All day [18 Battalion](#)'s forward troops had a fine view of him digging hard three or four miles ahead, and it was a shame that the artillery was short of ammunition and so could not 'tickle him up' as much as it would have liked. The outlook for [18 Battalion](#) was not good, for these Germans were fair and square in its way, and the next advance would take it right through them. Just behind the enemy, opposite the battalion's right flank, rose a low hill, hardly worthy of the name anywhere else, but a distinctive feature in that table-top landscape. Nobody looking at this humble bump on the ground would have guessed that it would earn an undying place in the history of the New Zealand Division, but that was destined to happen before many more days passed—the name of the feature was [Belhamed](#).

It was fairly obvious that [18 Battalion](#) would have to push on again almost at once, so nobody was surprised when orders came through late that afternoon for a night attack on [Belhamed](#). Nobody was surprised, but nobody was pleased, for everyone had seen the Germans swarming on the flat ahead, and the thought of heading straight into them in cold blood was not pleasant. But that was the only way. The whole division was to move west that night and make its big effort to join hands with [Tobruk](#). Sixth Brigade would attack along and down the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment and make the actual contact with the [Tobruk](#) garrison at [Ed Duda](#), four miles west of [Belhamed](#). But this contact would be firm and useful only if [Belhamed](#) was in our hands, and this was [4 Brigade](#)'s job.

So far this campaign had been a gentleman's war for [18 Battalion](#), mainly riding in state in lorries with only occasional opposition—food might have been a bit short

and lacking in variety, but there had been no bitter fighting as in [Crete](#), no exposure to stinging wind and rain as in [Greece](#). Even when there had been fighting the tanks had taken the edge off it before it reached the infantry. But the night advance to [Belhamed](#) was to be different. A straight-out silent attack with the bayonet, infantry face to face with infantry, no trucks, no tanks, no artillery except a few salvos to help the attackers keep direction. Eighteenth and 20th Battalions were to share [Belhamed](#) between them, and tanks, carriers, artillery observers and all the rest would come up in the morning. [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger](#) of 20 Battalion would command both units during the attack and on the objective.

As zero hour approached, a half moon emerging at intervals from clouds lent enough light for the companies to see what they were doing. None of the usual laughing and skylarking, no smoking, only the rustle of men moving and the murmur of low voices as they formed up. C Company on the right, A on the left, with D and B behind, and Battalion Headquarters, signallers, mortars and pioneers in the centre. Then they were away, long files of men in close formation going slowly forward, every one with a pick or shovel on his back, riflemen with bayonets fixed and bandoliers slung from their shoulders, Bren-gunners loaded up with spare magazines, officers with compass in hand checking direction, 'sigs' with their No. 18 sets or with telephones and wire. The battalion had practised and practised such an approach march until the drill was as perfect as it could be, and there was curiously little difference between the training and the real thing.

It was only four miles to [Belhamed](#), but distances at night seem at least twice as far as by day. On and on they went, stumbling over stones, their burdens getting heavier and heavier. Surely, they thought, they must have overshot the mark—and then machine guns spoke up from a rise in front, and they were in the middle of the enemy.

Corporal Ralph [Joyes](#)⁹ of D Company speaks for every man in the battalion that night when he says:

Never ever will I forget that approach march.... It seemed endless and I think that most of us were pretty well done when we actually got into the real thing. Even then we saw nothing but tracer which seemed to pass by us on all sides. The noise was terrific with most of us yelling our heads off.

For a little while all was confusion, **18 Battalion** smashing its way through the enemy with bullet, grenade and bayonet, even sometimes with rifle butts. It was **Galatas** all over again, this time not hemmed in by streets and walls but out in the wide open spaces. Some men fell dead or wounded, but for each **18 Battalion** casualty revenge was exacted several times over. The battalion had the whip hand in that mêlée; the Germans were caught only half ready, a lot of their firing was wild, and some were shot down before they could even get into action. Only a few prisoners were taken, most of them wounded.

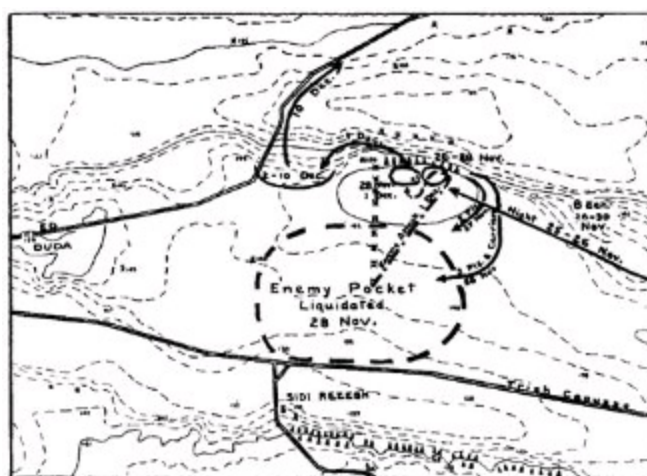
Then, quite suddenly it seemed, the opposition melted away, and the forward companies found themselves out in the clear, with only sporadic firing going on here and there as a sort of afterthought. The other companies and Battalion Headquarters weren't far away—the whole unit had kept remarkably well together throughout the long approach and the scrap in the German lines, though B and D Companies had tended to overrun the forward companies during the fighting.

Only a little farther now, and then the companies halted and the order was passed down to dig in. Evidently they were on the objective, although it looked very like any other piece of desert. The moon had set, and you could not see far beyond your nose. The men began to dig—and then discovered the peculiar perverse quality of **Belhamed**. A few inches down was solid rock.

It was before midnight when the battalion halted on **Belhamed**, and from then nearly to dawn the men toiled and sweated to get underground. Luckily the enemy seemed to have pulled back. But as for digging themselves in, all many of the men could do was to hack out hunks of rock and build 'sangars' above ground, some protection certainly, but poor substitutes for slit trenches. Their navvying finished, the men at last had time to draw breath and realise that it was cold. A biting wind was sweeping the plateau, and the battalion, minus blankets and greatcoats, had to crouch there in the dark and take it. By sunrise everyone was nearly frozen.

When it became light enough to see, it was clear that 4 Brigade had indeed reached its objective, but was holding only the northern edge of the **Belhamed** 'bump', **18 Battalion** on the eastern part and 20 Battalion on the western, both units bunched into fairly small areas, not far apart. C and D Companies of the **18th** were right on the lip of the northern escarpment, with a wide view of the country below,

and A and B Companies a couple of hundred yards farther south, B Company in touch with 20 Battalion. But nobody had much leisure to inspect the position in detail. With daylight came mortar bombs, shells and bullets, pouring in from all sides except the east. After the easy war of the last few days the battalion had a rude awakening now. It had truly run into a hornets' nest, and the hornets were full of fight and determined to sting these invaders to death. The battalion was terribly exposed, and almost at once casualties began to mount up. Captain Mackay of B Company was among the first, as was [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger](#), both wounded about 7 a.m. by machine-gun fire which suddenly swept A and B Companies. The same burst of fire killed CSM Lance Preston ¹⁰ of B Company.



18 BN AT BELHAMED

18 Bn at Belhamed

It was still dark when the supporting tanks, carriers, anti-tank and Vickers guns, and [18 Battalion's](#) own B Echelon transport set out for [Belhamed](#), but dawn caught the column halfway, and German artillery below the escarpment to the north began to plaster it. Most of the column had to stop and take what cover it could in wadis; the tanks and carriers pushed on to [Belhamed](#), but the tanks were engaged by a group of German anti-tank guns to the south the moment they poked their noses over the lip of the escarpment. In a very short time the guns claimed five victims. The remaining tanks spent about half an hour on [Belhamed](#) engaging the guns, then withdrew east again, and their part in the day's fighting was over. The battalion was on its own again until, later in the morning, its anti-tank and Vickers guns and 3-inch mortars somehow forced their way through to the northern edge of [Belhamed](#),

where the broken top of the escarpment afforded a little cover. The battalion was delighted to have them there. The infantry would also have been more than pleased to see its own unit transport with some hot food, greatcoats and blankets aboard, but that was impossible during the day. This was the first time in the campaign that the fighting troops of [18 Battalion](#) had been separated from their 'B Ech'; they missed all the little extra amenities that went with the trucks, but it was no good growling about it.

The infantrymen could do little all day but lie in their slitties or sangars, as every inch of the ground was under observation and any movement attracted fire. But the carriers were invaluable. Not only did they bring the 3-inch mortars the last part of the way up to [Belhamed](#), but they also ran 'mercy missions' from the companies to the RAP with wounded men who otherwise could not have been evacuated till dark—in those conditions it was next to impossible for stretcher bearers to work. As it was, the wounded were made as comfortable as possible at the RAP in a ravine on the escarpment, and were sent back that night to the dressing station.

Another group that found conditions pretty well impossible that day was the 'sigs'. They had taken telephone gear with them, and laid lines to the companies before dawn, but the shelling soon chopped these lines about, and all the linesmen's efforts could not keep them in operation, as each repair would be followed soon afterwards by a fresh break. Finally they had to give up. From then on most communications on [Belhamed](#) were by wireless—the No. 18 sets functioned well, and no major difficulties arose, though every company headquarters became convinced after a while that Jerry was using its particular wireless aerial as an aiming mark.

There is little need to describe the misery of the men on [Belhamed](#), cold, hungry, and harassed by fire every time they poked their heads up. They could retaliate to some extent with mortar and machine-gun fire, but none of this seemed to have much effect. From daybreak there were artillery observers forward on top of the escarpment, and requests for shellfire poured in continuously from the companies; but the artillery could not give these really satisfactory attention, as their ammunition was so short that they were forced to limit their fire to essential and emergency targets.

Most of the shells were coming from the north, where the Germans had artillery (including some big 5.9-inch guns) on the low ground. But south of [Belhamed](#), where the ground sloped gently down to the foot of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, was a pocket of very alert enemy, aggressive and well armed, untouched the previous night. [Belhamed](#) and [Sidi Rezegh](#) could not possibly be held in comfort while this pocket was there. But no active steps were taken against it immediately. The command system of [18](#) and [20](#) Battalions was temporarily out of gear, and it was some hours before Colonel Peart more or less unofficially took over both units and began to make plans for the future welfare of the troops on [Belhamed](#). There was no chance of doing anything constructive about the pocket that day, but Peart had it on the agenda as an urgent item. In the meantime, reconnaissance patrols went out as far as possible in that direction, and both battalions did their best to keep the pocket under fire, though it was out of mortar range and too well dug in for effective machine-gunning.

One patrol in particular, a small D Company 'recce' party led by Lieutenant Phillips, went a long way out towards Sidi Rezegh, passed within sight of the pocket, and even had a short argument with a German car containing two officers, but eventually got back without a shot fired at it. Not only did it report details of Jerry's position, but it also stumbled on a minefield, a long belt of Teller mines running north and south just west of the highest part of [Belhamed](#). A few days later [18](#) [Battalion](#) was to make very good use of those same mines.

As the battalion lay hugging the earth and cursing, there were a few bitter inquiries about the wonderful air support that the Division had been promised at the outset of the campaign. It was not till the afternoon of 26 November, in answer to repeated calls for help, that two flights of [Blenheim](#) bombers with supporting fighters appeared and bombed to the north of [Belhamed](#), to the accompaniment of loud cheers from [4](#) [Brigade](#). On the other side, there was a cheeky little German reconnaissance plane that hovered over [Belhamed](#), ignoring the rifle fire that poured up at it from all angles, and even landed once not far from [20](#) [Battalion](#). Late that afternoon it came back once too often, for this time the rifles did their work, and the plane crashed near the transport lines.

Before setting out for [Belhamed](#) the previous night the men had had a hot meal,

which was just as well, for they had to exist till after dark on the 26th on the small stocks of bully, biscuits and water they carried with them. In the evening, when the shooting slackened off, carrying parties brought a meal up from B Echelon, and never were they more gratefully welcomed—except in B Company, whose party was snapped up by a stray German patrol somewhere on the way forward. Gradually over the next few days greatcoats and blankets were brought forward, and they made a great difference to morale. They could not ward off the mortar bombs, but they could and did keep you from 'seizing up' in the bitter nights and damp days that followed.

Eighteenth and 20th Battalions were certainly very uncomfortably placed on [Belhamed](#), but they were in clover compared to [6 Brigade](#), which hadn't been able to sweep the enemy off the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, let alone push on to [Ed Duda](#). That brigade spent 26 November in furious fighting, three battalions perched up on the escarpment and one below, on the same step as [Belhamed](#), but entirely surrounded by the enemy at close range. It had terrible losses—so heavy that [General Freyberg](#) cancelled its [Ed Duda](#) orders and passed them over to [4 Brigade](#). That night [19 Battalion](#), plus the ever-ready Matilda tanks, came forward from reserve, advanced past [Belhamed](#) so quietly that [18](#) and [20](#) Battalions hardly heard it, and pushed on to [Ed Duda](#) with a most astonishing lack of opposition, to meet British troops from [Tobruk](#).

So 27 November dawned with the [Tobruk](#) corridor formed at last, a narrow unstable corridor, but an undeniable link between besieged [Tobruk](#) and the outside world. The New Zealand Division's immediate objective was won, and now it had to extend the corridor and make it usable. This was plainly not going to be easy. The German armour was away at the Egyptian frontier, ordered from the main scene of action by a wild decision of Rommel's, but it couldn't be expected to be away for ever, and the German and Italian infantry formations left to guard [Tobruk](#) were fighting for their lives, and fighting well. The stage was all set for calamity, and the question was— for which side?

¹ Appointments in [18 Bn](#) on 15 November:

CO: Lt-Col [J. N. Peart](#)

2 i/c: [Maj R. R. McGregor](#) (LOB)

Adj: Lt S. N. S. Crump
MO: Capt J. Dempsey
Padre: Rev. F. O. Dawson
IO: Lt J. Tyerman
OC HQ Coy: Capt A. S. Playle
QM: Lt A. M. B. Lenton
Sigs: 2 Lt E. H. Fairley
AA: 2 Lt E. R. Percy (LOB)
Mortars: 2 Lt E. F. Kent
Carriers: Capt P. R. Pike
Pioneers: 2 Lt J. W. McCowan
TO: Lt R. McK. Evans
OC A Coy: Capt H. M. Green
2 i/c A Coy: Lt R. G. Parkinson (LOB)
7 PI: 2 Lt D. L. Morgan
8 PI: 2 Lt L. Rawley
9 P1: 2 Lt S. B. Edmonds
OC B Coy: Capt J. G. Mackay
2 i/c B Coy: Capt E. H. Boulton (LOB)
10 P1: 2 Lt P. L. Christianson
11 P1: Lt J. A. B. Dixon
12 P1: 2 Lt P. A. Thorley
OC C Coy: Maj R. J. Lynch
2 i/c C Coy: Capt J. E. Batty (LOB)
13 P1: Lt H. C. Hewlett
14 P1: 2 Lt P. J. C. Burns
15 P1: 2 Lt B. G. S. Jackson
OC D Coy: Maj L. I. Day
2 i/c D Coy: Capt C. L. Brett (LOB)
16 PI: Lt W. F. Snodgrass
17 PI: Lt D. F. Phillips
18 PI: Lt A. C. Beachen
RSM: WO I E. R. Firth

² Capt T. R. Atchley; Hamilton; born London, 19 Sep 1905; clerk; p.w. 22 Nov 1941.

³ Capt D. F. Phillips; Otorohanga; born NZ 6 Aug 1918; farmhand.

⁴ WO I J. L. Richards, MM; Auckland; born Wellington, 9 Jul 1916; company director.

⁵ 2 Lt W. J. Kennedy, MM, m.i.d.; Tauranga; born Thames, 29 May 1910; farmer.

⁶ Maj E. R. Firth, MBE, BEM, m.i.d.; Tauranga; born Auckland, 9 Feb 1913; Regular soldier.

⁷ Maj L. Rawley; New Plymouth; born Dunedin, 3 Jan 1915; Regular soldier; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

⁸ Lt P. L. Christianson; Auckland; born NZ 24 Oct 1916; toy manufacturer; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

⁹ Lt R. B. Joyes; Huntly; born NZ 4 Sep 1913; window dresser; twice wounded.

¹⁰ WO II L. R. Preston; born Wellington, 1 Sep 1905; bank officer; wounded 25 May 1941; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 14 – CALAMITY IN THE DESERT

CHAPTER 14

Calamity in the Desert

The 27th November was a day of clouds and showers, of success, disappointment and confusion. The brave remnant of **6 Brigade** fought its way ahead, almost yard by yard, to clear the rest of the **Sidi Rezegh** escarpment, at fearful cost to its already decimated battalions. But the **Tobruk** corridor proved a very inefficient corridor indeed. Nineteenth Battalion, on its way to **Ed Duda**, had unsuspectingly passed several enemy pockets, which now, in fighting mood, prevented the Kiwis from making any firm link with **Tobruk**. With British tanks handy and liable to come at them at any time, the occupants of these pockets must have been most unhappy; but they did what they could until the German armour hurried back from the Egyptian frontier. Had the corridor been cleared and properly consolidated on 27 November, the New Zealand Division might have been spared the events of the next few days. But the Division and the **Tobruk** garrison wasted precious hours that day at cross purposes, while the time for concerted action passed fruitlessly.

For **18 Battalion** 27 November was a vile day—steady shelling from the north and west, mortaring from all round the compass, machine-gunning on fixed lines from the south. Horribly typical, all this, of the days on **Belhamed**, days spent lying as flat as possible in your cramped slittie, getting up to stretch your legs only at night or in the early morning. Corporal Joyes enlarges on this point:

There appeared to be some kind of a gentleman's agreement about the hour to commence hostilities in the mornings— ... we could see the enemy shaking out his blankets or coats first thing in the morning and the same thing happened in our positions. About 9–10 a.m. the day's work commenced and we would put in another day hugging the ground and cursing.

However, gentleman's agreement or no, it says a lot for **18 Battalion** that its steadiness and discipline did not crack. It was bad enough on **Belhamed**, in company with the dead, short of food, water and rest, without the strain of this continual destructive fire, which had claimed eighteen victims on 26 November and went on whittling down the battalion by ones and twos on the 27th. Worst of all, they could do little to retaliate. The mortars and Vickers did what they could, but their

ammunition supply was getting nearly as low as the artillery's.

The battalion's particular dislike was reserved for the pocket of enemy to the south. It was impossible to tell exactly how big this pocket was, though not many troops were visible down that way, and yet its nuisance value was tremendous. The men on [Belhamed](#) had, they felt, a very legitimate grievance against these Germans—they were outnumbered and surrounded, so why couldn't they do the sensible thing and surrender?

It is understandable, then, that when two of them approached the battalion's lines under a white flag about 9 a.m. on 27 November they should have been taken for truce emissaries. Wishful thinking, yes, but natural in the circumstances. They were actually coming to pick up one of their officers lying wounded in front of D Company. But the first [18 Battalion](#) men to reach them had other ideas. 'They appeared to be somewhat nervous,' says Lieutenant Phillips, 'and neither could speak English.... A pantomime ensued between us, they wanted to take him back with them, but we rolled him on our stretcher and fetched them all back with us.... The officer was delivered to R.A.P. and the other two ... were sent up to Bn HQ.'

Opinions at Battalion Headquarters were divided as to whether or not the Germans were truce emissaries, but finally Lieutenant-Colonel Peart (backed up by [4 Brigade](#) Headquarters) sent them back to their own lines, in company with the IO (Lieutenant John [Tyerman](#) ¹), who was to demand the surrender of the pocket. Tyerman reports, 'I was successful in making contact with the 2 I/C but the request was refused.' Surrender was not part of the German idea at all.

So the 'truce', after nearly two hours of beating about the bush, ended in a fizzle. It seems now, looking back, to have something of a comic opera flavour. But to the men on the spot there was nothing amusing about it. As Phillips says, 'The events of the previous few days made the position somewhat unsettled.' Peart's demand for surrender was perfectly serious, and might have been a chance to save lives and smooth the path for the Division.

But the sequel was tragedy. A tentative arrangement had already been made for a daylight attack on the southern pocket on the 27th, and immediately after the 'truce', still with the thought in mind that the enemy was ready to throw in the

towel, [Brigadier Inglis](#) and Colonel Peart confirmed the order. At 11 a.m., therefore, two companies of 20 Battalion set out across the flat, coverless desert, straight for the pocket, following an artillery concentration which was little more than a token. The men of [18 Battalion](#), watching them go, thought to themselves, 'Poor devils'.

There was cause for pessimism. The Germans, very far from surrendering, turned the full weight of their fire on the luckless 20 Battalion companies, which were forced to ground out in the open, with no chance of going either forward or back. The 20th sent an SOS to [18 Battalion](#), and Colonel Peart ordered D Company out in support. At 1.20 p.m. 17 and 18 Platoons went forward on this forlorn hope, accompanied by a 3-inch mortar and followed a little later by three damaged Matildas that someone had 'rustled up' from somewhere.

The platoons dropped down off the top of [Belhamed](#) to the east, circled round and advanced due west towards the enemy. They might as well have stayed at home. Well short of the German positions they were forced to the ground, and there they stayed, burrowing as far as they could into the sand, helpless against the torrent of bullets and mortar bombs that streamed in. The pocket of Germans, isolated, outnumbered, doomed, was showing its teeth to some effect.

The Matilda tanks had no direct contact with the infantry and so gave them little relief; but they gamely tackled a nest of anti-tank guns and put some out of action. Two of the tanks were further damaged and had to pull out. But the exposed infantrymen had to stay prone on the ground and take what came. 'After much talk around the Coy. by passing messages from man to man,' Phillips reports, 'it was decided to wait till dark and either have another go or return to unit.... Some few Jerries tried to come after us but they were not very keen on their job.'

When darkness fell, after an endless afternoon, the men of [18](#) and 20 Battalions got up off the ground and made for home with their tails down, and with nothing to show for their hard work except further gaps in their ranks. D Company, [18 Battalion](#), had had eleven casualties, 20 Battalion not far short of a hundred.

Long before this it had become obvious to the spectators on [Belhamed](#) that the attack would make no headway. Fourth Brigade had neither reserve infantry nor gun ammunition enough to push the thrust home, or to cover the withdrawal of the

unlucky forward companies—so what was there to do? The only solution that might possibly be any good seemed to be for the Matildas, on their way back from [Ed Duda](#), to pass through the pocket and perhaps shock Jerry into surrendering.

The afternoon was well on when the tanks left [Ed Duda](#), but they travelled too far north. The Germans in their path, panic-stricken at the sight of them, tried to surrender, but with no infantry handy the tanks could not round up any prisoners, and carried straight on eastwards. The Germans in front of the [18th](#) and [20th](#) forward companies were untouched. This plan had miscarried; now a full-scale tank and infantry attack on the pocket was planned for next day.

So the situation mounted towards its climax. But not all on the one side. [Africa Corps](#) was racing back from the frontier to play a belated part in the tussle for [Tobruk](#), and if it could carry out its plan to assemble on 28 November for an attack on [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [Belhamed](#), calamity would be impending for the New Zealand Division, away out there on the bare desert step, short of ammunition, rest, food and support. And by the end of 27 November [Africa Corps](#) had made so much headway in its swift westward move that it could hardly now be balked in its plan for next day.

Eighteenth Battalion's first inkling that anything of this kind was afoot was at 1 a.m. on 28 November, when it was rudely roused from sleep and stood-to till dawn. It was a noisy and colourful night, with flares and lights in the distance in all directions and the sound of engines coming apparently from all sides except the west. To the bemused men in the slitties it seemed probable that they might be attacked at any moment, but sounds travel far in the clear desert air, and the storm was not yet ready to break. So [18 Battalion's](#) night vigil was fruitless.

The doomed German pocket was still there in the morning, apparently undismayed by yesterday's proceedings. During the night two small patrols from C Company had reported Jerry awake and active; and morning found his machine-gunners and mortar men still very lively, while the gunners from the north added their regular quota as before. But at 2 p.m. the men in the slitties, standing up and braving the shellfire, were rewarded by a magnificent sight.

Across the [Belhamed](#) flat, steady and unhurried, moved the tanks, with lovely 25-pounder shells and mortar bombs bursting in front of them and the clatter of

Vickers joining in; then a line of bustling carriers, and last of all three platoons of infantry—a ridiculously small infantry force it looked, not much more than sixty men all told. The watchers had a grandstand view of an attack which went like clockwork. They saw the tanks advance slowly westwards nearly to the horizon, they saw the demoralised Germans in their hundreds standing up, they saw the carriers and infantry, like sheepdog packs, rounding them up and herding them back towards the Belhamed fold, they saw the tanks come back again sweeping the area and picking up strays. After three days of alternate boredom and fright, this spectacle was exhilarating. The looming threat of German tank attack was forgotten in the joy of seeing those bloody mortars and Spandaus eliminated. But the number of Jerries made your head swim. First estimates by those who saw it were anything up to 1000, and even though this figure was reduced in the final count to somewhere about the 600 mark, it was still a lot of Jerries—more than all the combined fighting troops of 18 and 20 Battalions on Belhamed.

The attacking infantry (two platoons of C Company and one of D, all under Major Lynch) made the same circuitous approach as the D Company platoons had the previous day, dropping down the northern escarpment, then moving about two miles east while still out of sight of the Germans, then spreading out on their start line near the artillery, 15 Platoon right, 13 Platoon left, 16 Platoon of D Company behind. Early in the piece the tanks disappeared over a slight hump, but the platoons, breasting the rise, had a fleeting glimpse of tanks and carriers exchanging fire with the enemy.

The resistance was slight. Machine-gunners here and there fired sporadic, uncoordinated bursts, some of the anti-tank gunners stuck to their posts and got a few shots away, a handful of marksmen in a derelict tank made things uncomfortable for a while. But there was no real determination in the defence. The Matildas cruised slowly on, right through the positions, peppering them with fire and completing the confusion. Then, as the carriers and infantry closed in, the debacle began, and right in front of them the Jerries popped up out of their holes like rabbits, first one, then a few, then a swarm of them. It was a worrying few minutes for C Company, who had been led to expect 100 or 150 men against them, but now found themselves outnumbered many times by their prisoners. Sergeant Percy Yendell ² of 15 Platoon says:

How easy it would have been for them to pick up arms again, as they were everywhere, and the tanks and carriers every moment were getting farther away, we had to move very quickly to crowd them into the centre. There was a moment when a shot was fired, one of my men sung out that it was a Jerry, when I thought they were starting to re-arm, but thank goodness it did not happen, as candidly I don't think we would have had much show.

Both carriers and infantry were too alert to allow anything of this nature. They herded the prisoners up and kept them under control, passing them back with no waste of time, first to 16 Platoon, then on to B Company.

After getting rid of their prisoners, 13 and 15 Platoons moved on again after the tanks, right through to the far side of the pocket, where Jerry had had a group of field guns, including four of the big 5.9-inch brutes. These the tanks put out of action very effectively with a few shells, and then, to quote Lieut [Hewlett](#),³ 'amused themselves shooting up stacks of ammo', while the infantrymen, having no more prisoners to worry about, turned their attention to the pickings lying round the battlefield. There was less personal loot than at [Gambut](#), but there was a fair supply of pistols and compasses, while Sergeant Baker reports that they 'collected so many binoculars that nearly every man had a pair for the few days before the inevitable calling in'. Then the tanks and carriers assembled on the western slope of [Belhamed](#) near 20 Battalion, while C Company set out for home with its haul.

The attackers did not come out of this action scatheless, but considering the numbers opposing them they could have fared very much worse. One of the [18 Battalion](#) carriers was hit by machine-gun fire before the resistance collapsed, one of its crew killed and one wounded. Twelve of the infantrymen were wounded, one fatally. The wounded were picked up (unusual luxury) by an RAP truck which went the rounds after the battle. There could well have been another truck, or a whole convoy of them, circulating to pick up the mortars, anti-tank guns, rifles and assorted gear left strewn round, but that was impracticable in the meantime.

By 4 p.m. the tumult and the shouting were all over, the prisoners on their way back to [4 Brigade](#), the attackers either back at [Belhamed](#) or going there, the excitement simmering down among both participants and spectators. But very soon [Belhamed](#) was buzzing again, as [18](#) and [20](#) Battalions packed up their scanty

belongings, vacated slitties and sangars, and changed places. The move was already under way when 13 and 15 Platoons arrived back, so that they didn't return to their old positions, but went straight to the new, only a few hundred yards away, just behind the field of Teller mines that ran along [Belhamed's](#) western slope. The position [18 Battalion](#) now took up was three or four hundred yards in diameter, with A and C Companies on the escarpment facing north and west, and B and D a little to the south, D Company in close touch with 20 Battalion. Some of the boys had to dig new slitties, a most unpopular sport in that [Belhamed](#) rock; but a slit trench is one of those things you can't take with you.

The changeover was a domestic arrangement between the two units. Twentieth Battalion was in poorer shape than [18 Battalion](#), having had more casualties, including most of its senior officers; so this move would, in theory, put [18 Battalion](#) in the post of danger on the west, nearer the enemy (or where the enemy was thought to be). According to all the rules [18 Battalion](#) should receive the brunt of any attack in its new area. In the event, this plan miscarried badly, but that was due to poor co-operation by the Germans.

It was pretty obvious by the afternoon of 28 November that an attack was bound to come. A large enemy force, armour and all, on the highest escarpment on the Division's southern flank, was nibbling at the edges of [6 Brigade](#), clearly with the intention of pushing through to the north and smashing the [Tobruk](#) corridor. To the north and west [4 Brigade](#) knew very little of what was happening, and Lieutenant-Colonel Peart was worried over reports from observers that tanks and infantry were moving down from the north towards [Belhamed](#). It seems now, with the benefit of after-knowledge, that the observers may have been indulging in a little excusable panic, and that what they took for enemy may have been British forces from [Tobruk](#) mopping up among the garrison troops of the German 90 Light Division, or else part of [19 Battalion](#) with some I tanks moving back from [Ed Duda](#). The [Tobruk](#) troops did their best that day to help the New Zealand Division (and themselves) by widening the corridor down below the [Belhamed](#) escarpment, but their upstairs neighbours were completely in the dark about all this.

Thanks to the Matilda tanks, the corridor was now more than just a token. That night some of the more vulnerable troops from outside [Tobruk](#), including [13 Corps](#) Headquarters and the ASC, moved through it into the fortress to be out of the line of

fire of Jerry's attack, and up to [Belhamed](#) came a convoy, a wonderful convoy laden with supplies and ammunition. All these vehicles came quite close to [18 Battalion](#), and the rumble of engines in the still night air never sounded more musical. Even the boys on [18 Battalion's](#) western fringe, who had to work hard to keep the trucks off their minefield, did not curse them as they would normally have done.

But just over the horizon, sometimes audible on [Belhamed](#), was that other sound, similar and yet much less musical, the menacing growl of enemy tanks and troop-carriers manoeuvring into position for the assault. By 29 November they had the troops in the corridor all but surrounded, and were beginning their inward move to slash through the New Zealand positions and cut the Division off from [Tobruk](#). [Ed Duda](#) and [Belhamed](#), we now know from German records, were right on the attack route. The men of [18 Battalion](#), sitting uncomfortably on their eminence, did not know that, but it was a pretty safe guess that they were 'for it'.

They endured a day of savage shellfire on 29 November, thicker and more continuous than on any other day so far. The shelling did little actual damage, and several of the sufferers have remarked on the number of duds, but the moral effect of spending yet another day down below ground was very bad. 'If it lasts much longer,' commented one man, 'we'll all be "nuts".' Even the duds were nerve-racking, ricocheting and skidding all over the place with a noise like a train going through a station.

That afternoon and night the men could hear the ominous din of battle only four miles away, as [15 Panzer Division](#) attacked [Ed Duda](#). This fight, though [18 Battalion](#) was not in it, had a great effect on its future. Had [15 Panzer Division](#) overwhelmed the thin garrison on [Ed Duda](#) it could have carried straight on to [Belhamed](#) and very likely would have rounded up every man there. But the British on [Ed Duda](#) spoiled this plan—the Germans got a toehold on the height, but after hours of savage fighting were pushed off again, and [18 Battalion](#) had a respite from the fate intended for it.

But what an uncomfortable respite! Nobody in [4 Brigade](#) knew much about the position—Jerry, for all anyone knew, might be cleaning up [Ed Duda](#) and getting a clear run to [Belhamed](#). So the night of 29–30 November was wakeful and alert, everyone on edge, till patrols from C Company went out and returned with

reassuring news. The country between Belhamed and Ed Duda looked empty; one patrol met some British tanks and had a yarn to their crews, who told them of Jerry's reverse at Ed Duda. About the same time a two-man 'recce' from D Company crossed the low ground where the late Jerry pocket had been, found the whole place bare, and made touch with 6 Brigade on top of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment with no worse risk than that of being shot by zealous 6 Brigade sentries. Evidently it was not the turn of the boys on Belhamed—yet.

So 30 November came, and three-quarters of it went, with nothing to get excited about except (of course) more shells; until 4.15 p.m., when dimly through smoke and dust the men on Belhamed could see enemy tanks converging on Sidi Rezegh from the west and south, and could watch the battle raging as 6 Brigade went down fighting. It was an awful, depressing sight. Despite shellfire and all the resistance desperate men could put up, the tanks moved on along the Sidi Rezegh escarpment right through 6 Brigade, a poor shaken remnant of which got away northward and rallied again just east of Belhamed. In the evening 18 Battalion could see the macabre glow of fires for several miles along the escarpment, and, looking at them, knew that they themselves would be next, and that they would need all their 'guts' to face what was coming next day.

Unpleasant as this day was on Belhamed, it was even grimmer a couple of miles east, where 18 Battalion's B Echelon transport was huddled, along with the rest of 4 Brigade's, in the sparse cover afforded by shallow wadis. Till now the transport had had comparatively little shelling, the 'B Ech' boys had been able to go about their normal business, and the quartermasters had been able to run hot food up to Belhamed every night. But on 30 November they 'copped a packet'. This was due (so everyone thought) to a mass of trucks from other units, having parked in the area the previous night, skipping out of range of an expected tank attack from the east. Whether that is true or false, the whole B Echelon area got well plastered all day, so much so that 18 Battalion's carriers moved back there in a hurry, expecting to have to repel boarders any time. The news that all 4 Brigade's transport was to take the corridor to Tobruk that night was very welcome. Jerry, luckily, was not a great one for shelling at night, so the move was undisturbed; the carriers went back to the Belhamed escarpment, and by daylight all of B Echelon was safely harboured inside the Tobruk defences.

Captain Playle has commented on this move:

It was typical of this unorthodox campaign, that we had to drive out through our own front line positions, cross a considerable area of 'No Man's Land' quite unprotected, and enter the [Tobruk](#) perimeter through the front line at [Ed Duda](#).... There was little time to spare as daylight was fast approaching as we passed through the [Ed Duda](#) positions; as it was, the tail of the column was almost embroiled in the battle which flared up again with the oncoming of day.

Dawn on 1 December found the rifle companies straining sore, sandy eyes south from [Belhamed](#), and their fears were justified. By 6.15 a.m., before it was well light, the shells were pouring in again, thicker and more continuous than ever, and soon a pall of dust and smoke, hanging thick over the battlefield, blotted out the view and left [18 Battalion](#) guessing but apprehensive. Then every heart turned over and every hand gripped its weapon tighter, as out of the haze loomed German tanks, ten times life-size, followed by field guns and lorries full of infantry.

Shells were falling thick on [Belhamed](#), but it wasn't in human nature not to pop your head up occasionally and watch the tanks as they crossed the flat where the German pocket had been so successfully wiped out three days earlier. Now the tables were turned. The tanks seemed to be coming straight for [18 Battalion](#)—no, they weren't—they veered off to the east, across B and D Companies' fronts, and the noise of battle rose to an unbearable racket as they clashed with New Zealand artillery two miles away.

This epic slogging match, tanks against field guns at point-blank range until the guns died fighting, holds a place of unique tragedy and honour in the Division's history. But from [18 Battalion](#)'s hill the action was hidden by the dust cloud, thickened now by the smoke of many burning vehicles. All the [18th](#) knew was that there was a mighty battle with the German tanks down there in the murk. There were other things to think about, too, for machine-gun fire was coming from the south and shells were screaming in from three sides, a lot of duds among them, but also a lot of good ones. The [18th](#) had never experienced heavier shelling. The German field guns had stopped south of [Belhamed](#) and were trying to batter it to a pulp, though under fire from the battalion's anti-tank guns. One German gun was knocked out, but there were plenty more to slam their shells into the defences. The

battalion was too occupied with its own plight to spare many thoughts for a battle it could not see, and so the tanks' next move, though inevitable, came as a sudden shock that might well have panicked less steady troops.

Turning from the stricken guns, the tanks charged straight into 20 Battalion, which, battered by fire and lacking support, had no chance. Not till the tanks were right inside 20 Battalion's lines did the 18th see what was happening, and by then 20 Battalion's companies were surrendering. While some of the tanks busied themselves rounding up their prisoners, others moved on towards the nearest 18 Battalion posts less than 100 yards away. It was a critical moment for 18 Battalion. A few men, dazed by the fire and disheartened at seeing 20 Battalion's surrender, began to climb out of their slit trenches with their hands up; if the rot had set in at that moment, it could have been the end of 18 Battalion.

It was a moment for prompt action, and prompt action there was. All the officers within earshot roared at those offering to surrender; and not only the officers, for one man reports that 'their mates stopped them'. The danger was scotched at birth by the example of all those who stuck to their posts. There was no more immediate threat of surrender. The battalion's only loss just then was a mortar crew which was too close to the 20th to avoid capture.

But if there was no quick intervention, 18 Battalion would beyond a doubt be overwhelmed just as the 20th had been. There was no hope of support from the New Zealand artillery, but by good luck the 18th had at its back 1 Royal Horse Artillery of the Tobruk garrison, on the other end of a telephone line which miraculously was still intact. A call for help went out from Battalion Headquarters, surely one of the most bizarre distress calls ever sent: 'You know where we are. Shell us, and shell us hard.' The tanks were as close as that.

The shells were wonderfully prompt, and they fell just in the right place. The 18th, heads down as far as they could get, suffered not a single casualty; but the tanks sheered off to the south, and their prey had a few minutes' breathing space to collect its resources for the next round.

Then, as so often happens, the hour produced the man, and the man was Lieutenant-Colonel Peart. This reserved ex-schoolmaster, meticulous to a fault in

base camp, had shown rare mettle in this his first fighting campaign, though no fire-eater like John Gray. Now he decided that **18 Battalion**, instead of going 'into the bag' en masse, would clear out. There was an escape route down over the escarpment to the north; it had been closed to 20 Battalion because some of the tanks had circled round and reached the lip of the escarpment first, but luckily it was still open for the **18th**. Major Lynch of C Company walked right over to 20 Battalion's position to make sure that it was past all help, and while he was away Peart issued a provisional evacuation order to the companies, to go into effect when he gave the word.

Though tired and well under strength, the **18th** could still have 'packed a punch' against infantry attack, but tanks were another matter. Apart from the anti-tank rifle, or 'elephant gun', about as effective against tanks as a pea-shooter, it had in support only a handful of two-pounders of 31 Anti-Tank Battery, the staunch guns that had elbowed their way through to **Belhamed** in broad daylight on 26 November. One of these, sited almost on the 20 Battalion boundary, had been overrun at the same time as that battalion, and two others, brought down with all speed from **18 Battalion's** northern front that morning, had had time only to take up makeshift positions against this threat from the south. Faced with the heavier guns of the Mark III and IV tanks, the two-pounders did not have a dog's chance.

Now the machine-gun and mortar duel which had been going on all the time rose to an uproar as the German tanks and infantry moved in again. There was no doubt at all this time where they were heading. They came straight for **18 Battalion**.

Peart, in a characteristically laconic report made later, describes what happened then:

At about 1000 hrs the tanks turned to attack this Bn. At this time the order to withdraw towards the Tobruch Force was given. The withdrawal was carried out in good order under heavy fire.

B and D Companies, the first to go, stuck to their slitties till the tanks were almost on top of them. Then Peart gave the order to withdraw. They needed no second telling; some men left small packs and everything except rifles in their scramble for safety. The Bren guns went with them, but anything heavier had to

stay. But the withdrawal did not degenerate into a rout as it could easily have done. Any tendency to panic was firmly checked by the officers, under Peart's direction, who kept the men well under control—a terribly difficult thing to do when metal is flying, and great tanks coming up fast at your back. B and D Companies, along with the anti-tank gunners, mortar and Vickers men, and a few odds and ends, reached the escarpment and thankfully disappeared over it, followed at once by A Company, and finally C. In these companies, too, some men escaped from right under the noses of the tanks, which swept [Belhamed](#) right up to the escarpment and the minefield.

Of course there were casualties—a lot of casualties. They were unavoidable. In their slitties the men had come through the rain of fire pretty well, but once up on their feet, running those few hundred yards back to shelter, the tanks and guns took their forfeit. The official cost was 58, including nine dead. As many as possible of the wounded were carried back, but it was inevitable that some should be missed and fall into Jerry's hands.

Near the escarpment edge were the carriers and a few essential vehicles. They were out of luck. Before they could withdraw down the escarpment the tanks had them in their sights, and the cloud over [Belhamed](#) thickened as truck after truck was hit and set ablaze. Eight burning wrecks were left behind when the rest finally got under way and disappeared over the lip of the escarpment, one of them on fire. The carriers dodged the shells, but on the way down off [Belhamed](#) they had the bad luck to run on to a minefield that they did not know about, losing two carriers and four men. The rest assembled with the infantry companies.

The 'gathering of the clans' was a matter of minutes only. A little distance to the west, near the friendly Royal Horse Artillery, Peart rallied his battalion. He had no intention of withdrawing farther, or of staying there under the escarpment to be a target for plunging fire. Within half an hour he again had the companies up on the escarpment facing the enemy, about a mile west of the old position, protected from the tanks by the minefield. The Germans on [Belhamed](#) seemed to be too busy looting the positions to do anything more aggressive in the meantime.

Now the worst had happened. Calamity had struck, and it was the Kiwis who had stopped the blow. The [Tobruk](#) corridor was no more. The New Zealand Division,

exhausted and disheartened, its positions disrupted, its ranks tragically thinned, could take no more part in the battle, but left the field to the apparently victorious Germans and, except for [18 Battalion](#), withdrew that night to quieter spots eastwards.

Compared with the rest, [18 Battalion](#) had been lucky. True, it had lost a fifth of its number, but it had not had such fierce, prolonged fighting as [6 Brigade](#), nor had it been overrun like 20 Battalion. It had been within a whisker of that fate, but had dodged it by what [Brigadier Inglis](#) later called 'a skilful and justifiable avoidance of a punch they could not have taken directly'.

The chance of war is an unpredictable thing. Had [18](#) and 20 Battalions not changed places three days before, it would have been the [18th](#) that finished the war behind barbed wire, and the 20th might well have taken the escape road. However, that was not to be. The [18th](#) survived to fight another day, and carried the New Zealand flag at [Tobruk](#) until the pendulum of calamity swung again, and the enemy, weakened beyond immediate repair by his furious November battles, left the [Tobruk](#) area in headlong retreat.

¹ [Capt J. Tyerman](#); [Melbourne](#); born [England](#), 14 Jan 1907; shipping agent.

² [Sgt P. Yendell](#); [Hamilton](#); born [England](#), 18 May 1903; draper; twice wounded.

³ [Lt H. C. Hewlett](#); [Whangarei](#); born [Mata](#), 2 Jan 1906; farmer.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 15 – THE PENDULUM SWINGS

CHAPTER 15

The Pendulum Swings

Nobody could have called 18 Battalion happy on 1 December, sitting up on the escarpment expecting the worst. It had just seen its friends of 20 Battalion marched off to captivity, had had to leave the field to avoid the same fate, had lost a lot of good men in the process, and was separated from the Division. Late that morning, to Brigadier Inglis' mighty relief, Lieutenant-Colonel Peart raised him momentarily by wireless, but 18 Battalion had no possible chance of rejoining the brigade now that the country in between was infested with Jerries. All it could do was to sit tight and make the best of it.

At any rate, the battalion was with friends. Besides the Royal Horse Artillery it had met the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment of the Tobruk garrison out west towards Ed Duda, and Peart had placed himself under command of their parent brigade, 14 Brigade, who delightedly accepted the reinforcement, temporary though it might be. In its new position perched on the escarpment the battalion could do a useful job blocking Jerry if he tried to go on from Belhamed towards Ed Duda.

A useful job, but a dangerous one. The battalion had no anti-tank guns now; the gunners had withdrawn with the rest, leaving their guns behind, and were now an infantry platoon. The only defence against another attack would be the flimsy minefield and the stout hearts behind it, neither of them adequate protection against tanks. The men could not rely on the friendly escarpment another time, for here it was a gentler slope, no real obstacle for vehicles. Just by 18 Battalion's western flank—in fact B Company was astride it—the Tobruk bypass road climbed the step, then curved west to disappear over the hump of Ed Duda. A good tarred road this, providing access to the 18th from two directions. Ed Duda was all right, as it had been strongly reinforced after the near shave on 29 November and was now a main point of the Tobruk defence. But down the bypass road to the north was a no-man's land, with (as far as 18 Battalion knew) no British troops between it and 90 Light Division somewhere vaguely up in that direction.

So the position was uncomfortably exposed and open to shellfire. Some of the battalion were lucky enough to find old enemy sangars they could use, but most of

them had to turn to and hack out fresh holes that afternoon, while shells splashed round them. Luckily the fire was not concentrated—Jerry was very likely as short of ammunition as the New Zealand Division had been a few days earlier.

One small but vital part of the battalion really benefited from the change, and that was the RAP. It had a perfect position ready made for it, a cave in the hillside, with near by the remains of an Italian field hospital crammed full of medical and surgical gear. The rifle companies on their way back up the escarpment all loaded themselves with blankets and canned food from these stores, but what they took was a drop in the bucket. The cave was still full of enemy wounded, but there were four Itie doctors on the premises, so skilled aid was not lacking. Getting casualties off to hospital, an iffy operation on [Belhamed](#), presented no difficulty here—they went by night along the bypass road to [Tobruk](#), and struck no trouble.

This worked the other way too. The daily hot meal, ammunition and supplies could now be taken up to the battalion in comfort from [Tobruk](#), instead of across a stretch of pathless, perilous desert. The worst dangers that trucks had to face now were the British minefields round [Tobruk](#), which took a lot of negotiating— [18 Battalion](#) lost three trucks on the mines during the next few days.

The 'B Ech' boys, to digress briefly, were not at all taken with [Tobruk](#), which they sweepingly classified as a terrible hole. A huddle of dusty ruins, a landlocked harbour full of wrecks, bombed nightly, the water undrinkable—what a dump to fight for, they thought. Their spirits were very low the first afternoon, when wild rumours began to circulate about the fate of the boys on [Belhamed](#). But by evening it was generally known that the more alarming of these rumours were untrue, that the rifle companies had escaped the 'bag' and were still in the fight, though tired and depleted. Next day every man who could be spared from B Echelon was sent up to reinforce the rifle companies on their escarpment.

Life on that escarpment, though much more bearable than the previous week, was still no bed of roses. The enemy was close and was in a nasty aggressive mood at first, as [18 Battalion](#) soon found out. A report by Peart to [Divisional Headquarters](#) on 3 December outlines briefly what happened during the first three days in the new position:

9. At about 1900 hrs [1 December] a night attack was made on the Bn. by enemy infantry from the north. This attack was easily repulsed with LMG and rifle fire.
10. At about 0630 hrs 2 Dec 41, a new attack was started from the north by at least a Bn of the enemy with arty support. This attack was also repulsed with heavy loss to the enemy by 0900 hrs. We suffered 7 casualties.
11. The remainder of 2 Dec 41 was one of comparative quiet except for movement of the enemy outside small arms range. Arty fire was brought to bear by **1 RHA** who had sent an FOO to the Bn.
12. Late in the afternoon considerable activity by the enemy was observed on belhamed and an attack from that direction was expected. After considerable difficulty it was found possible to get two A/Tk guns (Polish) through Beds and Herts Regt, and five I tanks from **22 Armd Bde**.... **1 RHA** arranged a complete defensive fire plan.
13. No attack developed and night $\frac{2}{3}$ Dec was quiet. 90 reinforcements were sent forward from B Ech of **18 Bn** and **20 Bn**. 10 **18 Bn** reported and took away all wounded, except stretcher cases, and some 50 officers and ORs of a German and Italian hospital in the Bn area.
14. On 3 Dec much enemy movement was visible east and south of the posn. Recce patrols were sent out and at time of writing it appears that the enemy is holding a defensive line sidi resegh-belhamed-bu amud.... An attack on the enemy has also developed further south from apparently some portion of our own troops.
15. Wire has been received from Beds and Herts Regt and 600 mines have been promised. It is proposed to further consolidate the posn on night $\frac{3}{4}$ Dec.
16. The morale of the tps is good.... The present strength of the unit, including attached from **20 Bn**, is 17 Offrs and 528 ORs....
17. It is emphasised that for a considerable period this Bn has been placed in posns of extreme difficulty with three sides open to attack and with little support available. Great help has been received in particular from **1 RHA** and their FOO....
18. Early information about plans for our future action or movement would be appreciated....

This bald account fairly effectively conceals some very sound work by **18 Battalion**, beginning shortly after dark on 1 December, when the alarm was first raised that Jerry was coming in on the north-east flank. The Brens facing that way opened up forthwith, the riflemen round them joined in with enthusiasm, and very successful their efforts were, for Jerry halted and dug in where he was, down below the escarpment. After the morning's events the battalion was not at all disposed to let sleeping dogs lie. The Brens continued to give Jerry what one man described as a 'good pasting', but Jerry stuck to his new position, and a little later in the evening

sent in a few shells which rather cramped the battalion's style.

All that night fingers in [18 Battalion](#) were very ready to triggers, but Jerry did nothing till daybreak next day, when a sudden storm of shells arrived, followed by the enemy infantry, whose numbers, now that they could be estimated in daylight, looked like 200 or so. Reaction was swift. Brens and rifles opened up, followed by the [Royal Horse Artillery](#), with an effect so rewarding that even the [18 Battalion](#) boys were astonished. Under the shelling and accurate sniping the German troops broke and ran—a rare spectacle—and as they did so more and more troops rose out of the ground and joined them till the estimated 200 had swollen to a battalion at least. They did not stop till they reached a small ridge 800 yards away, where they rallied on a line of tanks in hull-down positions.

Jerry had now lost his first advantage of surprise, and all the advantage of ground lay with [18 Battalion](#), which could overlook the whole situation. To some men it looked as if the tanks were driving the infantry back into the fight, but that might have been a bit far-fetched. There was certainly much activity over in the lee of the little ridge, staff cars buzzing about and the Germans obviously making ready to come again. But the fun, when it began again about 7 a.m., was shortlived. The German infantry this time made almost no progress; the Royal Horse Artillery (for whom the [18th](#) was beginning to cherish a warm regard) opened fire again and broke up the advance, helped by three opportune British tanks which appeared out of nowhere.

That was the ignominious end of Jerry's attempt on [18 Battalion](#) from the north. During the rest of the morning the infantrymen and artillery had intermittent sport shooting at small enemy parties which from time to time rose up from the ground and made a dash for safety, and in the afternoon the pioneer platoon sent out a patrol and helped the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment to round up some 150 Germans who had hoped to lie doggo till dark. They might have got away with it but for an accident—an enemy car travelling injudiciously up the bypass road had stopped when fired on, and a carrier which went to investigate had stumbled on these hapless Jerries in the vicinity. Exposure for hours to drizzle and cold wind (for 2 December was a foul day) had sapped their resistance, and they surrendered without argument. They were herded up and marched off to the 'Beds & Herts' lines, with [18 Battalion](#) interestedly watching from its vantage point.

The history of these abortive attacks from 'the other side of the hill' is interesting. While the morning attack on [Belhamed](#) on 1 December was in full swing, [Africa Corps](#) asked 90 Light Division to attack from the north, the idea being to trap the Kiwis between two forces and crush them, nutcracker style. The 90th Light agreed with alacrity, but promise seems to have outrun performance; the best unit it could find for the job was a makeshift, poorly armed battalion, commanded by the divisional adjutant and composed of odds and ends, supply troops and the like.

The first attack that night penetrated well down towards the [Belhamed](#) escarpment, but could not be pressed home against the solid defence of [18 Battalion](#) and the Tommies. The attackers dug in for the night, then next morning tried again, with the disastrous results already described. It was no mere repulse, it was a fiasco. The battalion, received in such unfriendly fashion by [18 Battalion](#) and [1 RHA](#), lost heart and decided unanimously to go home, 'streaming back in disorder' as 90 Light Division itself admits. Its unfortunate commander, hauled over the coals later, could offer no convincing explanation—the men, he said, had 'bolted leaving behind their A Tk guns and other weapons'. Not an inspiring page in the history of German military prowess—but what a tonic for the battle-bruised [18 Battalion](#), whose morale had inevitably suffered a little in the cataclysm of 1 December.

So, despite the rain and cold, the battalion woke up on 3 December in a mood of renewed confidence. Another factor that helped to bring this on was the welcome reappearance of the [RAF](#), which from 1 December had sent a squadron or two over daily to 'do over' Jerry's battle positions. The [Luftwaffe](#), thank Heaven, seemed to be right out of the sky, except over [Tobruk](#), which still took a nightly 'towelling'. The anti-aircraft displays over the port, even from 18 miles away, were worth the price of a little sleep.

The much-disputed area between [Belhamed](#) and [Ed Duda](#), now that Jerry had given up his idea of breaking through from the north, was surprisingly quiet on 3 December. A few odd enemy parties wandering round within range of [18 Battalion's](#) Brens were tickled up a little, and every now and again a small salvo of shells fell on the battalion, including one bout just as the daily supply vehicles from [Tobruk](#) were unloading that evening. But apart from this, all movement seen in enemy territory was well away to the east, beyond [Belhamed](#) and [Sidi Rezegh](#), where columns were

perpetually moving southwards. It puzzled [18 Battalion](#) why this should be so—the explanation that the enemy was getting ready to evacuate the field did not occur to it.

Still less did it seem like that on 4 December, which was a day of alarms and excursions on the battalion's southern front. The day is outlined in another of Colonel Peart's laconic reports:

At 0715 hrs 4 Dec an enemy attack developed on [Ed Duda](#) crossing some 1000 yds to our south. We engaged them with MMG fire and some LMG fire from FDL's of B Coy. Our southern flank recd considerable attention from the enemy and suffered heavy mortar, MMG and shell fire throughout the day. We had fourteen casualties.

At about 1215 hrs the same day two enemy tanks approached our eastern flank (C Coy). One ran over an enemy mine and we destroyed it with anti-tank fire. The second withdrew. At 1450 hrs the [Border Regt](#) counter-attacked from [Ed Duda](#) with only partial success finally withdrawing through our right flank.

All this was by way of a final fling by an enemy forced off the battlefield, but by no means routed. It began very early in the morning with general shelling of the area, A Company (the most southerly company) getting the lion's share. Sergeant Yendell of C Company recalls:

The first shells to arrive at dawn were sulphur shells, the first we had experienced. One... covered a number of chaps with burning bits of sulphur, fumes went right down our throats and we had a very bad bout of coughing, I and others too thought gas, and no respirators, what a rotten 10 minutes. It proved to be a ranging shell as then followed 2 hours of the heaviest shelling I have ever experienced.

Then came the Germans, about 200 of them, advancing across the open ground south of [18 Battalion](#) in the general direction of [Ed Duda](#). The [18th](#) companies, especially A and B, had some good shooting for a while, and so did a British Vickers gun platoon ([Northumberland Fusiliers](#)) which had arrived up in support the previous night and had gone into position with A Company just in time to take part. It looked at first as if Jerry, when he sent his troops straight across that bare flat, did not

know just how close the opposition was.

However, he knew now, and lost no time in doing something about it, the 'something' consisting of machine-gun and mortar fire on A and B Companies, the heaviest since 1 December. This almost neutralised 18 Battalion's fire, forced the troops down into their holes, and opened the way for the attackers to get right past the battalion and cut the bypass road west of B Company. It was a difficult morning for B Company, its telephone lines constantly cut by shells, so that its defence could not be co-ordinated as well as it would have liked. Jerry succeeded in putting up an anti-tank-gun nest on the bypass road, with unfortunate results, for when four I tanks sallied down the road through B Company they ran into concentrated fire and only one came back.

It was a depressing morning, with the thought in every mind, 'Is this going to be 1 December all over again?' It looked as if it might be, particularly just after midday, when two German tanks hove in sight east of the position, making for C Company. These, thought the boys, would probably be the forerunners of many more; there was no nice escarpment to save them this time, so were they to share 20 Battalion's fate after all?

Not pleasant thoughts, these, for men who had survived that other black day. But this time, thank goodness, they were unfounded. The two tanks were not followed up by more; and awaiting them was an unexpected surprise. One of Jerry's own mines did a job its layers never intended—it blew a track off one tank, and the Polish anti-tank gunners finished the cripple off and drove away its companion. This was a satisfactory little action, in cheering contrast to the pounding A and B Companies were taking.

The Border Regiment's counter-attack was quite unexpected, and to the onlookers seemed a foolhardy though gallant piece of work, straight across the open desert with no supporting fire. The Borderers were caught out in the open and suffered terribly. The only good thing about it, from 18 Battalion's point of view, was that the Germans' attention was diverted from A and B Companies, and the pressure on them was reduced though they were forced to keep low until dark.

That night the enemy disengaged and began a general withdrawal westwards.

Patrols south from [18 Battalion](#) next morning found to their surprise that there was no enemy left facing the battalion, only a smallish force on [Belhamed](#). Up north, too, 90 Light Division had left except for rearguards, which pulled back later, leaving that dishevelled piece of sand and scrub to the British.

If you want to appreciate the sun, try living underground for a while. This was pretty well what [18 Battalion](#)'s rifle companies had done for nine days, and now once more they were free to roam round in the open with impunity. That is not to say that they dropped their guard and neglected precautions—standing and roving patrols, both from the companies and the carrier platoon, went out in all directions to keep watch. But where you would previously have seen only camel scrub, now there was continual activity, men walking round, standing or sitting in the open, revelling in their freedom. There were still a few enemy holding on at [Sidi Rezegh](#) until the withdrawal was complete, but the battalion paid no attention to them.

Before anything else, there was a job to do on [Belhamed](#). Salvage parties found there scenes of terrible desolation, dead Germans and Kiwis, burnt-out Jerry tanks, the gallant New Zealand gunners still lying round their guns, a shambles of scattered gear and weapons of all kinds. Particularly noticeable was the large number of German dead very close to the old New Zealand positions, gruesome witnesses to the fury of the fight that had taken place there. The [18 Battalion](#) parties buried all these dead, friend and foe—there was no time to waste pity or regret on them, it was of necessity a callous, unceremonious burial. Then there was all the gear to be salvaged and sent back to [Tobruk](#), though of course the battalion made its own losses good first. Most valuable of all the loot in the eyes of the men was a stock of German and Italian rations, and enough water for everybody to wash all over and take off their ten days' whiskers. There were trucks, too, more than enough to replace all the battalion had lost. Even a few stray prisoners were picked up—on 6 December C Company got quite a start when a party of Italians emerged from an old well to make formal surrender.

Now that the enemy was on the run, the [RAF](#) was over again in large numbers to hurry him along, passing to and fro overhead. One over-keen Hurricane pilot on 5 December gave the battalion a few bursts from his guns, luckily with no casualties, but that was all. On 5 December the artillery supporting [14 Brigade](#) was near enough to harass Jerry as he moved west, but after that his main force was out of range and

the shooting stopped.

A situation like this was always good for a crop of rumours. This time, inevitably, one story in particular gained wide currency—we're going to be relieved, we're going back to [Egypt](#) with the rest of the Div. It was a very popular rumour, for a move away from that bleak, ill-omened [Belhamed](#) would be fine no matter where they went. And it was a fairly safe rumour, for [18 Battalion](#), though still fighting fit and in good spirits, had done its full share, and was now overdue for a respite and an opportunity to refurbish.

There were signs of a move from about 7 December. All the attached troops ([1 RHA](#), the [Northumberland Fusiliers](#), the Polish gunners) left one by one. On the 9th the last salvage parties went over to [Belhamed](#), and the same evening definite word came through of a move to [Tobruk](#) next day. The battalion was in a holiday mood now, the sort of mood that grips a unit about to leave any sticky or unpleasant spot, and lightly and cheerfully the men packed the trucks and made ready to pull out next morning.

The 10th December dawned grey and bitter, but that didn't matter. At 7.30 a.m. ASC lorries appeared on the scene, and within an hour the whole battalion was on its way, spinning along the bypass road towards [Tobruk](#). Eyes scanned the waste to catch glimpses of the [Tobruk](#) defences or the positions Jerry had clung to throughout the campaign, but the fighting on [Belhamed](#) was already slipping from the memory, for such is the way of soldiers.

Seven miles short of [Tobruk](#) the convoy turned off the main road towards the sea, wound down into a steep-sided wadi, and there they were. 'Dig in' had been the order; but many of the men found ready-made protection in caves, and most of the others were content with token holes. Then they settled down to enjoy a day of blessed idleness.

They had reason to be pleased with themselves. Nobody had ever accused [18 Battalion](#) of lacking guts, but it had re-proved itself beyond all doubt. Its initiative and vigour after the [Belhamed](#) catastrophe were recognised—rare honour—in a letter from the [13 Corps](#) commander, who wrote to Lieutenant-Colonel Peart:

I want to thank you most sincerely for all you have done. You have all been hard, even overworked in the task of wearing down the enemy by meeting and beating off his repeated attacks—now he has fallen back, thanks to you and all those who fought to the last. But for the gallantry of all we should never have been in the favourable position in which we find ourselves.

Words like these would, of course, have been shrugged off with a deprecatory oath or two by any member of the battalion; but still it was good to feel that you had come through a trying time with credit, and that it was now over and behind you. The light-hearted, almost happy-go-lucky warfare of [Gambut](#) and [Zaafan](#) had given place on [Belhamed](#) to a tense, uncomfortable sort of war calling for steadiness and stamina, and [18 Battalion](#) had risen to the occasion, though it was to be hoped that such an occasion would not recur.

The battalion had had only a handful of casualties since 1 December, but still its rifle companies were little more than half strength now, for 50 killed and 119 wounded ¹ is a big gap torn out of a unit, even without counting the 21 men taken prisoner. A few of the wounded were unlucky enough to fall into Jerry's hands when he overran a dressing station east of [Sidi Rezegh](#) on 28 November. Saddest blow of all for the survivors, ten more of the wounded were lost in the torpedoing of the hospital ship [Chakdina](#) outside [Tobruk](#) on 5 December.

So it was a depleted battalion, only 577 strong, that boarded its trucks after breakfast on 11 December and headed east, turning its back on [Tobruk](#) and its scrubby, corpse-strewn desert battleground. Depleted, but gay and in high spirits, its losses already gone from the forefront of the mind, as always when a unit comes out of action.

How different this trip back was from the move up before the battle! No groping in the dark over humps and hollows this time. Away they went at heartening speed down the main road, past their old looting ground at [Gambut](#) (the very sight of the airfield made the mouth water), then off the road and south-east across the desert to the Egyptian frontier. At 3 p.m. they passed through the Wire, then through a vast dumping ground of stores and ammunition, and so to their night's camping place eight miles inside [Egypt](#).

Two more days like the first, and at 2.30 p.m. on 13 December the familiar **Baggush** landscape once more hove in sight, and there were the LOB people welcoming the wanderers back, the whole battalion a Babel of jumbled talk, **Gambut** and **Zaafraan** and **Belhamed** being refought, the dead remembered again with brief solemnity.

The past month in the LOB camp had dragged badly, with nothing much to do except guard and fatigue jobs over the almost empty New Zealand area. Rumours of the battalion's exploits had filtered back from the 'blue', but most of them, in the way of rumours, had been so distorted as to bear only vague likeness to the reality. Now the yarns flowed freely, losing nothing in the telling, and those who had spent the month in safety and comparative comfort came near to envying the rest their hardships and dangers. For he is a poor soldier indeed who does not covet honour, and in the chaos of **Belhamed 18 Battalion** had, more than ever before or since, covered itself with honour.



¹ Includes 9 men wounded and prisoner of war.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 16 – FRESH WOODS

CHAPTER 16

Fresh Woods

The battalion's first job at [Baggush](#) was to revel in the pile of mail waiting for it. Then it had to scrounge new roofing material, for to its disgust it found nearly every dugout in its area unroofed and open to the weather. Usually, in [Egypt](#), that would not have been very serious, but this was the wrong time of the year. The night after the unit arrived a heavy rainstorm sent a small Niagara cascading down the escarpment and flowing round the dugouts down below. Before the end of [18 Battalion's](#) three and a half weeks at [Baggush](#) things were even worse—bitter winds and rain squalls, the Box a mess of churned mud, dugouts (according to one dissatisfied tenant) 'proper messy holes'.

Training began on 17 December, with a fairly full daily programme: arms and bayonet drill at first, then much route-marching, weapon training and range work. There was some grumbling at being pitched into work so soon, but loafing round [Baggush](#) would have been pretty grim, even the diehards admitted that. Anyway, some honest toil gave everyone an extra impetus to enjoy the relaxation of Christmas.

This was celebrated in style, with lots of food, and enough drink to make all hands wish there was more. But it was a sedate occasion compared with New Year. With an issue of rum to boost the party along, the whole of the New Zealand Division 'went to town' on 31 December, and [Baggush](#) saw a show that outdid the fireworks display of a year before. German flares, Itie grenades, machine guns, Bofors, even 25-pounders—it was bigger, better and noisier than many a battlefield. The battalion was above the escarpment on a route march when the fun began, but it made for home and joined in, rightly thinking that the centre of a hurricane is a safer place than the edge.

Although [Baggush](#) was as unattractive as ever, everyone managed to have quite a good time there. The training was regular but not really tough. A big parcel mail, arriving in dribs and drabs for a fortnight after Christmas, kept the boys supplied with fruit cake and other luxuries to contrast with the bully and biscuits of [Libya](#). A reinforcement draft of some fifty men included a good sprinkling of old hands whom

everyone was glad to see. Best of all, there was a persistent rumour that the New Zealanders would be heading back soon to their beloved [Maadi](#), king of camps, which they had not seen for many long months.

Rumour was accurate, for 1942 was not a week old when [18 Battalion](#), along with the rest of [4 Brigade](#), bade the [Baggush](#) Box and its mud a last farewell that had few regrets in it. The big packing day was 5 January. Next morning the transport left early with nearly all the stores, tents were struck after breakfast, the carriers were loaded on railway trucks, and the same evening the battalion joyfully boarded the train at [Sidi Haneish](#) and away it went, clattering and bumping through the night on its way back to civilisation.

The graceful palms of the [Nile](#) delta, the debonair minarets of [Cairo](#), the lush green of [Maadi](#) village had never looked so good, for they spoke of leave, of good food and drink, of the relative comfort of Base. One man appreciatively wrote:

This is the first time for about a year that we have struck a camp which is fully equipped with all necessities and naturally enough we appreciate the change. There's hot and cold showers, picture shows, butter and tons of fresh vegetables on the menu.... We get an issue of meat and fruit pies two times a week.

Of leave there was no lack. Ten per cent daily to [Cairo](#) (which in effect means as much as you can afford), and once again a small quota of seven-day leave. The demand for leave was bound to sag later as paybook credits disappeared, but for the moment [Cairo](#) was irresistible.

However, [Maadi](#) was a very temporary port of call, and paybooks were still relatively intact when on 22 January the battalion went on its travels again, back to the Combined Training Centre at [Kabrit](#). This time, according to a particularly intriguing rumour, the Canal was to be only another temporary halting place, and very soon the whole division would be moving on to fresh woods. According to some authorities it would be going back to New Zealand or the South Pacific; for these were the early days of the Japanese war, and New Zealand's safety was a nagging worry in all minds. Other wise ones scorned this idea. But the question could not be resolved in the meantime.

Until the end of February [18 Battalion](#) was at [Kabrit](#), route-marching over soft

dunes, doing the same old weapon training and digging and small-scale manoeuvres, playing football whenever possible, hating the fine Canal dust and the high winds that blew it into eyes and food and blankets and everywhere. The war seemed to have gone off the boil—true, two reinforcement drafts came in to bring the battalion up to full strength again, and the gear it had lost in [Libya](#) was replaced, but it had to hand a lot of its trucks over to British Army authorities, and could not get new ones, which indicated that no more active operations were in store for it immediately.

There was disappointingly little amphibious training in February. In the last week of January there were two full days of instruction at the Combined Training Centre—on assault craft and all the bits and pieces that went with them, scaling ladders, rowing boats, hand carts for use on beaches, wire ‘carpets’ to be laid on the beach sand as roadways. There was also a landing exercise from the invasion ship [Glengyle](#) on the far shore of the [Bitter Lake](#), beginning at three o'clock one cold January morning and continuing for two hungry, uncomfortable days. But then the battalion had no more of this kind of work until 23 February, when it loaded on the [Glengyle](#) for a bigger, more important landing exercise farther afield.

As usual, the men knew very little about what was to happen and why. At the jetty they were jammed tight into the landing craft, then out and up the [Glengyle's](#) vertical sides like monkeys. Space on the ship when all were aboard was nearly as cramped as on the boats, but the men did not complain, so much did everyone appreciate the fresh Canal air and the freedom from dust. In the evening the [Glengyle](#) sailed away down the Canal, passed out into the Gulf of [Suez](#) while most of her passengers slept, and about midnight arrived off [Ras el Sudr](#), 26 miles down the Arabian coast, where an unwilling battalion was dragged from its slumbers and turned loose in the boats, with a lining of hot cocoa to help it on its way.

This was no fun on a cold night, particularly as there was something of a sea running, and some of the men were sick on the way in. [Wellington](#) bombers growled overhead dropping flares along the beach. The leading companies (C and D) were ten minutes late getting to shore, and then D Company's boats went aground, had to be taken out again, and finally landed three-quarters of a mile from their right place. A number of other boats hit rocks or shoals a little off shore, and the men,

obediently running out when the bow doors went down, found themselves up to the neck in water with a hundred yards to wade to dry land.

This bad beginning threw the whole landing out of schedule, but the companies pushed on as best they could with their programme, which involved a three-mile advance inland and establishing positions on a low ridge, while a ship-to-beach ferry service brought the support weapons and other bits and pieces ashore. At 11.30 a.m. the fun and games were finished, and everyone went back to the beach and out to the waiting [Glengyle](#).

This was not the first practice landing that had been made at [Ras el Sudr](#), but it was the first one at night, and consequently was not expected to run with clockwork precision. Experts from both Army and Navy who were around keeping an eye on things were kind enough to report that ' [18 Battalion](#), with a few exceptions put up a very creditable performance indeed'. The forward companies had navigated their way inland over rough, unknown country to land fair and square on the objective.

Next day the battalion was back at [Kabrit](#), arriving there in a vicious sandstorm. But its stay in the dust was drawing to a close. On 27 February, quite unexpectedly, orders came which set the rumours at rest and temporarily silenced those who had the Division already on the ships for New Zealand. Its destination was a very different one.

The countries at the eastern end of the [Mediterranean](#) had so far played an undistinguished part in the war; but they would become key strategic points if the Germans tried to encircle the [Mediterranean](#) and link up their armies in [Russia](#) and North Africa. In such a case the British planned to meet and halt them on a series of prepared positions in [Syria](#). Among the formations nominated to dig and occupy these positions was the New Zealand Division. As early as August 1941 the Division had nearly gone to [Syria](#), but had been sent to train for the desert instead. Now, with the coming of spring and with a new German offensive expected in [Russia](#), the defence of [Syria](#) loomed up again. Rommel's big counter-attack in [Libya](#) in January delayed matters for a while, and the Division stayed in [Egypt](#) on call, but by mid-February, with the British line stabilised (so everyone hoped) at [Gazala](#), the situation seemed easier, and the Division was released to the Ninth Army in [Syria](#). In the second half of February, all unknown to the Kiwis, arrangements were completed

and plans made for the New Zealanders to shift to [Syria](#). A sector was allotted to the New Zealand Division, engineers began to build camps for it, and it was decided that [4 Brigade](#) would lead the Division there early in March.

The defence was to be based on a number of 'fortresses', corresponding more or less to the desert 'boxes', covering all the routes down through [Syria](#). The Division's particular responsibility, the [Djedeide](#) fortress, was an important one, blocking the [Bekaa](#) valley, for centuries a north-south highway pointing at [Palestine](#) and [Egypt](#). Near the little village of [Djedeide](#) the [Lebanon](#) and Anti-[Lebanon](#) ranges bounding this valley converged, making a naturally strong position that would be difficult to get at from a flank. The fortress was to be tank-proof, dug for all-round defence, and stocked with two months' supplies. All this was to be done by mid-May—Jerry, said the experts, would not be able to overcome all the obstacles separating him from [Syria](#) before the end of May at the earliest.

However, all this was on the upper level, and [18 Battalion](#) knew nothing of it until its marching orders arrived out of the blue on 27 February—pack up for the trip to [Syria](#) next day. This delightful surprise was received with enthusiasm. It promised new interests, new scenes, freedom from the Wog dust that, at the very moment the orders were published, was swirling round the camp.

The enthusiasm was not quite so marked next day when the hundred moving-day chores had to be done, especially as the battalion camped out in the cold that night, its tents having already been struck and loaded on a train. On 1 March the transport left before sunrise, but the rest of the unit had to hang round till 6 p.m., when some trucks arrived to take it to [Geneifa](#) station. The train set out in the dark, crossed the Canal and stopped at [Kantara](#) just on the other side.



eastern mediterranean

A belated meal at [Kantara](#), and then everyone settled down to sleep. But there was little rest that night. The train stood all night at [Kantara](#), while the men squirmed in the cold discomfort of the carriages without even the soothing clack of the wheels to put them to sleep. By morning there was not a vestige left of the enthusiasm of two days before. However, soon after 6 a.m. the train suddenly got on its way, and spirits rose again as it headed into the sunrise across the [Sinai](#) desert. Later in the day the arid [Sinai](#) gave place to the irrigated gardens and citrus groves of the Palestinian coastal plain, and as the train hurried north to [Haifa](#) the men revelled in the unaccustomed green and gorged themselves on oranges, eight or ten for a piastre.

Next morning, after a night at the [Tira](#) transit camp outside [Haifa](#), [18 Battalion](#) went on its way again, this time in twenty-four antiquated civilian buses. It was much cooler. The way led through farmlands where the first fruit trees were in full blossom, down to the Sea of Galilee—who can forget the splendid first glimpse of this mountain-locked lake from the Galilean hilltops?—then up through steep, rugged country into [Syria](#), towards the snowy mountains visible on the northern horizon. It was at times a hair-raising ride, as the bus drivers spent the day jockeying for position on the winding roads, and several buses had fits of temperament, boiling and coughing their way up the hills and breaking down from time to time. But every bus reached its destination ([Damascus](#)) some time that evening, and next day the battalion went back to ordinary old comfortless 3-ton lorries for the last stage of the trip.

It was now in attractive country, glittering mountain snowfields poised above lower hills and valleys bright with wild flowers. But a biting wind blew off the snow, so that everyone was glad to wear greatcoats. At 1 p.m. the men were decanted from the trucks at journey's end, a jumble of tents and Nissen huts on flat, stony ground, with the steep wall of the Anti-Lebanons rising not far away to the east, and a spectacular view across the valley to the high snowfields of the Lebanon. The valley floor and the lowest hill slopes were cultivated here and there, dotted with scrubby olive trees and tiny farm hovels. Down the valley flowed a river, and a muddy irrigation canal ran beside the camp. Not much more than a mile away, where the Anti- [Lebanon](#) foothills began, was a straggly village that looked worth investigating.

It was good to step into a ready-made camp, but there were a few domestic chores to do, sumps to dig, incinerators to build, and so on, that kept the battalion more or less occupied for a few days. Life was pretty easy. Reveille at 7 a.m., which is holiday hours for the Army. There were few parades, and the boys spent their off hours exploring the surrounding country, the nearby village ([El Aine](#) by name) and other villages within reach. The countryside offered few possibilities, but the [El Aine](#) wineshops stocked a variety of lethal brews whose names captured the imagination even if their taste did not. They sounded prohibitively expensive, £1 or more for a bottle, but the Syrian pound was worth only 2s. 3d., producing an illusion of wealth that was apt to be dangerous. A few miles farther north was a particularly clean, attractive village called [Fakie](#), which very soon became a favourite with [18 Battalion](#) because of the friendly reception it got there and also because of the lovely hand-woven rugs made by the women. You could spend hours watching these rugs taking shape on their primitive frames, and many of them found their way back to New Zealand in the next few months.

On 5 March the transport and heavy baggage arrived in streaming rain. Luckily, the ground here did not degenerate into such a mud bath as the [Baggush](#) camp, but the rain and the chilling snow wind combined badly together. Everyone was quite keen to get to work, if only to keep the blood circulating. But for a few days they had to be patient, and keep themselves warm with football and route marches while waiting for the order to start their battle positions.

From the time [18 Battalion](#) arrived at [El Aine](#) it mounted a full guard on its camp, the first since leaving New Zealand. This was not just ornamental, but protection against the Syrians, who enjoyed wide notoriety as thieves, and had a particular liking for army equipment. During the trip to [Syria](#) the men had been warned about this, and about Fifth Columnists, said to abound in this part of the country. The first part of the warning was undoubtedly justified, as the battalion found before long—gear of all kinds vanished inexplicably from here and there, even from inside the camp, and the price of immunity was eternal vigilance. As for the Fifth Columnists, there were periodical reports that parachutists had been seen in the hills near the New Zealand position, and once a search party found some abandoned parachutes, but [18 Battalion](#) had no direct experience of them.

The battalion was hardly settled at [El Aine](#) before C Company was taken from it and sent for a fortnight to guard a big ammunition dump on an old French airfield at [Talia](#), 25 miles to the south. This was a cold, joyless job, enlivened by one incident which those who took part in it would prefer to forget. The chief actor in this was a Tommy warrant officer who appeared at the dump with a truck about two o'clock one morning, demanding rifle ammunition in a hurry. On the strength of a written authority, apparently signed by the British officer in charge of the dump, he was allowed to load up and go away. Next morning, however, there were fireworks; the authority had been forged, the Tommy and the ammunition had vanished, and the guard commander narrowly escaped court-martial.

Two months later, in May, C Company was sent off again on the same kind of job, this time at [Baalbek](#), some 18 miles south of [El Aine](#). For this the company was split up, 13 Platoon taking over a petrol dump in a rocky wilderness a few miles from [Baalbek](#), the rest a dump of bombs in caves on the edge of the town. No incidents like the [Talia](#) one occurred to enliven this second guard. No. 13 Platoon, finding time heavy on its hands, attained remarkable proficiency with the Bren gun during its fortnight there, more so than the other platoons, which were nearer to the attractions of civilisation provided in [Baalbek](#).

[Baalbek](#) was [4 Brigade](#)'s chief afternoon leave centre from early March onwards. There was little to do there, though the wineshops plied a roaring trade; but the imagination was caught by the vast, magnificent Roman ruins, one of the show

places of the [Levant](#), just outside the town. So far the Division had viewed its antique monuments with detachment and a vague distrust. But these [Baalbek](#) remains were 'bloody good ruins', an expression implying the highest praise in Kiwi language. They roused enthusiasm by their very hugeness, and few were the Kiwis who did not make at least one trip to crane their necks at the decayed majesty of the Temple of Jupiter, and to be photographed, dwarfed against the mighty pillars.

Over the weekend of 9 and 10 March the battalion's officers went forward to the battle position and explored it thoroughly on foot; company sectors were decided and work instructions given. On the 11th the whole unit went up there and the navvying began.

The [Djedeide](#) fortress, sprawling across the valley and up the hills on either side, had already had some work done on it— an anti-tank ditch across the front was nearly finished. Fourth Brigade had the right-hand sector, consisting mostly of the forbidding Anti- [Lebanon](#) slopes; only [18 Battalion](#) had a stretch of comparatively low, accessible ground. About a mile along the good main road running north from camp the unit's area began, and from there it stretched another mile and a half forward, astride the road, as far as [Djedeide](#) village, which was included in the front line. The battalion's mile and a quarter of front was to be held by two companies, B in [Djedeide](#) and on the valley floor to the left of the road, D among gardens and orchards on gentle slopes on the right flank, just above [Djedeide](#). The rest of the unit was farther back, perched on hillsides on the right of the road, in the lee of a rocky spur which came down just behind [Djedeide](#). The battalion's right-hand neighbour, [20 Battalion](#), looked down on it from the crags, while [18 Battalion](#) itself looked down on the valley to its left, where other troops were later to come in and complete the line.

For two months the men worked at [Djedeide](#), blasting away the hard rock, hewing out slit trenches and gun positions, living quarters and first-aid posts, observation posts and headquarters, the last-named roofed over and strengthened with heavy railway iron. Some natural caves provided ready-made dugouts without the hard work, once the traces of native occupation were cleared away. Everything was camouflaged, and an intricate system of dummy and alternative positions was built. The Syrians living nearby became very friendly after a while, and the first-aid posts found themselves acting fairy godmothers to the villagers, whose medical

services seemed to be nil.

At first the men attacked the work with enjoyment. It was a novelty to be in cultivated country, or even on a rocky hill, after the eternal sand and sameness of [Egypt](#). The air was crisp and clear, the cold invigorating, and the weather for the first few days good. From about 18 to 25 March the retreating winter had a last fling, with vicious rainstorms, snow almost to the bottom of the hills, and freezing cold; but this passed away very quickly, and by the end of the month the sun was out again and the valley warming up with the advance of spring. The oranges ripened and were a pleasant variation in the rations, succeeded by apricots as the weeks wore on.

The malarial season came too. The Bekaa valley is a highly malarious area, and from 4 April every possible weapon was turned against its bearer, the too friendly anopheles mosquito. Anti-malaria squads could be seen prowling the area spraying stagnant water with insecticide. Complicated personal precautions appeared in routine orders—mosquito nets to be tucked in round blankets at dusk, sleeping quarters sprayed every morning, face nets and gloves for sentries, repellent cream smeared on exposed skin. You even saw inspecting officers running their fingers along a man's cheek to see if he had greased himself properly. Later in April, when summer clothes were issued, the unlovely [Bombay](#) bloomers at last came into their own, being unhitched and let down below the knee at dusk to dissuade the 'mossies'. In [18 Battalion](#), as in every other unit, the men were apt to look on all these precautions with a tolerant contempt, and observe them when convenient. But this was not the case with typhus, which was reported in the [Bekaa](#) valley in March. This most unpleasant disease commanded more respect among the Kiwis, who were quite ready to co-operate by obeying 'out of bounds' restrictions where typhus was concerned.

As the weeks went on and the heat increased, the first enthusiasm for manual labour was less evident. The Bekaa valley, the men found, was a natural wind funnel. It blew almost continuously, sometimes in gales that forced fine dust in everywhere—you might as well be back in [Egypt](#), was the men's reaction whenever this got particularly bad. The tempo of the work slackened considerably.

With the receding snow the mountains lost their beauty and became arid,

ragged hunks of rock, and though the valley blossomed in lush spring green splashed with the vivid red of wild poppies, there was a feeling of being shut in, of having no horizon wider than the few miles of river plain and the mountain tops. This increased when in late April the semi-nomadic local peasants began their move to summer grazing grounds. Every day and all day the valley was filled with a moving throng of sheep and camels, of dark gipsy-looking people, of donkeys loaded high with household goods, all coming from nobody knew where and disappearing into the vague distance. No wonder that the Kiwis, without enough hard work to absorb all their surplus energy, tended to become restless.

With restlessness comes mischief. Mild mischief, to be sure, but it took several forms—a vastly greater consumption of questionable liquor with all its unpleasant effects, an equally vast increase in the popularity of that expensive sport 'two up', systematic dynamiting of the fish out of the [Orontes River](#) which ran past [18 Battalion's](#) camp some two miles away.

This last caused most trouble. Beginning in a small way in March, it had assumed such proportions by late April that the river was practically denuded of fish, and the local authorities, perturbed by the disappearance of one of their staple food sources, made a vigorous protest which led to the sport being completely banned under penalty of severe punishment.

It was all very well putting notices in routine orders banning this or that, but it was more to the point to provide recreation. So this is what [18 Battalion](#) set out to do, and it was very successful.

The most popular institution, beyond a doubt, was the battalion ski school. This was a brilliant idea of Lieutenant-Colonel Gray's, who had returned to his old command—officially a knowledge of skiing might be useful to everyone if Jerry invaded [Syria](#) and it came to fighting in the high country, but the effect (and probably the real intention) was to give everyone a day's mountain holiday. The school was established at Ainata, a scruffy little village thrown down at the foot of the steep upper ridge of the Lebanons. Selected instructors, under Captain Phillips, who had already had a month at a Ninth Army ski course, ran the school. Skis were hired in [Baalbek](#), and daily from 13 to 30 April one platoon went by truck up the mountain to Ainata. Few of the men had ever been on skis before, so the standard

was not very advanced, but it was all good fun, the snow was nice and soft to fall on, and by the end of the day most of them were getting the hang of controlling their skis. Except for a few men chosen for a three-day advanced course there were no second visits, which was a pity, as one day of it whetted the appetite for more.

Less popular was a scheme introduced later in April, by which every platoon in turn went for a three-day march on its own into the Anti-Lebanons. This was no holiday jaunt, but a tricky scramble in the heat up and down stony ridges and rough wadis. The men travelled fairly light; their heavier gear was carried by mules ('nervy, evil tempered things' according to one man) driven by Indians and under the care of the platoon sergeants, which took different routes and met the platoons each afternoon at a rendezvous. Theoretically the idea was to get the men used to the mountains and to give platoon commanders and sergeants practice in the art of finding their way by map and compass. Actually, interest was pretty perfunctory, and most of the men seemed to regard the trip in the light of a camp fatigue, something to be got over as soon as conveniently possible without too much hard work. The best part was that the platoons could fire off half their ammunition, which led to some noisy, spectacular shooting contests in the evenings, the wadis echoing to the rattle of Brens and the thud of 2-inch mortar bombs. There had to be a perpetual watch, day and night, in case the local bandits should try to 'jump' the column for the sake of its arms, ammunition and equipment. On the third day, if the platoons were lucky, they emerged from the mountains at the tiny village of Joussie, 15 miles north of camp, and were picked up by trucks on the nearby main road.

At the beginning of May, with the introduction of summer working hours (7 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.), the afternoons became the men's own to do pretty much what they pleased. A little desultory cricket was played, but it was too hot for football. Some men explored the villages and some went off visiting friends in other units, and more and more took advantage of daily swimming trips to the source of the [Orontes River](#), which springs from under a cliff in a deep gorge, forms a small pool, and from there goes thundering down the gorge to the plain. It is a wild and rugged but magnificent spot. The snow water makes you gasp when you plunge into it, and most of the swimmers found a couple of 'just in and outs' quite enough. The recognised thing after a dip was to climb the cliff to some ancient fortified (and pretty inaccessible) caves, then to come down and brave the icy water again before going home.

Even with these diversions the [Djedeide](#) fortress was beginning to pall now, so news of a brigade manoeuvre was very well received. The work on the defences was showing real results, so much so that [Divisional Headquarters](#) felt it could send its brigades off in turn. On 20 May [18 Battalion](#) went out to its morning digging for what it hoped was the last time, spent the afternoon on parade for the [Duke of Gloucester](#), and in the evening organised gear and weapons for the exercise, while ASC lorries, which had not been seen in the battalion's lines for months, streamed in. Next morning the camp was astir at 4.30, and by 7 a.m. the convoy was on its way north along the main road. The route swung east along a dusty side road round the north end of the Anti-Lebanons, and then they were running across open semi-desert, following the great oil pipeline which was one of the reasons for the Kiwis being in [Syria](#). About midday the convoy reached its laager area, and there for twenty-four hours the battalion waited for something to happen, finding to its surprise that this part of the country was a good deal colder than the [Bekaa](#) valley. At night, indeed, it was almost uncomfortably cold.

The main purpose in the manoeuvre was to scrape the rust off the Division's 'desert formation' technique, which had fallen into disuse during the last few static months. So for most of the next four days the battalion travelled about the desert as part of [4 Brigade's](#) convoy, wheeling, halting, laagering, moving into formation by day and night—quite like old times, thought those who had been in [Libya](#). One afternoon the infantry had to get down and walk a couple of miles with tanks moving ahead, and at the end had a brief shoot with Brens and rifles while Vickers and 25-pounders banged away behind them, but this seemed secondary to the main object.

Back at [El Aine 18 Battalion](#), to its irritation, found that it was to do more work on the defences, which it thought it had left behind. Interspersed with this work was a little range firing, which everyone enjoyed, and anti-gas training, which everyone hated. However, the general tone in the unit was perkier than before, because now, for the first time, there was talk of a wonderful holiday camp at [Beirut](#), on the [Mediterranean](#), over the other side of the Lebanons; the whole unit, said Rumour, was going there to spend a week swimming and enjoying the delights of city life. Those whose duties had already taken them to [Beirut](#) spoke glowingly of the town—a handsome, well-to-do place with everything you needed for a good time. The prospect was most encouraging.

Then it became official. The battalion was going to [Beirut](#) all right, and it was to get an important perquisite, two extra days as a bonus in return for digging in the tents of the holiday camp. Nobody had any objection to this, quite the contrary, for, said the boys, after all the excavating they had done all round the [Middle East](#) they could dig in a few tents with one hand tied behind them.

Fifty men from the battalion, who were to be camp guards at [El Aine](#) while the rest were at [Beirut](#), went to the holiday camp on 5 June with the [Maori Battalion](#). They were the lucky ones. They had their holiday and returned on 12 June. The same day the rest of the battalion crowded into ASC lorries and rode away, in the highest of high spirits, over the Lebanon to [Beirut](#).

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 17 – INTERRUPTED HOLIDAY

CHAPTER 17

Interrupted Holiday

The rest camp was wonderfully situated, right on the beach and only three miles out of [Beirut](#). After the oppressive [Bekaa](#) valley the sea air was delightfully cool. The battalion arrived about 1 p.m., and very soon some men were on their way into town and most of the rest were in the water. The warm, clear [Mediterranean](#), so buoyant that you could swim with very little exertion, was irresistible, and [Beirut](#) just as attractive as reported. This was a real rest camp, no red tape and as few rules as possible.

The work on the tents occupied the next two mornings, beginning early before the sun got too hot. The boys worked furiously, knowing that the quicker they finished the more time they would have to enjoy themselves—they were not likely to come to this kind of place often, and time was precious.

It was more precious than they knew. On 14 June the blow fell. Those who left camp that day left it tranquil and sleepy under the midday sun; a few hours later it was shaken rudely out of its calm and transformed into a beehive of rumour and turmoil. They had 'had' their holiday. Back to [El Aine](#) next morning, everything to be packed for a long trip. Where to? Nobody knew. Some said New Zealand, some even said [England](#), but most had a horrid fear that it would be neither of these, but the old familiar [Egypt](#) again. News of the move was carried into town by the grapevine, and as one officer says, 'You can imagine what [Beirut](#) was like that night.' But next morning there were only eight absentees—many of the boys may have been in bedraggled condition, but all were ready for the next job, whatever it was.

The ride back over the mountains was a subdued one. The cutting short of its holiday had for the moment taken much of the sparkle out of the battalion, and the heat at [El Aine](#), according to one man, was 'like a blow in the face'. There was work waiting for them. For two days they had their noses well down to it, packing all their widely assorted gear and stowing it on their trucks, removing New Zealand badges and shoulder titles, painting out the fern leaves on the trucks—for this was a move of the greatest secrecy. News began to filter through of disasters in [Libya](#), of a triumphant Rommel advancing on [Tobruk](#). The prospect of New Zealand or [England](#)

receded from the forefront of possibility, where only wishful thinking had kept it in any case.

The soldier's short memory is an advantage at times, and when the battalion's convoy left [El Aine](#) early on 17 June the boys had got over their depression. It was a perfect morning, the lazy prospect of several days' truck ride was not unattractive, and what was going to face them afterwards could be forgotten until the time came. Nostalgia for [Syria](#) was to come later in the blazing heat of the desert battlefield, when the men were to realise that, in the words of one of them, they had 'grossly overlooked its two crowning qualities of peacefulness and quietness'.

Blame for the interrupted holiday must lie squarely on Rommel. At the end of May he had opened an offensive in [Libya](#) which, after a fortnight's slogging match, broke the [Eighth Army's](#) line and forced it back towards the Egyptian frontier, closely chased by the Germans. On 14 June violent, mixed-up battles were still raging west of [Tobruk](#), but the issue looked serious enough for an SOS to be sent to the New Zealand Division, nearly 1000 miles away, to come back at top speed to reinforce the defence. This was a rush order, and the Division responded quickly and efficiently. Two days' preparation was all that [4 Brigade](#) (the leading brigade) could have, and by the end of that time it was ready to go, with everything it possessed, with food and water and petrol and oil organised for the trip, with all its trucks in running order, with convoy timetables all arranged. Level-headed, experienced staff work was responsible for the arrangements, and capable, safe, fast driving over long hours was necessary to see them through.

The Bekaa valley had been hot, but as the convoy moved south the heat got fiercer yet. The first day (14 hours' driving) took it right away from the snowy tops of [Syria](#) to [Tulkarm](#) in central [Palestine](#). The second day saw the last of green cultivation, and that night the men pitched their bivvy tents on the sand at [Asluj](#), near the [Palestine- Egypt](#) frontier. The third day, beginning at 4 a.m., was all sand and glare until, early in the afternoon, the [Ismailia](#) oasis rose into view beyond the [Suez Canal](#). About midday on the fourth day the convoy passed through [Cairo](#), greeted with glad familiar shouts by the Wogs, who evidently had not heard that the move was secret. That night the battalion slept in the squalor of [Amiriya](#); next day it moved on again, past its old sweating grounds at [Baggush](#) and [Garawla](#), and about teatime pulled in, along with the rest of [4 Brigade](#), at 'Smugglers' Cove', a nook on

the coast two miles east of [Mersa Matruh](#). A couple of hours later it carried on westwards through [Matruh](#), and dug in for the night four miles along the coast past the town.

Next morning, for the first time since 14 June, the boys had leisure to stop, take stock of their situation, and count up the date. It was 22 June, only one day after they should have left [Beirut](#). Instead, here they were, sweltering in the summer heat of [Egypt](#), dazzled by the sun's glare on the everlasting sand, waiting for Jerry to come and attack them. They did not know how far away he was, but knew it could not be far, for on the previous day they had been amazed and scandalised by the endless streams of disorganised traffic coming against them on the road, all moving east away from the battle. It had been more than disorganised; at times it had been a rabble such as the old [18 Battalion](#) originals had seen before, once only, on that horrible journey south from [Larisa](#) in [Greece](#). To see it now, hundreds of miles east of where they had left a victorious [Eighth Army](#) six months before, was an ominous beginning to their new campaign.

The battalion was now occupying the coast end of the old [Matruh](#) 'box', stuck out on an arid stretch of white sandhills, with miles of nothing at all in front of it, a shallow salt lagoon behind, [19 Battalion](#) on its left, and on its right, beyond a wreckage-strewn beach, the sea. Into that sea, in the intervals of digging, sandbagging and wiring, went [18 Battalion](#), in carefully controlled and guarded parties, to wash off the dirt of travel. It was good to be clean, but it did not last, because afterwards the men had to get back to their shovels again, and by evening they were as sweat-soaked as ever. The 'prepared' positions they were occupying had fallen on bad days, the trenches were silted up and full of rubbish—even making the place habitable was a bad enough job, and in addition they had to extend the positions, stand to night and morning, and take full battle precautions, with pickets and patrols out in front at night. Parties of engineers came along to lay mines between the sandhills.

The next two days were blazing hot, but the work had to go on at top speed. The sand was easy enough to dig, but sandbagging and shoring up the trenches was hard, slow, painstaking work. It was urgent, too. Jerry, according to the reports, would be on the doorstep before many more days passed. The flow of trucks and

men from the west increased on 23 June until there was a perpetual traffic jam along the coast road, visible from the battalion's sandhills. On the 24th the distant grumble of the guns could be heard, and on the western horizon rose a column of black smoke.

The British seemed to be masters in the sky, that was one consolation. German planes sneaked through from time to time, including one lone bomber on the night of 23–24 June which dropped its load not far from [4 Brigade](#) Headquarters, but British planes were frequently overhead, including formations of nine purposeful [Boston](#) bombers heading west and then returning. All these planes were obviously not stopping the enemy, but they were probably delaying him somewhat and winning valuable time for the defenders of [Matruh](#).

Not that the Division was destined to defend [Matruh](#) for very long. On 24 June new orders arrived. A new arrival in [Egypt](#), [10 Indian Division](#), was to replace it under [10 Corps](#) in the [Matruh](#) positions, and the mobile, experienced New Zealand Division was to move south, come under [13 Corps](#), and watch the south end of the makeshift line that was being hastily formed south of [Matruh](#). It seemed likely that this would involve some complicated desert fighting on the pattern of November 1941, but it suited the Kiwi temperament better than being stuck in trenches with no freedom of movement.

The warning order for this move, when it reached [18 Battalion](#) late on 24 June, was hailed with relief, for nobody in the unit thought much of the place it was in at present. There was an intriguing aspect of the order, too—the Division was to be organised into three groups with infantry, artillery, Vickers guns and all the other bits and pieces needed to make them self-supporting in action. This was the first time the New Zealanders had met the 'battle group' system then in vogue in the [Eighth Army](#). The name 'battle group' sounded rather dashing, but nobody seemed to have much idea exactly how the groups would operate.

It did, however, bring about an immediate change in [18 Battalion's](#) status. The unit was taken out of [4 Brigade](#) to become the infantry element of a new 'Divisional Reserve Group', which was also to contain [6 Field Regiment](#), a battery each of six-pounder anti-tank guns and Bofors, and a Vickers company. Lieutenant-Colonel Gray left the battalion for the last time to take command of this Reserve Group, and Major

Lynch took his place, though the changeover was not complicated, as [18 Battalion](#) Headquarters did duty as Reserve Group Headquarters too. One company from each battalion, said the warning order, was to go back to an LOB camp at [Amiriya](#). In [18 Battalion](#) the long straw fell to A Company, which packed up and headed for [Amiriya](#) with very mixed feelings.

With mixed feelings, too, [18 Battalion](#) watched the rest of 4 Brigade move off during the afternoon of 25 June and disappear along the road to the east. The battalion had always before gone into action as part of [4 Brigade](#), and to be on its own, the only infantry in a little independent force, was strange and somewhat unsettling. It was ready to leave soon after 4 Brigade, having handed its trenches over to some tough little [Gurkhas](#), but then it had to sit round for four hours waiting for its ASC transport, which had been held up by traffic jams. At 11.30 p.m., when the battalion finally got away, the congestion was still bad, and the way back through [Matruh](#) to [Garawla](#) was a slow, monotonous crawl. From [Garawla](#) things were better, because here the New Zealand convoys disengaged from the retreating tide of traffic and turned south along a desert track running beside the [Siwa](#) telephone line. This track was not in the same class as the nice tarsealed coast road, but it was free from that infuriating, mixed-up procession of trucks.

Nobody got much sleep that night; you might drop off from time to time, but would wake up with a jolt when your truck lurched down into a dip or bounced over some unevenness in the track. By 6 a.m., when the convoy stopped, everyone was dusty, tired and cross. Luckily the day was cooler, with a little breeze to take the edge off the heat. Digging slit trenches did not take long, and after breakfast the men were able to settle down to a fairly peaceful day watching a continual stream of British planes flying westwards. There were more planes out that day than the battalion had seen before, and it was a heartening sight.

During the night the convoy had passed through the broken country at the head of the coastal wadis, and the Division was now parked on flat desert near the foot of the first big escarpment, which could be seen in a long low line to the south. The battalion, though few of its members realised it, had joined up here with the artillery and other support weapons of the Reserve Group, and was right in the middle of the Division, between 4 and [5 Brigade](#) Groups, covering Divisional Headquarters against any sudden onslaught from the west.

However, this was only a temporary halting place, and soon the Division would be moving eight miles farther south. There it was to wait for Jerry and fight him when he arrived, to delay his advance and keep him off the second big escarpment, which would give its possessor command over the southern end of the British line. At the spot where the Division was going this escarpment divided into two, a low, fairly passable rise and a 60-foot bluff behind it. The dividing point was a prominent height jutting out north from the escarpment, by name Minqar Qaim. The Kiwis could not resist parodying this name and making bad jokes about it; nobody could foresee that within two days it would take its place among the immortal names in the New Zealand Division's story.

North of [Minqar Qaim](#) the desert is dead flat, stony and particularly desolate. Across this waste on the afternoon of 26 June the long procession of the Division advanced to battle, first the brigade groups, then the Reserve Group, and finally Divisional Headquarters. The Reserve Group, moving after tea, had just reached the first step of the [Minqar Qaim](#) escarpment when dusk came on, and with it the worst fright the boys had had for months.

A perfect formation of Bostons had just disappeared overhead on its way west, and everyone was still speculating how Jerry was liking that, when suddenly another swarm of planes hove in sight from the west. After a day when British planes had been constantly overhead, very few men even bothered to look at these until they flew round in a big circle and began a bombing run from the east. At first [18 Battalion](#) seemed to be right in the path of the attack. The battalion's rifles and Brens spoke up, and for a few moments the atmosphere was breathless, everyone thinking the planes had singled him out as a personal target. Then the bombs fell farther north-east, right on top of where [4 Brigade](#) had already taken up its battle position. In [18 Battalion](#) the tension relaxed. The Reserve Group went on its way again, up the first escarpment and on to a half-mile-wide plateau between this and the upper bluff.

This was a situation where the Kiwis' long and detailed desert training paid off. The whole group dispersed in the dark, took up its battle positions smoothly and efficiently, and dug in, under the protection of a line of 25-pounders of 6 Field Regiment. The battalion hacked an all-round position out of the desert rock, B and D

Companies on the edge of the first escarpment facing north (the direction from which Jerry was expected), C Company perched up on the upper bluff facing south, Battalion Headquarters in a wadi cut into this bluff. The transport, after dropping its passengers and their gear, moved off to a 'harbour' at the foot of the upper bluff, just south of the battalion's area, where it was supposed to be well out of harm's way. To the west, round [Minqar Qaim](#) itself, was [5 Brigade](#) Group, to the east [4 Brigade](#) Group. Divisional Headquarters, when it arrived later in the night, set up shop right in the middle of [18 Battalion](#),¹ between its northern and southern fronts, surrounded by the Reserve Group's anti-tank and Bofors guns. And the whole Division was ready to receive the enemy, whose armour was racing east and was now reported to be only five or six miles away. Tomorrow was certainly going to be interesting, if not very comfortable.

¹ Appointments in [18 Bn](#) on 26 June:

CO: Maj R.J. Lynch

2 i/c: vacant

Adj: Capt J.E. Batty

MO: [Capt S. B. Thompson](#)

Padre: [Rev. F. O. Dawson](#)

IO: Lt O. H. Burn

OC HQ Coy: Capt P. B. Allen

QM: Lt A. M. B. Lenton

Sigs: [Lt H. D. Gilfillan](#)

A-Tk: Lt R. McK. Evans

[Lt J. W. McCowan](#)

Lt N. J. McLeod

Mortars: Lt A. J. McBeath

Carriers: [Capt P. R. Pike](#)

2 Lt H. F. McLean

TO: [Lt E. W. Woodhouse](#)

OC A Coy: Capt H. M. Green (LOB)

2 i/c A Coy: [Lt K. L. Brown](#) (LOB)

7 Pl: [Lt D. L. Morgan](#) (LOB)

8 Pl: [Lt E. H. J. Fairley](#) (LOB)

9 Pl: Lt S. B. Edmonds (LOB)

OC B Coy: Capt A. S. Playle

2 i/c B Coy: [Capt D. F. Phillips](#)

10 Pl: Lt R. A. McGurk

11 Pl: 2 Lt K. H. McDonald

12 Pl: Lt W. H. Burrige

OC C Coy: Maj E. H. Boulton

2 i/c C Coy: Lt H. C. Hewlett

13 Pl: Lt J. Tyerman

14 Pl: 2 Lt A. E. Taylor

15 Pl: 2 Lt R. G. Bush

OC D Coy: Maj C. L. Brett

2 i/c D Coy: Capt A. C. Beachen

16 Pl: Lt W. H. Behague

17 Pl: 2 Lt R. A. Ward

18 Pl: 2 Lt H. L. Hay

RSM: WO I H. R. Lapwood

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 18 – BATTLE AT MINQAR QAIM

CHAPTER 18

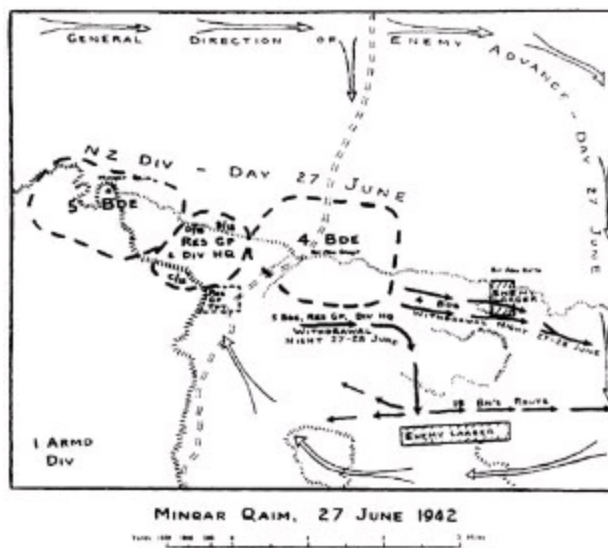
Battle at Minqar Qaim

Dawn on 27 June showed 18 Battalion that its little corner of Egypt, far from being deserted, was uncomfortably over-populated. Inside its perimeter, besides the big trucks and caravans of Divisional Headquarters, the desert was bristling with Bofors guns, anti-tank guns, and the snouts of 25-pounders sticking up out of their camouflage nets. Bad neighbours in a scrap, these 25-pounders, for they always attracted the first and the heaviest fire; but at the same time good, comforting friends to have around when the situation was bad.

There, too—rather embarrassingly—were the battalions own two-pounder anti-tank guns, eight of them, the first it had ever owned. Until that morning they had been the property of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, but they had long been promised to the infantry units as soon as the regiment got the wonderful new six-pounders it had been waiting for. Anticipating this bequest, 18 Battalion had formed an anti-tank platoon and sent a few men to a short course at Matruh, but it was hardly prepared for the guns to arrive while it was in the act of settling into its battle positions at Minqar Qaim. However, that is what happened. The platoon took the guns over, but could only put them near Battalion Headquarters and experiment with them at every opportunity during the day.

The most unnerving part of a battle, they say, is waiting for it to begin. If that is so, the Kiwis were spared much strain on 27 June, for the day was not very old when Jerry made his appearance, not coming directly at the Division, but passing five miles north of it, through a gap between 10 and 13 Corps, his passage for the time almost undisputed. The first indication of his arrival was the noise of shelling and what sounded like a tank battle to the north. This was about 9 a.m. A little later the first German shells arrived in the vicinity, and the battle was on.

Up to this time the battalion had seen nothing of the enemy, but then, almost imperceptibly, something appeared out of the



Minqar Qaim, 27 June 1942

haze away on the northern horizon—a crowd of little dancing dots at first, then more of them and bigger, elongated by the heat shimmer until they might have been a forest of palm trees filling the horizon. They moved steadily right across the Division's front, keeping their distance. By now the New Zealand artillery was in action, and the noise of battle grew to a continuous din, ground and air quivering with the crack of the guns and the drone of the shells going away northwards, and punctuating all this the duller crunch of German shellbursts. Some of the shells fell at random over **18 Battalion's** area; it was not heavy shelling, but enough to dissuade the men from walking farther away from their slitties than they had to.

Shortly before ten o'clock **18 Battalion** launched its only excursion of the morning, when two sections of carriers under Second-Lieutenant **McLean**,¹ in company with a column of 25-pounders from **6 Field Regiment**, set out northwards, straight for the enemy, to tackle the troublesome guns harassing the Division. To the spectators this looked like a door-die show, and this was what it turned out to be, for the column found itself unexpectedly face to face with German tanks which obviously thought it had no right to be there. Neither carriers nor guns were adequate to deal with tanks. The column did not stop to argue, but at once began to pull back, half the guns covering the other half, and the carriers firing as they withdrew. One carrier was hit and put out of action, and Sergeant Jock **Black**² won one of the battalion's rare decorations by pulling his own carrier up alongside the stricken one and rescuing its crew and weapons. Luckily nobody in the carrier crews was hit. The column made for home, pursued half-heartedly by a few tanks, and reached safety

with no more mishaps. After this the shellfire on the enemy was stepped up, but no more raiding parties went out. The Germans also increased their fire, obviously aiming at the artillery and the big vehicles of [Divisional Headquarters](#), but the whole of the Reserve Group spent a very uncomfortable hour with shells dropping quite thickly all over the area. In [18 Battalion](#) several men were killed and some wounded, including WO I Harry Lapwood, the RSM; and one truck in the battalion's area was hit and set alight.

So this artillery duel went on hour after hour, while the infantry suffered that worst of tortures, prolonged boredom mixed with fright. It was a really bad day. There was nothing they could do, not even walk over to see their friends—not safely, anyway, for the hard ground made the shell splinters fly far, and there was no cover except for the slit trenches. 'When we weren't doing anything,' says Private Hamilton, ³ 'we stayed in them all the time, but the heat was almost unbearable in them We tried hanging our ground sheets over the top to keep the sun off, but it only made it all the worse.' To the other distresses was added thirst, for the air was full of dust, and there was no water except what the boys had in their bottles.

There was more or less of a lull about midday, but only for a little while, then Jerry began again, from the north-east this time, ranging with airburst shells (vile things against which even a slittie was no protection). The afternoon was worse than the morning, for Jerry seemed to have woken up to the fact that there was a big force south of his line of march, and that he must do something about it. The New Zealand guns were prompt to join in, and the whole of the battalion's plateau seemed to be dancing with points of light flickering through a fog. To the east, where [4 Brigade](#) was, the battlefield was hidden by the dust and smoke, but whenever the noise died down in [18 Battalion's](#) area it could still be heard from [4 Brigade's](#) direction. Most of the shells that came [18 Battalion's](#) way passed over the rifle companies to burst round [Divisional Headquarters](#) and the artillery. Late in the afternoon [Lieutenant-General Freyberg](#) was wounded in B Company's area; the first man to attend him was Private Seddon [Haua](#), ⁴ one of the company's medical orderlies.

About 4 p.m. the battalion had a rude awakening to danger, when German tanks appeared below the escarpment to the south-east and began to scatter shells over the landscape.

This was something that had not been bargained for. Although C Company was on this side of the perimeter facing south, nobody had seriously thought there would be any danger from there, as the British [1 Armoured Division](#) was not far away in that direction. Accordingly the field and anti-tank guns had all been sited to fire north, and the Reserve Group's transport had been carefully parked south-east of [18 Battalion](#), in the exact direction from which these tanks came. When they first loomed into view through the haze nobody recognised them, and for a while artillery and infantry observers peered at them through glasses, trying to decide which side they were on.

The first people to decide were the transport drivers. An officer—nobody knew who—is said to have driven through the transport park shouting out that German tanks were on them and that all trucks were to get out of the road. There was, regrettably but understandably, a minor panic; everyone ran for the vehicles, and at the same time shells began to whizz and crash round them. Nobody attempted to form up in any sort of order; it was every truck for itself. Most of them followed the plateau round past [18 Battalion](#) Headquarters, through B and D Companies and towards [Minqar Qaim](#), but some went up the escarpment, steep though it was, and headed west across C Company's front. Major [Boulton](#)⁵ recalls some blanket rolls bouncing out of one truck in its flight, and the German tanks wasting good shells shooting at these suspicious-looking objects on the ground.

Later in the day, after things had quietened down on the battalion's southern front, most of the vehicles came back. But not all, for some took a big circle round to the west and south, then headed east and stopped only when they were well clear of the battle. Not until two days later, when the whole of 2 NZ Division was back in the [Alamein](#) line, did they rejoin the battalion.

With the transport out of the way the German tanks kept their course towards C Company, firing impartially all over [18 Battalion](#)'s area as they came. By now there was no doubt whose they were. They closed to not much over half a mile, and C Company, with only itself between them and Divisional Headquarters, and with no anti-tank support, felt very naked on its cliff top. The men, remembering 20 Battalion on Belhamed, could already see the wire of the prison camps closing round them—and then deliverance came.

The artillery had not been sitting idle all this time. As soon as the tanks first appeared a battery of 25-pounders and some of the new six-pounder anti-tank guns of the Reserve Group had been swung round to face south; now that the tanks were definitely identified as not 'ours', all these guns opened fire. At such short range they could hardly miss. Several tanks were knocked out, and, to the mighty relief of C Company, the rest turned back. At about the same time some tanks of 1 Armoured Division hove in sight; they did not close with the enemy tanks, but their presence was probably a deterrent, for Jerry did not renew his attack.

But there was a little more trouble to come. About the time the German tanks first came along, a little force of German infantry had established itself unnoticed in a wadi in the escarpment about 400 yards south of C Company's platoons, set up mortars and a machine gun or two, and opened a very disconcerting fire on the company. The forward platoons (13 and 14), reinforced with a platoon of Vickers and two 3-inch mortars, returned the fire as best they could, but the enemy was well tucked away out of sight in the wadi, and C Company was working more or less in the dark until Second-Lieutenant Ron Bush ⁶ of 15 Platoon reconnoitred out on the right flank and reported Jerry's position.

Major Boulton takes up the story:

Up to now, C Coy. had been sitting tight and for lack of suitable targets had scarcely fired a shot. In spite of a good deal of shelling and the rather daunting tank advance, everyone had been very steady. I decided to have the enemy on and attack with one Pl. supported by fire from the other, the M.M.G.'s and Mor.... I cannot speak too highly of 15 Pl's attack and of the support given.... Before 15 Pl. moved, Andy McBeath ⁷ slapped down 30 or 40 rounds right on the enemy mortar & M.G. positions. The M.M.G. effectively mowed down every O.P. the enemy tried to set up & as a result his mortar fire became hopelessly inaccurate.

Fire from a carrier also helped to keep the Germans' heads down while 15 Platoon advanced.

The attack was a little classic of fire and movement. Second-Lieutenant Bush describes it:

One section... was sent to a position where they could fire down into the wadi from the flank.... The 2 sections with me commenced what was an attack more or less according to the book, with one section advancing about 30 yards under cover of the other section's fire and then going to earth and giving the fire for the other section.... The enemy group were under cover of a rock ledge... with 2 machine guns and an anti-tank gun trained up the slope. During the attack we suffered no casualties though two rounds were fired from their anti-tank gun. They were unable to use the machine gun as the gunner was shot.... Before we reached the ledge some of the enemy escaped in one of the trucks while the remainder surrendered.

There were fewer than a dozen prisoners ('a dirty lot of devils,' remembers one man, 'and ... in great spirits'), a truck, some assorted weapons, and two British artillerymen whom the Germans had been holding prisoner. But German prisoners were extremely rare at [Minqar Qaim](#), and C Company had reason to be pleased with itself. Unfortunately, the prisoners had to be left behind that night.

A small local success like this made no difference to the general situation, which was about as bad as it could be. The enemy behind [18 Battalion](#) was the forerunner of a larger column which had circled round east and south of the Division. Jerry had the Division nearly surrounded, and evidently thought he could take things easy, for about dusk his shelling stopped and his columns made ready to laager for the night.

From quite early in the day the future of the Division had been under discussion at high levels, and it had been clearly laid down that it was not to stick to the [Minqar Qaim](#) position to the bitter end, but to withdraw when the time was ripe, and go back to [Alamein](#), 80 miles east, where the next defence line was being organised. Now that Jerry was in force east of the Division, there was no option but to pull out that night. So the battle groups, as soon as darkness fell, set about their preparations. The Division, said the orders, would be led by [4 Brigade](#) Group, with the Reserve Group, [5 Brigade](#) and [Divisional Headquarters](#) following, and would crash its way through any opposition.

All [2 NZ Division](#)'s perfection in desert drill would not help it this night. Not only the Reserve Group's transport, but also 4 and 5 Brigades', had been scattered by German tanks during the day, and all the vehicles the Division could raise were insufficient to take everybody except by packing them on like sardines. Well, there

was only one thing to do—pack them on, even if gear had to be dumped to make room. Everything on wheels that would go was pooled and divided among the units, petrol was shared out.

During the evening **18 Battalion** quietly packed up and tramped a mile and a half east to where the vehicles were waiting. All roads led to the same place just then. The desert seemed full of men, little groups walking here and there, criss-crossing one another's paths, but all somehow heading in the same direction, converging on the transport. And what a collection of vehicles! Besides such of its own transport as had come back after the afternoon's disturbance, **18 Battalion** had a sprinkling of stray trucks and anti-tank portées, and the men who could not be accommodated on these were put on to artillery 'quads' and gun limbers, sometimes along with men from **5 Brigade** units. They swarmed over every vehicle, grabbed places where they could sit or cling on, and then, when they were all shaken down and ready to go, there was the usual interminable wait. Even apart from the overcrowding it was a fidgety wait—everyone knew that Jerry was close, and it seemed that all the noise involved in organising the column must penetrate his consciousness and bring down a shower of shells. But nothing of the sort happened.

Fourth Brigade was very late getting off the mark, and not till 1.30 a.m., two hours behind schedule, did the Reserve Group move off. It had been formed up in parallel columns, with Lieutenant-Colonel Gray in front, then carriers and anti-tank guns, then **18 Battalion** just behind, with its leading vehicles in a good position to get a ringside seat if anything happened. Now it set off eastwards, a close-packed mass of transport and men groping its way across the rough ground. The atmosphere was tense and rather jumpy, but it was a relief to be on the move, no matter how slowly.

And then **4 Brigade**, a little way to the north-east, gatecrashed the enemy in its path, and things began to happen.

The famous breakthrough by **4 Brigade** took place about a mile ahead of the Reserve Group, but once the action got into full swing the noise, even at that distance, was awesome, and so was the dazzling display of tracer that marked the engagement. Streams of this tracer and a few 'overs', flying round the Reserve Group, gave some men the impression that their group was at close quarters with

the enemy, which was not the case.

The Reserve Group, [5 Brigade](#) and [Divisional Headquarters](#) were hastily ordered to wheel right to get away from the danger area. This was a tricky manoeuvre in the dark, and for a while things were a bit mixed up, some of [4 Brigade's](#) vehicles tangling with the other groups, some of the rear vehicles threading their way up through the convoy. Somehow things were fairly well straightened out, and the Reserve Group and the rest of them went on southwards, with the noise of [4 Brigade's](#) battle growing fainter behind them. The men, with relief, settled themselves a little more comfortably on their congested vehicles and composed themselves as best they could for sleep. They had had a trying day, and all they wanted was to take it easy for a while.

Perhaps it is partly because everyone was so bemused with sleep that nobody can remember details of the next events very clearly, or agree on just what happened. But there is not the shadow of argument about the main fact, which is that, about a mile and a half from where the column turned south, it ran full tilt into Jerry.

The first anyone knew of this was green flares going up out of the darkness almost under the noses of the leading vehicles. There was not time to dodge. The flares were followed by tank shells and tracer, at first a few trickles from different places, then increasing to a torrent as more and more of the enemy woke up and manned their guns.

The front trucks stopped—they could do nothing else. They stopped dead, men jumped out of them, dived to the ground, and the stouter-hearted among them tried to take the enemy on with rifles and Brens. Still the rivers of tracer streamed through the darkness, though it was not dark for long, as trucks were hit here and there and set on fire, the flames providing a dim, unstable light for the battle. Some [18 Battalion](#) carriers went out on the right flank to form a screen, and the New Zealand field and anti-tank guns joined in, dropping trails on the spot and opening fire at shorter range than they had ever done before.

After the first minute or two there was little order in the ranks. Trucks were starting up and going this way and that; the rear of the column had not stopped but

was piling up behind the leaders. There was no panic, but there was terrible confusion, and as for keeping place in the column, there was no such thing.

The halt must actually have been very short, though it seemed endless. Then Colonel Gray took a hand. From the time the action began he had been standing up with his head sticking out of the cab of his truck, a landmark for those of the Reserve Group who were close enough to see him. Now his voice rose clearly above the din as he ordered the group to wheel left and get out of it. Trucks started up and shot off following Gray's direction; men who had left their vehicles or jumped out of burning ones scrambled madly on to any others they could catch; then, as one man says, 'the chariot race was on'. At full speed the trucks charged across the desert, heedless of rough ground and stones and broken springs, heedless of order or distance or desert formation. The drivers just went with the mob, and the passengers clung to the sides, to any projecting bits and to each other, in a desperate effort to stay with their vehicles. All round them the tracer still carved great gashes in the darkness.

Afterwards, when the Kiwis thought back in cold blood on the events of that mad night, everyone was amazed how light the damage had been. The enemy's shooting had been the shooting of frightened men rudely jerked out of their sleep, erratic in the extreme. Some remembered having seen lines of tracer going high overhead, far too high to do any damage; it was a miracle, said others, how the shells and bullets had passed right down between the rows of vehicles without hitting anything. Inevitably, though, hundreds of them had found marks, and most of the trucks bore some honourable scar, a broken windscreen or a punctured radiator or a torn canopy. The human casualties, at first feared to be enormous, turned out to be much lighter than anyone could have believed possible.

The 'chariot race' took the Reserve Group, quite by accident, along the edge of the German laager for several miles, but luckily no more of the Jerries seemed to grasp what was happening, or perhaps they were not game to begin anything. Whatever the reason, the fire soon slackened and died down as the column tore on its way, and never were men more glad to be swallowed up in the darkness and to seek less frequented spots.

Half an hour's gallop eastwards, and then the column stopped to have a look at

itself. What it saw was not reassuring. There seemed to be only about half as many trucks as there should be, and these included bits of other units picked up somewhere along the route. What had happened to the missing vehicles nobody knew, but there was no time to go searching for them now; Jerry would undoubtedly take up the chase at daybreak, and it was a long way back to [Alamein](#). The convoy went on its way through the first faint light of dawn, at a much more sober pace now. Everyone was tired out, suffering from reaction, and gloomily pessimistic about the fate of the missing trucks and men.

All that day they travelled over an unchanging stony wilderness, dotted here and there with other groups of vehicles, large and small, all going in the same direction. After a breakfast halt they spared no time to stop for anything, and by nightfall they had reached an easily recognised landmark, a well-used track and water pipeline which ran down through the desert from [Alamein](#). Thence next morning the Reserve Group moved six miles south and dispersed covering Divisional Headquarters in the ` [Kaponga Box](#) `.

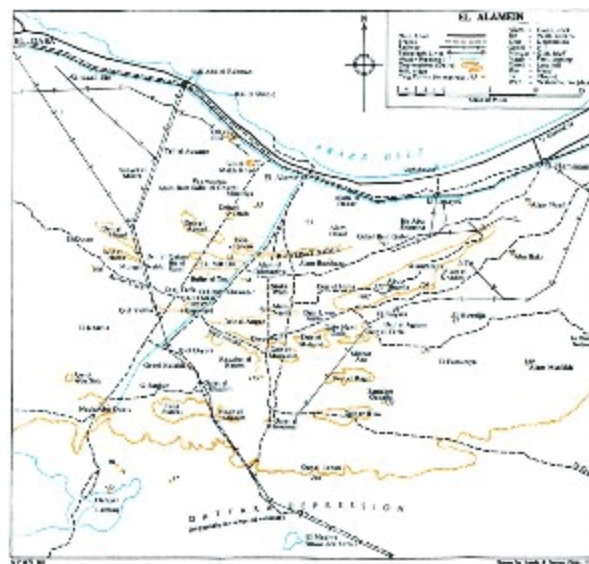
This Box, though [18 Battalion](#) had never been there before, had a familiar name. One of a chain of prepared positions on which the [Alamein](#) line was based, it had been christened by Kiwis who had worked on it in 1941. Now, on 27 June, when it became clear that the [Matruh](#) line would not last, [6 Brigade](#) had been hastily called up from reserve to man it, and the rest of the Division ordered to assemble there after withdrawing from [Minqar Qaim](#).

The desert here was a ragged affair, covered with the same stones and scrub that you found round [Matruh](#), but cut up and dotted in all directions with pimples and flat-topped eminences instead of the comparatively clean-cut escarpments farther west. In this unattractive spot the battalion gouged out its slit trenches and prepared to make the best of its heavy losses— or what it thought were heavy losses.

On 28 June a few of the missing vehicles turned up again, and on the 29th, to everyone's wonder and delight, more of them straggled in, some singly, some in small groups mixed up with assorted vehicles from other units. Several had broken down after the [Minqar Qaim](#) stampede, some with German metal in vital parts, some merely with the stress of speed across ground not built for fast driving; others had kept going, but had lost the column, and had in most cases banded together for

company with any other trucks in sight at dawn on the 28th. There were men, too, who came back to the unit on foot on the 29th—men who had jumped off their trucks and had afterwards climbed on to those of some other unit, men whose trucks had been hit or had 'conked out' and who had found their way back by scrounging lifts where they could. Some had spectacular stories to tell, like WO I [Naughton](#),⁸ who, while directing traffic during the night action (for which he received the MM), was knocked out by a shell splinter, regained consciousness to find the transport all gone, walked through the enemy's lines and hitch-hiked back to [Alamein](#). There was also a group of two dozen or so who walked all night after losing their trucks, collected together in the morning, and spent some time working on a group of abandoned trucks trying to get one going. Finally one man (Sergeant Felix [Crandle](#)⁹) got away to the east on a salvaged motor-bike, reached a British column and told the story to its commander, who sent a truck back and picked up the rest of the party with Jerry already in sight on the horizon. These and similar stories were told to attentive ears on 29 June, while [18 Battalion](#) relaxed in its slitties or sought under its trucks what shade it could from the heat.

By evening the gloom pervading the unit had almost completely lifted. So many of the missing men had come in during the day that only a handful was still unaccounted for. It was the real [18 Battalion](#) again, amazingly intact, with all its weapons and gear, fit to face the enemy whenever it was needed. And that would be soon, for Jerry was advancing on the [Alamein](#) line, and everyone would be called on to stand firm and stop it from crumbling as the [Matruh](#) line had crumbled. In the meantime the battalion sorted itself out again, restocked with food, water, petrol and ammunition, and waited for its next orders.



EL ALAMEIN

¹ Capt H. F. McLean; Auckland; born NZ 18 Jul 1907; salesman.

² Sgt G. J. Black, MM, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); Scotland; born Scotland, 2 Jan 1914; carpenter and joiner; wounded 1 May 1945.

³ Sgt J. C. Hamilton; Tauranga; born Pukekohe, 20 Jan 1920; farmhand; wounded 14 Aug 1944.

⁴ Pte S. Haua; Mt. Maunganui; born Tauranga, 11 Aug 1914; cargo worker.

⁵ Maj E. H. Boulton, ED; Auckland; born Wellington, 27 Apr 1900; school-teacher.

⁶ Capt R. G. Bush; Auckland; born Nelson, 3 May 1909; salesman; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁷ Maj A. J. McBeath, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Hamilton, 24 Sep 1913; commercial traveller.

⁸ Maj A. B. H. Naughton, MM; Auckland; born Aust., 21 Sep 1910; truck driver; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

⁹ Sgt F. Crandle; Dargaville; born Toronto, NSW, 4 Nov 1912; school-
teacher; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 19 – ALAMEIN CHESSBOARD

CHAPTER 19

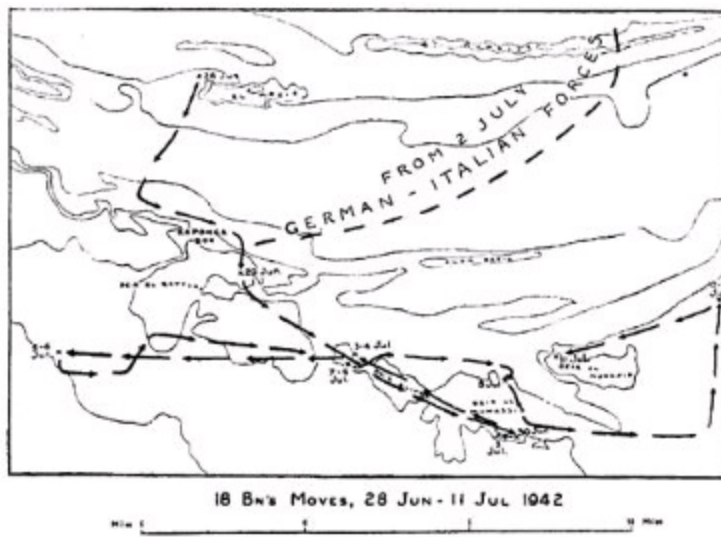
Alamein Chessboard

The next fortnight was for **18 Battalion** a period of bewildering and apparently pointless manoeuvres, flitting round the desert digging holes only to leave them and go off somewhere else and dig more holes. Occasionally the unit stayed in one set of holes for two or three days, more often for only a day or part of one. Some of the moves were at very short notice, some were only a few miles, and you could never predict their direction. Nobody in the battalion knew much of what was going on outside; such news and plans as filtered down to unit level seemed to change startlingly from day to day. There was no stability in life and little confidence in the future. You lived only for the moment, doing what you could to escape the pitiless sun and the voracious flies, keeping your eyes and ears open for 'Stukas', not knowing or caring what was to happen next week or tomorrow or in two hours' time.

And yet this frustrating fortnight was the turning point of the war in North Africa, for it halted the enemy's triumphant course, flung back his last dangerous thrusts, laid the foundations for his future rout. It was not **18 Battalion's** good luck to share in that rout, but it had its part to play in the preliminaries, and that part began with the infuriating desert-trotting of early July.

It began on 29 June with the whole of the New Zealand Division recovering in the **Kaponga Box**. That evening new orders arrived, rather perplexing orders with the enemy expected to arrive almost hourly—only **6 Brigade** to stay in the Box, the rest of the Division to move back east a little way and be prepared to send out mobile columns to support the defence of the Box.

For this move the Reserve Group went out of existence, and **18 Battalion**, back again in **4 Brigade**, left **Kaponga** after breakfast on 30 June and rode away eastwards. This was disappointing for the men, who had had enough eastward movement in the meantime; but they went only 12 miles along a series of scrub-covered depressions with broken, jagged escarpments enclosing them on both sides, then stopped and dug in just below the southern escarpment, at a spot where the desert was particularly cut about with steep faces, dry watercourses, and small hills.



18 Bn's Moves, 28 Jun–11 Jul 1942

In this shallow valley, the [Deir el Munassib](#) (Dear Ol' Munassib to the boys), 4 and 5 Brigades sweltered through three days of sandstorm and inactivity, fretting at being out of it when they heard tank battles to the north and gunfire away to the west. The situation was truly dangerous, for Jerry's attack on 1 July breached the [Alamein](#) line ten miles to the north, and his armour was pushing through the gap and threatening to fan out, in good old German style, behind the British defences.

The [Alamein](#) line was paper-thin, for so much of the Eighth Army had been mauled in battles farther west that there simply was not enough left to man the line properly. The 'box' defences were strongly held, but between them were large open spaces containing only mobile troops. So the Division, which had come back fit to fight and with its transport almost intact, was inevitably caught up in this 'mobile column' business. Jock columns, flying columns, battle groups—call them which you like—were in fashion in the [Eighth Army](#) just then. Their value was always dubious. The Division never liked them, and later when the Army grew stronger they were discontinued. They dispersed strength and did not effectively conceal weakness. But in early July they were the Army's only means of punching Jerry's nose.

D Company was the first in the battalion to go out on a mobile foray. Early on the morning of 2 July it went over to 20 Battalion's area and joined a strong column—most of 20 Battalion, a whole field regiment, anti-tank and Vickers guns—to drive north into the flank of the salient where Jerry had broken in. This column spent a very unsatisfactory day circling round a few miles of desert in obedience to orders

which reflected a rapidly changing situation to the north. Except for a little shellfire in the morning it did not come to grips with the enemy, and towards evening it ended up on a barely perceptible rise called [Alam Nayil](#) ridge, listening to the sounds of a tank clash farther north. D Company rejoined [18 Battalion](#) the same evening.

This tank battle broke the force of Jerry's thrust in the centre of the [Alamein](#) line, and he now seemed to be tending northwards towards the coastal end of the line, held by [30 Corps](#). So higher plans changed again for the umpteenth time. Briefly, the new orders were:

[30 Corps](#) to engage Jerry in front, [13 Corps](#) (of which 2 NZ Division formed the largest part) to push north from the [Kaponga Box](#) and take him in the flank. This would entail a general westward and northward move by the Division, and the Reserve Group was to be re-formed for the protection of Divisional Headquarters.

There was some resentment in [18 Battalion](#) when it learnt that it was to go back to the Reserve Group. Though there had been no lack of excitement at [Minqar Qaim](#), the men were still inclined to look on divisional protection as a 'sissy' job not fit for a fighting unit—quite an unjustifiable idea, especially in the fluctuating desert conditions, but the stigma of 'headquarters troops' is very real in an infantry battalion. So it was a slightly disgruntled unit that saw the rest of [4 Brigade](#) move away north early on 3 July, and then had to turn to and pack for a move of only half a mile nearer to Divisional Headquarters. Here, in an eroded basin dotted with little flat-topped hills, with both British and German planes frequently overhead, the Reserve Group assembled. In it were [18 Battalion](#), most of [5 Field Regiment](#), a battery each of six-pounders and Bofors, most of two Vickers companies and an ambulance detachment. As before, [18 Battalion](#) Headquarters also served as Group Headquarters, and in the meantime Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch commanded both group and battalion. Brigadier Gray was now commanding [4 Brigade](#).

Next night [Divisional Headquarters](#) and the Reserve Group moved back westwards along the soft sand of the depressions to [Deir Alinda](#), some four miles nearer [Kaponga](#). Only [18 Battalion](#) Headquarters and HQ Company were with the group at the time, for the rifle companies, under Major Brett's ¹ command, had been ordered away south to deal with a laager of Italian lorries that Divisional Cavalry's roving vehicles had reported a few miles away. The companies rode off in high

hopes, but these were dashed when, on arrival, they met only some Divisional Cavalry carriers, and learnt that the Ities had left in a hurry. So three very disappointed companies had to turn back empty-handed and look for the battalion, which by now had moved off nobody knew where. After spending several hours bumping over unknown country and bogging down in soft sand, Major Brett eventually bedded his column down about 2 a.m., and when day broke found the Reserve Group only half a mile away. After scraping themselves the shallowest of slitties the men settled down to sleep.

Perhaps weariness made the drivers a little careless, so that they parked their vehicles closer than they should have. But in that they were in good company, for [Divisional Headquarters](#) and the rest of the Reserve Group were all pretty badly bunched. At 9.20 a.m. along came a flight of very hostile Stukas, dived out of the blue and bombed right along [Deir Alinda](#). It was [18 Battalion](#)'s worst raid so far. Six men were wounded, one truck totally wrecked and half a dozen more set on fire. An ammunition lorry not far away was hit, blazed for a while with its cargo exploding in all directions, then blew up, and high into the air above [Alinda](#) floated a huge smoke ring.

For two days the Reserve Group sat in [Alinda](#) while German planes came round periodically— [18 Battalion](#), on a little eminence, had ringside seats for several raids along the bottom of the depression. British fighters were patrolling the sky, but somehow they never seemed to be there just at the right time. To the north and west were noises of battle, and just below them in Alinda British artillery was firing north. Then on the night of 5–6 July they had to pack up and move again.

This was part of a general forward move by the Division as [13 Corps](#)' push on Jerry's flank developed. The Division was now getting into position north and west of [Kaponga](#) for an attack to the north-west. The infantry brigades took up their new positions in daylight on 5 July, [Divisional Headquarters](#) and the Reserve Group that night. Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch was now commanding only [18 Battalion](#), Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam ² the Group.

It was certainly safer moving round the desert at night than by day, but it was much more laborious. This latest move took the Reserve Group across broken ground and soft-bottomed wadis in the Deir el [Qattara](#), and it struck real trouble. Private

Hamilton's story is typical of what happened to [18 Battalion](#):

We had to cross a few very soft places and a lot of our old cattle trucks were getting stuck, and it was through this that our convoy became dispersed. A truck would get stuck and the rest had to stop, and those in front kept going, and we would not be told the bearing. Anyway, we kept on going in the same direction, and didn't we come to a messy piece of sand. Just about every truck got stuck. The Ack Ack fellows had a bit of trouble getting their guns through. We pushed and dug at ours and gave it up as a bad job. Eventually we whistled up a big truck that pulls the guns. It was going to pull us after they'd got their guns out. But a Bren Carrier came along in the meantime and pulled us right through.

These 'cattle trucks', 2-ton Fords with high slat sides and two-wheel drive, which [18 Battalion](#) had acquired in [Syria](#), were noted for their habit of sticking in soft sand, and to spend all night over a move of a few miles now seemed to be the regular thing. It was well after midnight when the strays were rounded up and dispersed in the new position—quite a peaceful position, despite the intermittent growl and flash of gunfire to the north, and Very lights continually rising and hanging over the horizon. Next morning the battalion found itself at the north edge of a flat stony plain, with a surrealistic landscape of cliffs and wadis to its north, and a few skeletons of burnt-out trucks to add to the effect. Somewhere among or beyond those broken cliffs was the rest of the Division; the Reserve Group was in the extreme rear, covering Divisional Headquarters against any attack from the south.

Once again [18 Battalion](#) spent two whole days waiting for something to happen. Two hot, boring days they were, with only an occasional air raid nearby as a diversion. The battalion was more than usually depressed, too, for the news had just spread round of Brigadier John Gray's death in an air raid, and the sense of loss all through the unit was enormous; though no longer in command of the [18th](#), he was still its most familiar figure, and even those to whom his feats on [Crete](#) were only hearsay felt now that something irreplaceable had gone from the battalion.

On the afternoon of 7 July D Company, a little luckier than the rest, went out with a battery of 25-pounders to investigate reports of enemy seen to the west; the artillery banged away a few rounds at some vehicles on the horizon, but apart from that the excursion was a 'fizzer', and there was neither glory nor loot to be gained.

The rest of the Division seemed to be in the same unhappy position. It had pushed quite a long way north from [Kaponga](#), but [30 Corps](#) was finding it difficult to get its share of the party going, and it looked as if [13 Corps](#) might be left out in an awkward place, as there was a nasty gap between the two corps and miles of empty hilly desert to the south, both danger spots where an enemy force might sneak in. So on 7 July another new set of orders was issued, completely reversing the last ones. The New Zealand Division was to go east again, back to its starting point, as the right-hand division of a new [13 Corps](#) line running south from [Alam Nayil](#). [Kaponga](#) and the country north of it were to be left to Jerry.

The Reserve Group seemed to be out of luck with its night moves about this time. Going back to [Deir Alinda](#) in the small hours of 8 July it dodged the soft patches that had trapped so many victims two nights earlier, but this time some of the lights marking the track failed, there was confusion and delay while the convoy got back on to its right route, and daylight caught it still short of its goal. At dawn the trucks moved out from their close night formation to the widely spaced desert formation for the remaining mile or two, and reached [Alinda](#) with no unpleasantness from German planes. For the rest of the day there was nothing to do but chase flies, watch British fighters patrolling the sky, and envy [6 Brigade](#)'s convoy moving back through [Alinda](#) into reserve. Nobody could sleep much for the heat, so by evening everyone was tired, and the news of another move at short notice was not at all well received. It was only a six-mile move over ground that, though rough and stony, contained no treacherous soft patches. The Reserve Group ended up about 9.30 p.m. beneath the northern slopes of Munassib.

By the morning of 10 July the whole of the Division was back, facing north, watching the south side of Jerry's salient (which seemed to have grown bigger and more hostile since the Division left five days before). Fourth and 5th Brigades held the front, with the Reserve Group, as usual, well back screening Divisional Headquarters. Not well enough back, some of the boys thought, for during the day an odd salvo or two of shells fell not far away. C Company spent a day up near [Alam Nayil](#) with a small mobile column of 25-pounders and anti-tank guns; according to a witness, it 'lay about and watched the arty shooting, but was not called upon to take any more active part in the proceedings'. In the end the company had to move back smartly when Jerry landed some shells unpleasantly close.

It was one of those days when Rumour runs riot. Very early in the morning it was obvious from the heavy gunfire up north that something unusual was going on. It was still in progress when, about breakfast time, a report arrived that sent spirits up high—the Aussies were attacking on the coast and going well. Thus far the report was true; but Rumour spoilt things by adding a few very untrue details, that advanced parties of the attackers had reached [Daba](#), that Jerry's front was crumbling, that he was getting ready to retreat. However, these extravagant stories did not last long. Jerry's behaviour at [Alam Nayil](#) gave them the lie, for his troops in the salient, far from showing signs of withdrawal, were probing busily at the New Zealand line, testing the defence for weak spots. From the Kiwis' point of view, the best effect of the attack up north was that it drew the [Luftwaffe](#) away, so that [13 Corps](#) had a day free from raids.

That evening the Division again side-slipped eastwards. Eighteenth Battalion, misled by the Aussies' attack into thinking that it would at least stay where it was for a while, had settled down for the night with a clear conscience, and only the pickets were awake when orders came through to pack and move in half an hour.

This was the champion of all the night moves of the first half of July. [Hamilton](#) describes it:

About 10.45 the RSM came round waking up everybody, and telling them to be ready to move within half an hour. There was the usual chorus of growls about having to shift at that hour of the night.... We had to move very fast, too, as we weren't expecting to move this night, and our gear was lying round everywhere.... Well, like all the moves, we get so much time to be ready to move in, and we rush around like a lot of cats, and then we spend the rest of the time sitting on the trucks for an hour or two....

Well, after a lot of waiting round we started off, but hadn't gone very far before we stopped again. Just to the north of us slightly our planes were dropping parachute flares and they looked all right drifting down, only they were lighting our transport up a bit.... We passed through miles and miles of soft sand, and of course we had to do a lot of pushing and digging.... There were quite a few trucks like ours and we were getting left behind all the time.... We were very tired ... as we had no sleep that night, and very little the previous nights.

It was daylight before the battalion finished its move; it dispersed and dug in as usual, to the accompaniment of dull, distant noises to the north-west, where the tank battles in Jerry's salient had been raging for days. This was the farthest east that the Division was to go. The same afternoon there was another sudden move—the boys were getting to the stage now when they did not even bother to growl—not east as everybody expected, but back the way they had come. Once more [18 Battalion](#) ended up at the foot of a steep slope, the northern rim of the [Deir el Muhafid](#), north-east of Munassib. The area was soft sand, pitted with bomb holes, doubtless a reminder of some Stuka raid.

This was the last move of the apparently meaningless shuttling up and down the desert that had sapped the energy and patience of all hands during the past fortnight. All that time the [Alamein](#) line had been a sort of chessboard of manoeuvre and counter-manoeuve, and [18 Battalion](#) a very humble pawn on that board. It had been hard sometimes to escape the idea that all this manoeuvring might be a bit over-subtle and not directed firmly towards its final aim, a decisive counter-attack on the enemy from two directions at once. But now both British corps were poised for this attack, the enemy's spearhead in the central salient had been blunted by days of fighting, and it was only a matter of time before the balloon would go up.

Not only had this fortnight been one of sudden, inexplicable moves, it had also brought conditions that the Kiwis had not had to cope with in action before. The Division was no stranger to its present diet of bully and biscuits; it had learnt to bear thirst. But the [Alamein](#) line had more to offer than these. It had heat, heavy oppressive heat that brought the whole war practically to a standstill for three or four hours every afternoon. It had desert sores, it had 'Gyppo tummy'. Above all, it had flies, a never-failing supply of aggressive, greedy flies ready to gorge impartially on tea, bully stew, or human flesh, living or dead.

To [18 Battalion](#) the war seemed a particularly futile business just then. It had suffered all these discomforts, it had been annoyed by Stukas, it had had its hopes raised by baseless rumours—and at the same time it seemed to have done nothing useful, had not got near enough to Jerry to have a shot at him, but had pottered round out of range while battle noises floated down from the north. So it is no wonder that now, when the prospect of an attack and some close-range action

loomed up, the battalion welcomed it with gladness.

[Ruweisat Ridge](#), as ridges go, is very small indeed. It is a long narrow hump of sand and stones running east and west, only 30 or 40 feet above the level of the desert around it. From a distance the ground does not even seem to rise at all; but from the crest of the ridge you can see a surprisingly long way in all directions. Jerry's break into the [Alamein](#) line in early July had put him firmly astride this ridge, and when the [Eighth Army's](#) idea of a 'pincers' attack farther west came to nothing, [Ruweisat Ridge](#) became the next focus of attention as a desirable jumping-off point for a counter-offensive aimed at smashing Jerry's front.

Another point channelled the strategists' minds towards Ruweisat. It was right in the middle of the enemy's salient, and both its north and south slopes were held by Italians, easy meat compared to the Germans. There was, the British knew, a small sprinkling of German anti-tank men among these Ities, but behind them was only a small force of German tanks—most of these were tied up nearer the coast, while the Italian armour and German motorised infantry were away to the south. A night infantry attack on Ruweisat, then, could be fairly immune from counter-attack, and British tanks could come up on the heels of the infantry and push on westwards before the enemy had got over his astonishment.

So the [Eighth Army](#) planned. Thirteenth Corps was to deliver the first blow against the western part of Ruweisat, and [5 Indian Brigade](#) of [30 Corps](#) against the eastern, after which the armour would exploit to the north-west and [30 Corps](#) would attack south from the coast. After that, unleash the pursuit.

In [13 Corps](#) the New Zealand Division would do the first attack, starting two miles north of [Alam Nayil](#) and approaching Ruweisat from the south-east. It would be a long advance, six miles altogether, the last two through enemy territory. The attackers, leaving the start line at 11 p.m., were to be on the ridge at 2 a.m., and by dawn the tanks of [1 Armoured Division](#) were to be up in support, [2 Armoured Brigade](#) on the right and [22 Armoured Brigade](#) on the left, ready to meet a counter-attack or to push on westwards when the time was right.

There would be three battalions in the van of the New Zealand attack. On the right [23 Battalion](#) and in the centre [21 Battalion](#), both of [5 Brigade](#); on the left, [4](#)

Brigade would be led by 18 Battalion, now released from its frustrating reserve role. Nineteenth Battalion would advance slightly behind and to the left of the 18th, and the open left flank would be looked after first by Divisional Cavalry and the Reserve Group, later by 22 Armoured Brigade. Eighteenth Battalion's objective was Point 63, a trig point near the western end of the ridge, much more prominent on the map than on the ground.

The line now held by 4 and 5 Brigades, running north-east from Alam Nayil, was not a very healthy spot. For the last three days both sides had been hammering away at each other's infantry and gun positions, and the constant undertone of shellfire had been audible in Muhafid, sometimes rising to barrage proportions for a short time. Now, on the morning of 14 July, 26 Battalion of 6 Brigade arrived up from reserve to take over 18 Battalion's job in the Reserve Group, and the 18th packed up and left Muhafid at 2.30 p.m., with orders to relieve the Maori Battalion under 4 Brigade's command, and to get ready for the attack that night. For the first time since Minqar Qaim the battalion left its B Echelon transport behind.

Sending a unit up to the front line in broad daylight was an unusual idea; according to Captain Batty, the adjutant, 'someone argued that the shimmering heat waves would block the view of the enemy'. This convenient theory did not work out well. On the way up the battalion came under shellfire, not very concentrated but very uncomfortable, and everyone was quite glad to leave the trucks in the lee of a small escarpment and walk the last mile. As the companies neared the front line the first Maoris were coming out, tired, grimy, cheerful, bristling with a fantastic variety of weapons, shouting out pithy comments on front-line life ('She's a bastard in there, eh, boy') with wide grins as they passed. By 5 p.m. 18 Battalion was settling in, digging new slitties or adapting old ones, while shells still fell in steady ones and twos all over the area.

Not only the front line was unhealthy that day. The Luftwaffe, after a few days off, had been over in large numbers, and there had already been a hit-and-run Stuka raid on Muhafid in the morning. A second raid only half an hour after 18 Battalion left hit its B Echelon fair and square, and the Battalion Headquarters office truck with most of the unit records went up in flames—a casualty looked on with unconcern by the men in the companies, who would have been much more upset if it had been a cooks' truck. But the cooks' trucks were untouched, and the cooks were able to send

a hot meal up to the companies as soon as it was dark. By this time the shelling had slackened off, and the battalion was working fast to prepare for the attack.

It was impossible to make thorough preparations. There was no time to arrange liaison with 19 Battalion or 21 Battalion. There was no time for Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch or his company commanders to make any reconnaissance, and little time to arrange a plan of communications. Everything was hurried, and to make things worse 4 Brigade Headquarters came along with an instruction to 18 Battalion to send a company off to the south to cover a gap in the defence, as the German motorised columns of 90 Light Division were supposed to be pressing forward in this area. A whole company could not be spared just then, so the 18th compromised by sending the defence and carrier platoons, who hastened to the threatened gap but found no Jerries. They were withdrawn at 9 p.m., and one defence platoon man remarks bitterly that nobody had remembered to keep any tea for them.

There was also no time to make out a proper written battalion operation order for the attack; all the orders were verbal, scribbled down on scraps of paper by company and platoon and section commanders. Even then there was barely enough time before 9 p.m. At that hour the A Echelon vehicles left for a rendezvous at 4 Brigade Headquarters ready to advance when ordered, and the rifle companies and Battalion Headquarters moved off to the start line two miles north, everyone loaded up with ammunition, digging tools, and a day's food and water.

The Germans and Italians would have been very interested to see this part of the desert just then. Everything was unnaturally quiet, for this was a silent attack with no artillery preparation. Along the taped and lighted start line lay, sat or strolled hundreds of dark figures, outwardly calm, dozing or talking in low voices, but inwardly tense and fidgety, as everyone always is on these occasions. The battalion was ranged along 4 Brigade's 400-yard front, B Company on the right, D on the left, Battalion Headquarters in the middle, C Company behind, all waiting for 11 p.m. and the word go.

¹ Maj C. L. Brett, ED; Hamilton; born NZ 4 Oct 1906; farmer; wounded Apr 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

² Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 9 May 1904; clerk; CO 27 (MG) Bn, Aug 1940-Jul 1942; 24 Bn Jul-Nov 1942; town clerk, Auckland.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 20 – DISASTER AT RUWEISAT

CHAPTER 20

Disaster at Ruweisat

Next to [Crete](#), the Ruweisat attack was the worst disaster of the war for [18 Battalion](#). In one way it was worse than [Crete](#), for its tragedy came suddenly and unexpectedly, after an action which began well and had every promise of ending well. It was poor consolation to the battalion, and indeed to all the units who took part, that the failure was not their fault.

The night was clear, dark and still. The companies got off the mark well, filing forward quietly and confidently, much of the tension gone now that they were on the move. For an hour they advanced in good order and well up to schedule. Then suddenly things began to happen.

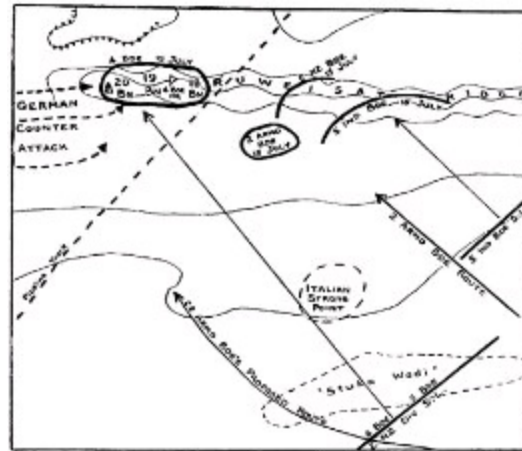
The enemy, [2 NZ Division](#) had been led to believe, had his forward outposts three or four miles from the start line, and his main defences on [Ruweisat Ridge](#) itself. But this was not so; the Italian Brescia Division, it was discovered later, had pushed its front forward to within two miles of the start line and made 'strongpoints' right across the Kiwis' line of advance. About midnight our leading troops ran into wire and mines, flares went up all along the front, and Italian machine guns opened up on fixed lines.

The reaction in [18 Battalion](#) was swift and uncompromising. In went the forward companies, yelling at the top of their voices, with rifle, bayonet and grenade. Guided by the tracer bullets, they closed with the machine-gun posts. The men of [Brescia](#) had little stomach for this sort of thing. Scores of them were shot or bayoneted, others fled or surrendered. Many were winkled out of their dugouts, some in night attire. The first round was New Zealand's at a cost of very few casualties.

But that was the end of [18 Battalion's](#) orderly advance as a unit. The vigour of their onslaught took platoons and sections away in widely diverse directions. The rest of the night is a disjointed story of small confused actions which can never be told coherently, for nobody saw more than his own little corner of it.

B Company, on the right, began to disintegrate almost as soon as the fighting began. Right up among the forward posts was an Italian tank—a small light tank, but

big and heavy enough to force some of B Company to ground and break up the attacking formation. In this mêlée the men swung off



**Attack at Ruweisat
14–15 July 1942**

course to the right and tangled with B Company, 21 Battalion, and according to Corporal Alf Voss of 11 Platoon, 'the two Coys got well mixed, both Coys calling out B Coy'. By the time those who had stopped got under way again the rest had disappeared in the darkness ahead, and all chance of the company's regaining formation had gone.

The main body of the company, after breaking its way through the first opposition, pushed on in two groups, mainly 11 and 12 Platoons to the right and 10 Platoon to the left, plus some strays from 21 Battalion and a few of 19 Battalion who had evidently wandered off to the right of their own unit. For a time the advance continued in almost uncanny quiet; then, some distance on, more tanks loomed up, big German tanks this time. B Company rushed them, disabled and captured one, crew and all. 'At this stage,' says Voss, 'we were all prepared to give the tanks a go after our initial success.' Voss himself, one of those select few whose fearlessness had become a byword in 18 Battalion, went right up to one tank and attacked the tracks with a pick.

But a handful of infantry cannot cope with tanks, and B Company paid for its cheek. Major Playle describes what happened:

The other one got away & immediately started machine-gunning us. It cruised to & fro, its M.G.'s going constantly. Quite a number of us took cover behind the captured tank, but eventually its petrol tank was hit & it burst into flames, so we had to scatter. The whole area was lit up like day & many of our chaps were hit at that stage.

These few minutes took heavy toll. Lieutenant McGurk ¹ and several others were killed, many wounded, and the survivors scattered. A few groups which dodged the tanks pushed on and finally reached the objective, including about fifteen men under Sergeant Bill Kennedy of 10 Platoon and most of Burridge's ² 12 Platoon; a few more came up later with 20 Battalion. Others, after a period of confusion, gradually banded together under Major Playle, who took them back towards the start line in obedience to orders from Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch. Day was breaking now, and everyone was nearly dropping with fatigue.

On the left, D Company also split up as soon as it got in among the Italians, and went surging forward through the strongpoint in little groups, mixed up with men from 19 Battalion who had appeared from nowhere during the fighting.

It had particularly good hunting. 'We struck a fairly thick patch of artillery,' says Major Brett, 'and there were a number of large dug outs in the area which we cleaned out with grenades.' Like B Company, D could not regain cohesion even after some of its groups had smashed their way right through the opposition into the clear, but set out northwards in the general direction of the objective in a ragged, unconnected formation. No. 17 Platoon was fairly well together, but 16 Platoon was badly broken up and 18 Platoon in two main groups. Major Brett had with him an assorted party of about twenty, but had lost touch with all the platoons. Some men who had lost the company altogether joined up with 19 Battalion for the night.

D Company was lucky enough to miss the tanks that wrought such mischief in B Company, though at one stage towards the end of the advance tanks were heard pulling back on the left flank. There was no more opposition behind the strongpoint, and the men pushed forward in the same vast silence that had seemed so uncanny to B Company.

Then Major Brett reports:

We heard troops moving on our left ... and found it was the 19th Bn—I found Syd Hartnell ³ and suggested to him that I attached myself to his unit, together with what few men I had, until we reached the objective & then sorted ourselves out in the morning. We carried on thus and reached our objective on the Ridge at approx. the appointed hour.... Syd Hartnell gave me a position on his right flank.

Here Brett's handful of men dug in and settled down to await dawn. The rest of D Company arrived in dribs and drabs, Second-Lieutenant Ward ⁴ with 17 Platoon, Lieutenant Behague ⁵ with part of 16 Platoon, and Sergeant Harold Aitken ⁶ with a few of 18 Platoon. Nobody had a very clear idea just where to go, so the parties dug in more or less where they happened to end up.

When the forward companies gatecrashed the first defences, Battalion Headquarters and C Company were not far behind, and very soon afterwards, pushing on to follow B and D Companies through, they found their way blocked by lively and resentful machine guns left untouched in the free-for-all. The Intelligence truck and two wireless trucks with Battalion Headquarters came in for special attention from the left flank, so 14 Platoon of C Company was sent off to deal with the offending machine gun. But the machine gun turned out to be a tank; it opened a murderous fire, broke up 14 Platoon with heavy casualties and sent Lieutenant De Costa ⁷ staggering back badly wounded to report. About the same time 13 and 15 Platoons made a series of small flanking moves, covering the machine-gun nests with Bren fire from the front and rushing the guns from flanks and rear. Both platoons lost men in these skirmishes, but once they got to close quarters the Ities surrendered with satisfactory ease. Having cleared away the immediate opposition, 13 and 15 Platoons paused for a breather and sent their prisoners back.

By this time Colonel Lynch had gone ahead to try to reorganise B and D Companies, which had both swung off course to the right. Nobody knew what was happening: the forward companies had disappeared, the wireless would not work, there was still firing to the right, trucks were burning here and there, a large body of 19 Battalion swung across Battalion Headquarters' bows apparently off course, and Captain Batty, left in charge of the small Battalion Headquarters group, decided to keep going on the correct bearing and fire direction signals to rally the companies. Just after that, to complete the general bewilderment, Battalion Headquarters and C

Company lost touch.

Captain Batty describes the next part of Headquarters' advance:

It was quite eerie going forward by ourselves just 3 trucks & a handful of men....We kept firing signals on our Bren but all it did was attract a couple of tanks to us. We could hear them grinding towards us and they stopped and fired Very lights over us. We stopped too and hoped for the best. They were probably puzzled & perhaps our 3 trucks looked a bit like tanks too. Any way we decided to go on and as they didn't open fire we thought it safest to keep going.

Finally the party arrived at what it guessed to be the objective; the night was far spent and the men stumbling with weariness. There was no sign of anyone, friend or foe. Batty ordered the success signal fired to rally the battalion, and the men then settled down to wait for dawn and see where they were.

Just as the darkness began to lift, their solitude was broken by yelling and firing as part of [19 Battalion](#) appeared over a rise to their right and took up position not far away. The spirits of Batty's party, very depressed by the lack of response to their success signal, lifted at once. They had the bad luck, while heading over towards the new arrivals, to lose the 'I' truck on a mine, but they located 19 Battalion Headquarters and were directed by Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell out to the right flank, where they found Major Brett and the handful of D Company already there. Brett took temporary command of the battalion, or such of it as was within reach.

To return now to C Company. After losing Battalion Headquarters, 13 and 15 Platoons were held up by tanks and more machine guns, and in the mix-up the two platoons parted company. No. 15 Platoon pushed on alone for a long way in the quiet period that followed the fighting, but got uncomfortably close to one of the blazing trucks that dotted the battlefield, and went to ground in some empty trenches, both to avoid the light and to work out where it was. Some time later it saw what looked like the success signal some distance away, and headed in that direction, but met 20 Battalion moving up and carried on with it to the ridge, arriving there just as day was about to break. No. 13 Platoon stumbled on Colonel Lynch and was directed by him back to the start line.

In C Company, just as in the others, many men had strayed during the

scrimmage. One handful under Captain Sutton pushed on, joining in some of the small engagements as they went, and apparently overshot the objective, for they were ahead of Battalion Headquarters when the success signal went up. By this time they had linked up, quite accidentally, with Burridge's party from B Company. The whole group went back and found Brett's small 'battalion' on [19 Battalion's](#) right flank.

Another party that reached the ridge was the 'defence platoon', a temporary platoon of reinforcements and odds and ends, which had started out just ahead of Battalion Headquarters and had had a night full of adventures in which it found itself at various times with B Company, [19 Battalion](#) and 21 Battalion. Near the ridge the platoon seems to have split into two parties, one under Lieutenant Frank Nathan, the other under Sergeant Dick Bishop. Nathan and his men fell in with 20 Battalion and moved up to the ridge with it; Bishop's party finished up out on its own with nobody else in sight, so turned back and also tagged along with 20 Battalion.

The night's greatest mystery surrounds Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch. After going forward from Battalion Headquarters in the thick of the fighting he missed his own men, was for a time in touch with B Company, 21 Battalion, then lost it in the fighting round the German tanks. He seems to have gone back to rejoin Battalion Headquarters, but missed it in the dark. From then on various [18 Battalion](#) men recall having seen him briefly here or there, and at one stage he sent the unexplained order by runner to Major Playle to meet him back at the start line; but nobody can clearly define his movements until nearly dawn, when he spoke to the commander of [5 Brigade](#) not far south of [Ruweisat Ridge](#). By this time his battalion was dispersed over miles of desert, and never had it been so scattered and bewildered.

To summarise the position at dawn. Nineteenth and 20 th Battalions had reached Ruweisat in fairly good order, and were taking up position round Point 63, along with a forward 4 Brigade Headquarters under Brigadier [Burrows](#).⁸ On [19 Battalion's](#) right flank, nearly a mile east of Point 63, in a shallow wadi facing north, was [18 Battalion's](#) skeleton headquarters under Brett, with Sutton's few from C Company. The B Company groups under Burridge and Kennedy were on a little rise just above Battalion Headquarters, and the D Company platoons in a very exposed

position between there and Brigade Headquarters. Farther left with 20 Battalion, very near Point 63, were Bush's 15 Platoon and the defence platoon. Other 18 Battalion men who had lost their companies were scattered in ones and twos among 19 and 20 Battalions. Behind the ridge were many more little groups, most of them hopelessly lost, either wandering round or waiting in such cover as they could find for daylight to show them where they were. Much of the battalion was back at B Echelon. Casualties had been at least 20 killed and 60 wounded.

Every surviving man in the battalion, no matter where he was, had one thing in common, and that was weariness. Weariness such as even soldiers seldom know, comparable with the weariness of the slog back from [Kastania](#) in [Greece](#) or over the Cretan mountains. Weariness made more intolerable by disappointment over the night's misadventures and by anxiety for the future. It was not a happy dawn for 18 Battalion.

And yet the unit had no reason to be ashamed of its performance. Bad luck had dogged it. Its commander had got lost, its wireless communications had unaccountably failed. Enemy tanks had appeared out of nowhere, and even without them the battalion had struck opposition against which no unit could hope to stay intact. It had run into the very heart of the Italian strongpoint, had ploughed its way right through, had killed or chased away many of the defenders, had captured nobody knew how many prisoners.

These prisoners, indeed, had been a curse. Almost every little group had captured its quota, often far outnumbering the captors. Some had been sent back under escort, but an attacking unit cannot spare many men to usher prisoners back; some of the groups had been forced to take their prisoners along with them, some had been lucky enough to unload them on to someone else (like Captain Sutton, who passed his batch over to the 19 Battalion provost sergeant despite the latter's protests), some had been so much at their wits' end that they had packed the Italians off unescorted towards the rear. Some prisoners had vanished into the night simply because there were too many of them to control. The men who reached the ridge still had some sheepish, docile Italians with them, harmless enough now, but hardly less embarrassing than they had been during the night. After daybreak, to make things worse, more Italians emerged from holes in the battalion's area to swell the captive throng. All that could be done was to herd them together as far as

possible and detail the absolute minimum of guards to look after them. As things turned out, all these prisoners (except for a few sent back during the afternoon) were liberated by the Germans that evening.

The first job on the objective was to dig in, if possible, before it got too light. But here was another misfortune. The Ruweisat ground was diggable only for a foot at most; after that you struck hard rock. Some men could not get below ground level even after trying at several places, so did the best they could with built-up stone sangars. Some occupied old Italian trenches, but the characteristic filth of these was too much for most men, who preferred their own shallower, less secure slitties.

When day broke enemy infantry and trucks could be seen milling round on the opposite slope only a few hundred yards away, obviously at a loss to know what was happening. It was a sight to make your mouth water, and it cut everyone to the heart to have to sit there and, for lack of artillery and supporting weapons, do nothing about it. The [18 Battalion](#) Brens opened up, but were met by shellfire so heavy that the gunners had to stop firing and get underground. Fourth Field Regiment opened at the enemy from away to the south, but it was firing at extreme range; some shells fell on the ridge, causing more casualties, and before long it gave up trying. Jerry was able to land his shells among [4 Brigade](#) unmolested, including some 210-millimetre monsters—many of these, fortunately, were duds, but even so they hit the earth with a whoomp like an earthquake. Against all this the men on Ruweisat had only themselves and their infantry weapons, plus a few anti-tank and Vickers guns that had made their way up to the ridge by dawn. The Vickers, as usual, were invaluable. The anti-tank guns had few opportunities, but the six-pounders with their long range had an occasional crack at Jerry.

Had these supporting guns not followed right on the heels of the infantry, so that they arrived on the ridge before full daylight, they would never have made the distance. As it was, the column came under fire from the south as it neared the ridge, and some portées were damaged. 'After a few minutes of milling about,' reports Second-Lieutenant [McLeod](#),⁹ 'the head of the column turned right and belted for some rising ground about a mile away. The rest of us followed and in a few minutes struck the rest of the Bn digging in on the objective.' The two-pounders stayed on their portées in the Battalion Headquarters wadi, ready to go where they

were needed.

The enemy south of the ridge, though broken through, decimated and disorganised, was obviously still in the fight. Machine-gun nests were active, and German tanks were cruising round the flat over which the Kiwis had fought their way. Some of 18 Battalion's wounded were unlucky enough to be picked up during the morning by these tanks; others evaded capture and eventually got safely back. A typical story is that of half a dozen men from 13 Platoon who, after lying low in old trenches all morning, enduring our own shellfire and expecting discovery at any minute, escaped early in the afternoon and rode back home in comparative comfort, due largely to the efforts of Private Alex Heron,¹⁰ who grabbed a truck from almost under the Germans' noses, loaded the party on to it, and set sail for the south. A German tank put a salvo of shells through the truck as it left, but with no lethal effect.

But that was in the afternoon, when Jerry's position south of Ruweisat was becoming sticky. In the morning his roving tanks held the upper hand there, and the 18 Battalion carriers, mortars and other A Echelon vehicles, following up at dawn not far behind the anti-tank guns, could not get through to the ridge at all.

The night battle and its aftermath, from the point of view of A Echelon, is described by Captain Phillips of C Company:

A Echelon ... drove slowly along behind the attack.... The Bns moved silently off ... then the usual wild yelling & cheering began & the tracer started to fly.... The firing would die down then start up again a little further fwd as the troops moved through successive defence areas. Our transport was slowly following along in fits & starts. The fighting continued into the night. At about 0100 ... it was continuous all along the Bde front....

About 02-0300 the heavy firing died down & things were fairly quiet. Bde transport was halted & we caught a bit of sleep. Collect a few Itie prisoners who were dribbling back & waited for dawn when a hot meal had to go fwd—it never did.

At first light we found ourselves ... in a low wide E. to W. depression.... Prisoners kept wandering back.... There were odd pockets of enemy still between us & the ridge & very few if any people got fwd....

Indeed, it is fairly safe to say that nobody got forward to Ruweisat that morning, though it was not for want of trying. Lieutenant McBeath tried to get through in a carrier soon after dawn, but came under fire from both flanks. Later in the morning several other parties of carriers tried with just as little success. Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch spent the morning making desperate efforts to organise and lead a relief convoy up to his forward companies with food and ammunition, but to no avail. The remains of the Italian strongpoint still lay like a watchdog across the path.

Meanwhile, the men on the ridge were spending a most unpleasant day, under fire almost continuously. Some of the groups that had arrived up with 19 and 20 Battalions made their way over nearer to 18 Battalion Headquarters, and a small makeshift battalion perimeter was formed. Even the short move over to the Battalion Headquarters wadi was fraught with danger—Lieutenant Bush, for instance, recalls that 15 Platoon 'proceeded towards the wadi singly at long intervals but 2 were killed by shell fire in the process'. In general, nobody moved about unless he had to. Some of the luckier ones, or perhaps those with calmer nerves, spent part of the day sleeping off their night's exertion. Those who did not sleep found the hours fearfully long fighting off thirst, flies, heat and fright. Sergeant Kennedy reports:

It was a hectic day, but we kept a billy boiling and tea brewing all day, with materials looted from German trucks.... Jimmy Buddle ¹¹. of Hq. Coy did great work during the day, attending wounded and brewing tea.

There was all too much scope for good work attending wounded, for there was a steady flow of casualties all day. The 18 Battalion RAP had strayed into 5 Brigade's area (where it had its own adventures, was captured and escaped again, and earned for 'Doc' Thompson ¹² the unit's first DSO), so the few medical orderlies with 18 Battalion on the ridge made a temporary aid post and cared for the wounded as well as possible on the spot. While the strongpoint south of the ridge still held its ground no wounded could be evacuated.

It was urgently necessary to clear away this offending strongpoint to open a way up to the ridge, so during the morning a mixed force of British tanks and Kiwi armoured cars tackled it, but not till mid-afternoon did it surrender. Then at last a

few people were able to reach the ridge, though there was no point in sending up infantry reinforcements. What was needed was tanks and guns to take on the German armoured cars which were now snooping round north and west of the forward troops, obviously spying out the land for a counter-attack.

The first to come up was Colonel Lynch, who took advantage of the attack on the strongpoint to make another bid for Ruweisat, leading some [19 Battalion](#) carriers full of ammunition. The little column ran the gauntlet of fire successfully, reached the ridge, and Lynch went to Forward Brigade Headquarters to report. Unfortunately, he never had the opportunity to rejoin his battalion.

Shortly after this Lieutenant McBeath and Second-Lieutenant McLean, with two [18 Battalion](#) carriers, got up to the eastern end of Ruweisat, but when they tried to work their way along the ridge to the battalion they were shelled back. They joined the British tanks of [2 Armoured Brigade](#) which were sitting below the crest of the ridge less than a mile from the battalion.

These tanks had from the beginning been the key to the success of the whole attack. They were, so the Kiwis clearly understood, to be up with the forward troops at dawn, both to protect them and to exploit north and west. But at dawn there was no sign of them, to the astonishment and wrath of the infantry on the ridge, who could see the enemy opposite apparently disorganised and ripe for the picking up, but without support could do nothing about it. Later in the day, when Jerry livened up and signs of a counter-attack became unmistakable, urgent appeals for help wirelessly back from Forward [4 Brigade](#) Headquarters were answered by assurances that the tanks were on their way up and would be there in plenty of time to protect the infantry. Even an armoured liaison officer came up to [18 Battalion](#) to raise hopes further. But that was as far as it went. Second Armoured Brigade, which quite early in the day had advanced to within a mile of [4 Brigade](#), simply stayed there until it was too late. Twenty-second Armoured Brigade had been deflected south-west by enemy strongpoints and tanks, and was miles away from 4 Brigade's left flank.

German armoured cars had first appeared on a low ridge a mile north of Ruweisat late in the morning. After midday they disappeared for a while—the early afternoon heat, so trying for the Kiwis, presumably caused the Germans to seek shade as well—but by 3 p.m. they were there again, driving up and down, having a

good look at 4 Brigade's position, while guns behind them pounded Ruweisat. More than once Major Brett brought up the question of withdrawal with Brigadier Burrows, but the reply always was, 'Stand fast, our armour will be here.' The atmosphere on the ridge was breathless, every man with one eye on Jerry and the other on the eastern skyline where the British tanks were expected. By 4 p.m. a force of German tanks had assembled in full view, and Brigadier Burrows at last passed the word down to withdraw after dark. But now any chance of withdrawal had gone.

About five o'clock the shellfire rose to a climax as the German tanks moved in from the west. Haze, dust and smoke blotted out the view, and the shells kept every head down, so that 18 Battalion saw little of the tragedy farther west, the six-pounder anti-tank guns firing till they were knocked out one by one, then 20 and 19 Battalions helplessly rounded up. After overrunning these two battalions the tanks paused, and there was still a faint but heartfelt hope that by lying doggo the 18 Battalion men might escape notice until dark. But soon the tanks came on again, working their way along the ridge. Most of the outlying platoons and little groups of men managed to withdraw out of immediate reach. The two-pounder portées made a quick exit from the Battalion Headquarters wadi, only just in time, for two armoured cars arrived and patrolled the wadi entrance, trapping Battalion Headquarters while tanks came over the top and down through the position. 'But for the armoured cars,' says Captain Sutton, 'we could have got out.' A solitary two-pounder kept the tanks at bay for a short time, but that would have been impossible for long. 'There was nothing for it,' says Major Brett, 'but to give in unfortunately, & we came out of our slit trenches at approx 5.40 p.m.' There were eight officers and about forty NCOs and men.

Almost at the same time Forward Brigade Headquarters, only a few hundred yards from 18 Battalion, was attacked too. A lone armoured car charged across the area tossing hand grenades here and there; one fell beside a trench where most of the senior officers were assembled, wounding Colonel Lynch severely. A little later the Jerries came back and rounded up everyone there, Lynch among them.

Not long afterwards the tardy British armour arrived, swept the area and temporarily pushed the Germans back. Some men who had not been picked up were able to get away covered by the tanks, and some wounded, including those in 18 Battalion's makeshift dressing station, were sent back to safety, but the tank

advance had by now lost most of its point—the position had already been lost, the prisoners whisked away, and the chance of exploitation had long gone. It could now be only a gesture on the armour's part.

Of the three battalions of 4 Brigade, 18 Battalion got off lightest. True, it lost a lot of men, including most of its remaining senior officers; but the German tanks' pause after overrunning 20 and 19 Battalions gave most of its survivors time to vanish over the skyline out of sight. There was no coordinated withdrawal, only little bands of men making their way generally eastwards until (if they were lucky) they ended up with 5 Brigade or 2 Armoured Brigade, or even with 5 Indian Brigade farther east. Some came under fire as they went, and suffered more casualties; at least one big party went too far north, got over to the wrong side of the ridge and was captured.

Sergeant Bishop's story is typical of the adventures that befell the fugitives:

We made a bolt for it & under artillery & machine gun fire reached some Italian positions some two hundred yards away & holed up there in the hope that our tanks or artillery might appear.... However the enemy tanks were the only ones to appear so the only thing to do was to head out into the open. A fair amount of fire followed us but we spread well out & I doubt if any one was hit.... Were fortunate in finding a food dump where we loaded up ... & were prepared to spend several days in the desert, if necessary. However after going only a couple of miles we noticed some of our own tanks on the right & headed for them.... Just before dark another two or three hundred stragglers rolled up.

Even more spectacular is the story of Sergeant Kennedy's escape with the remnant of B Company. This group, about fifteen strong, got out in the nick of time aboard an anti-tank portée, but was fired on by the enemy tanks and lost three killed (including GSM Norm Halcombe ¹³) and two wounded. Some distance farther on the portée 'conked out'; by great good luck there was another one handy, containing the Intelligence Officer (Lieutenant Burn ¹⁴) and a few men. The whole party piled on to this second portée and set out again, but, as Kennedy writes:

The fun wasn't quite over.... We had to drive right through an enemy infantry position.... Our driver put his foot down, the Gerries opened up from front, right, left

and rear, and every man on the truck returned the fire. We got through with one slight casualty. Then we found ourselves in another infantry position, but they proved to be a company of Indians, and we were safe, apart from hitting a mine and losing a front wheel.

Beside these tales of boldness and speed there are others of stealth and secrecy. Even inside the captured Battalion Headquarters area several men who lay low in slit trenches and sangars were lucky enough to escape being picked up, even with German tanks milling all about them. Those who got away with it stayed very quiet till after dark, then crawled away, in some cases right past the noses of the Germans, and escaped eastwards. There were even half a dozen [18 Battalion](#) strays who escaped from [19 Battalion](#)'s area when it was overrun—according to one of them, they 'strolled casually away, hid in a weapon pit until dark, and then made their way back to the Bde. lines.' It sounds easy.

To go briefly over to the other side of the hill, the smashing of Brescia Division's line and the establishment of British troops on top of Ruweisat threw the German command into consternation. But this was not allowed to degenerate into panic.

All the mobile forces that could be spared were detached from their own divisions and sent off as fast as possible to reinforce [15 Panzer Division](#) facing Ruweisat; both ends of the line had to be pared right down to danger point, but this had to be accepted to save the centre. We must admire the ruthlessness of a command that could take such a calculated risk, and the swift action that brought reinforcements rushing from north and south to converge on the threatened spot. Some of these reinforcements, pushing their way over unfamiliar stretches of ragged rock or soft sand, took all day to reach their goal, and if the British armour had done what was expected of it they would never have arrived in time.

First Armoured Division's failure was as astonishing to the Germans as to the Kiwis. The 15th Panzer Division, the formation on the spot, said that an attack by the British tanks early on 15 July would undoubtedly have broken right through. Had that happened, the history of the [Alamein](#) battle, and possibly of the whole war, might have been changed. But as it was, the tanks of [15 Panzer Division](#) and the armoured cars of 33 Reconnaissance Unit were given time to strike first, and the whole Ruweisat operation, planned and begun so well, ended in nothing.

Meanwhile the men back with A and B Echelons had had an anxious day harassed by Stukas and gnawed with worry over what had happened to the rifle companies. From those who had lost their way and drifted back during the attack they heard of the fighting and the confusion in the night. But the greater part of the companies and Battalion Headquarters had vanished into the blue, and it was anybody's guess what had become of them until dusk on the 15th, when stragglers began to trickle back, bringing with them a mixture of fact and fancy that added up to disaster. The whole of **4 Brigade**, said some, had been wiped out. Each little group seemed to consider itself the only survivors of **18 Battalion**. So the atmosphere back in the rear area was one of justifiable dismay; the truth was bad enough without Rumour to embroider it.

The first reliable information, along with news of **18 Battalion's** future, came from **4 Brigade** that evening. The brigade would for the time go out of existence as a fighting force. The two hardest hit units, **19** and **20 Battalions**, would go back to **Maadi**. Only **18 Battalion** would stay in the field, and it would come under **5 Brigade's** command. The men of **5 Brigade** still up on **Ruweisat Ridge** east of **4 Brigade's** objective would withdraw during the night, and a new line would be made about two miles south of the ridge, with **18 Battalion** on the right flank, facing north.

In the very early hours of 16 July, therefore, the battalion's transport moved north-east to its new area. It was only a short move, but involved some of the usual shoving to get trucks out of soft patches, and dawn was breaking before the convoy reached its destination. The trucks dispersed and camouflaged themselves on a stretch of flat, featureless waste, where, during the morning, the remains of the rifle companies rejoined them, some on foot, some on trucks and portées lent for the occasion by **2 Armoured Brigade**. Major Playle took temporary command of the depleted, depressed battalion.

The main task for 16 July, after digging in as best they could in that rocky ground, was to take stock. It was an unhappy task. Of the 250 men in the three rifle companies who had set out from the start line on the night of the 14th, only about a hundred now answered the roll. Of the rest, 30 were dead, 90 missing, for whom the best that could be hoped was that they were prisoners.

Almost irreplaceable was the loss of senior officers. Commanding officer,

adjutant, two company commanders, all of them original [18 Battalion](#) officers, had gone. Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch in particular was a grievous loss, and there was great regret in the battalion when, a few months later, word came through that he had died from his wounds.

Had he survived, Ray Lynch might well have been a first-rate battalion commander. He was a front-line soldier with an unusually keen tactical brain, impatient of base camp restrictions, efficient, methodical, yet easy and approachable in his manner. In Greece and [Crete](#) he led C Company magnificently; his MC for [Crete](#) was the only fighting decoration won by an [18 Battalion](#) officer for either campaign. That his last battle and his only major action in command of [18 Battalion](#) should have ended so ingloriously was just another of the tragedies of Ruweisat.

¹ Lt R. A. McGurk; born NZ 31 Aug 1906; company manager; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

² [Capt W. H. Burridge](#); [Auckland](#); born [Petone](#), 21 Sep 1913; salesman; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³ [Brig S. F. Hartnell](#), DSO, ED, m.i.d.; [Palmerston North](#); born NZ 18 Jul 1910; carpenter; CO [19 Bn](#) Oct 1941-Apr 1943; comd 4 Armd Bde Jun-Jul 1943; 5 Bde 9-29 Feb 1944.

⁴ 2 Lt R. A. Ward; born [England](#), 11 Mar 1916; tavern hand; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁵ [Capt W. H. Behague](#); [Orakei](#); born [England](#), 26 May 1912; Regular soldier; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁶ [S-Sgt H. J. A. Aitken](#); [Dunedin](#); born NZ 30 Jul 1905; school-teacher; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

⁷ 2 Lt R. G. De Costa; born [Gisborne](#), 14 Mar 1910; bank clerk; died of wounds 15 Jul 1942.

⁸ Brig J. T. Burrows, CBE, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Gk); Christchurch; born Christchurch, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn May 1941, Dec 1941-Jul 1942; 20 Bn and Armd Regt Aug 1942-Jun 1943; comd 4 Bde 27-29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul-15 Aug 1942; 5 Bde Mar 1944, Aug-Nov 1944; 6 Bde Jul-Aug 1944; Commander, Southern Military District, 1951-53; Commander K Force, 1953-54; Commander, SMD, 1955-60.

⁹ Capt N. J. McLeod; Te Aroha; born Eastbourne, 5 Sep 1912; civil servant; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

¹⁰ Pte A. W. Heron, m.i.d.; Arohena; born NZ 19 Mar 1917; truck driver.

¹¹ S-Sgt L. J. Buddle; born NZ 26 Jul 1918; clerk; wounded 10 Feb 1944

¹² Capt S. B. Thompson, DSO; Motueka; born Christchurch, 19 Dec 1916; house surgeon, Christchurch Hosp; 1 Mob Surg Unit Nov 1941-Mar 1942; RMO 18 Bn Mar 1942-Feb 1944; 2 Gen Hosp May 1944-Jan 1945.

¹³ WO II N. I. Halcombe; born NZ 17 Nov 1913; wool clerk; wounded May 1941; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

¹⁴ Capt O. H. Burn; Auckland; born Nelson, 26 Dec 1912; accountant.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 21 – THE EL MREIR FIASCO

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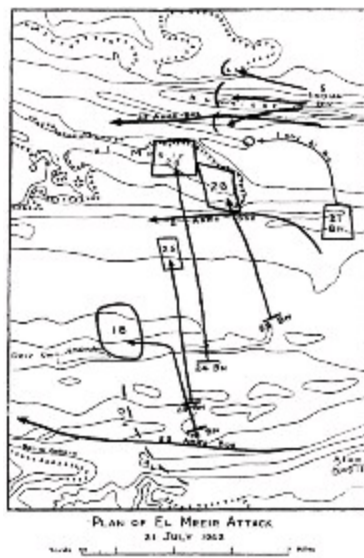
The El Mreir Fiasco

For three days 18 Battalion faced Ruweisat, listening to tank battles ahead and our artillery hammering the ridge, keeping an eye cocked for Stukas (which came over periodically but dropped nothing on the battalion), occasionally hitting the ground when the odd shell fell in the area. There was no particular excitement, except one afternoon when some tanks moved out from their nearby laager and headed for Ruweisat, and British infantry on the ridge could be seen advancing westwards. Even this distant spectacle lasted only a short time, then smoke blotted the infantry from view, and there was nothing left but the shellfire to indicate that fighting was going on out there just ahead.

The inaction of these days was not unwelcome, as Ruweisat had left the battalion in a sombre mood that remained longer than usual. Even the news that the unit was going back into the [Divisional Reserve Group](#) aroused little disapproval. For the time being the battalion did not much care what happened to it.

The Maori Battalion, which was to replace 18 Battalion in 5 Brigade, was expected up on the evening of 18 July, but did not arrive till early next morning. After breakfast on the 19th 18 Battalion turned its back on Ruweisat and drove away south-east to [Rear Divisional Headquarters](#), eight miles behind the front line.

Away back here, in the peace of Rear Division, the boys could enjoy a few amenities unheard-of in the rough living of the forward areas. With a slightly more generous water ration they were able, according to one man, 'to have a decent wash which was needed badly'. The YMCA was there with tobacco, chocolate, tinned fruit and beer, and free toilet gear for those who had lost theirs. Equipment was overhauled and replaced, and Brens and rifles got a more thorough clean than they had had for some time.



**Plan of El Mreir Attack
21 July 1942**

Here, too, the battalion got a new commander, Major C. L. Pleasants¹ from 19 Battalion. He took over on 19 July, and on the 20th addressed the unit in words that gained him favour even with the hard-bitten 18th. He used to think, he said, that the 19th's methods were good. However, he was going to try to fit in with the 18th's ways rather than make it conform to his. To a unit as jealous of its individuality as 18 Battalion this sounded fair enough.

It might have been thought that Ruweisat would have cured the British of making plans involving highly dubious infantry-tank co-operation, but it did not, for the Ruweisat tragedy was not four days old before another nearly identical scheme was on the drawing boards. The idea behind it—to smash the enemy's centre and cut him in half—was very laudable, but the method was ill-judged. This time the main force of German tanks was known to be in the place chosen for attack. However, there the plan was, and there it stayed, despite the doubts expressed by the New Zealand commanders at the preliminary conferences.

This time it was the turn of 6 Brigade, newly arrived up from reserve, which would make a full-moon attack on the eastern end of a large depression known as El Mreir, south-west of Ruweisat. At the same time 5 Indian Division would go for the western end of Ruweisat. The tanks of 1 Armoured Division would again be in support, and were to ward off counter-attacks in the morning and then exploit west. Fifth Brigade would hold a firm base and give supporting fire from the right flank,

and the left flank was handed over to [18 Battalion](#).

The battalion's orders sounded straightforward enough. It was to move up to a forming-up place along with a battery of six-pounders, two troops of Bofors guns and two companies of Vickers; then, under cover of fire from the Vickers and mortars, it was to advance behind and to the left of [6 Brigade](#), to protect the line of advance and cover the left flank while the 25-pounders of [5 Field Regiment](#) came up into position behind. Eighteenth Battalion's own left flank would be covered by Divisional Cavalry's busy cars, and 22 Armoured Brigade would be handy to deal with any German tanks or counter-attacks.

If an attack depended for success on the amount of air support beforehand, then this one was a safe bet. All through 21 July British bombers and fighters were overhead in numbers not seen since November 1941, and the Stukas for once had to take a back seat. It seemed a good omen.

It was fairly common knowledge on 21 July that there was another 'do' on, but, as usual, the battalion's orders came at very short notice, and to add to the normal chaos, while everyone was rushing round packing up, a batch of some fifty reinforcements arrived. What the newcomers thought of the scene of wild confusion can only be imagined. When the convoy got going—somehow—at 5 p.m. some men were still eating their evening stew, and platoon sergeants were still taking their reinforcements' names as the trucks bounced along westwards.

It was 7 p.m., and broad daylight, when the convoy reached the forming-up place in a long wadi supposedly out of the enemy's view. There the trucks dropped their passengers and retired; but before they were even empty the night's misfortunes began. Not far away shells began to kick up the dust.

At first this looked like a patch of normal harassing fire that would soon pass off, but it increased in weight and accuracy until the whole unit was under concentrated fire, obviously coming from an enemy who had seen them and did not like them. The men scratched shallow holes as best they could, but the digging was hard, shovels were at a premium, and there were several casualties before everyone got below ground. For more than an hour the shells came in, and not till dark could the companies assemble for the advance. The 'I' section, which was to have marked out

a start line with white tape, had been pinned down like everyone else, so there was a little trouble getting the companies lined up, but by nine o'clock they were on their way, led by B Company on the right and D on the left, with C Company and Battalion Headquarters following. Less than a mile away the [6 Brigade](#) units were already on their way north towards [El Mreir](#).

Though only half as far as the Ruweisat marathon, [18 Battalion's](#) advance was still a long one, 3000 yards on a bearing of 343 degrees (in 'civvy' language, north-north-west), followed by 1600 yards due west. This would lead it through a thick belt of mines which covered the front, then across a shallow depression, then up on to the next low ridge rising from the southern wall of [El Mreir](#). On this ridge was the objective, where the battalion was to dig in.

In contrast to the eerie silence of Ruweisat, this advance began to the accompaniment of a full chorus of guns and mortars, with an occasional [Wellington](#) bomber growling overhead. Just ahead of the start line were the Vickers guns and the battalion mortars, which fell silent as the companies passed through, then all opened up at once with an ear-splitting racket, firing over the attackers' heads. Going forward under Vickers fire was for most of the men a new and strange experience, all other battlefield noises blotted out by what one diarist calls 'this incessant crackling'.

Well out on the first leg of the advance [18 Battalion](#) unexpectedly came on a large column of vehicles, apparently stuck out miles from nowhere, which proved to be [6 Brigade](#) transport queued up to go through a gap in the minefield. The battalion navigated the minefield without difficulty, then set off again on its bearing. It had outrun the noise of the mortars and Vickers, every ear was cocked for suspicious sounds and hands were not far from triggers, for nobody knew exactly where to expect the enemy. But, though battle noises were floating down from [El Mreir](#) two or three miles ahead, all was quiet to the left, and the battalion made its left turn and set off across the sand of the wadi and then up a slight slope, stumbling over rough stones. Its wireless contact with [6 Brigade](#) was not working well, so that the battalion was out on its own, groping forward, with a bright moon lighting it up uncomfortably.

Then, just as at Ruweisat, the leading troops struck wire and mines, flares went

up ahead, Spandaus snarled, tracer came streaming in, and B and D Companies surged forward, bayonets fixed. For a few minutes all was noise and fitful light, Brens and Spandaus and grenades all joining in.

The foremost B Company platoons, 10 and 11, came under crossfire as they went forward, and had several killed and wounded. They stirred up real trouble, for the source of the fire proved to be a line of very unfriendly tanks sitting hull down over the ridge. Corporal Voss of 11 Platoon, always apt to treat tanks with disrespect, got close enough to grenade one tank and its supporting infantry. A man of his platoon tells the story:

In went [Alf](#) with half a dozen of us yelling like a bunch of banshees around him. I was never closer than 25 yards to the tank but I saw Alf Voss all over it. It was a one man show and I don't think any of the rest of us did anything more than give him moral & oral support.

But one man could not beat the whole German army alone, and B Company had neither the numbers nor the fire power to drive home its attack.

But despite the tanks, B Company came off lightly compared to D, which had a really tragic night. Its bad luck began before the left turn; two men in the reserve platoon (18 Platoon) were hit by 'shorts' from the Vickers, and in the resulting delay the platoon fell behind and lost touch, so that only 16 and 17 Platoons were able to go into the attack. What happened next is told by Second-Lieutenant Cliff [Hawkins](#)² of 16 Platoon:

Just before we reached the limit of our advance someone touched a trip wire exploding a series of mines which caused many casualties and brought down heavy M.G. and small arms fire from straight ahead. [Beachen](#)³ gave the order and we charged the Gerry F.D.L's. taking heavy casualties on the way. They pulled out before we got into bayonet range and retired to their next line about 200 yards further up the slope of the ridge while we occupied their former position and exchanged fire for a short time.

When things quietened down we started to look after some of our wounded and one of the boys reached into a slit trench to get a blanket.... To his surprise there was a Gerry cowering under the blanket.... We picked up about half a dozen

prisoners there.

On this flank, too, it was hopeless to try to push farther on without support. Captain Beachen (D Company's commander) had disappeared, presumably killed in the first scramble forward; 16 and 17 Platoons together were reduced to about seven men; two of the tanks moved over from the right and came in behind the survivors, so there was no option but to sidestep to the left and leave the field to the enemy.

When the trouble first began Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants called C Company forward to help. The company hastened up, picking up a few odd prisoners on the way, but it missed the forward companies and may, without realising it, have gone a little way ahead of them. It came under fire from the tanks at 200 yards' range, went to ground and could make no more headway, though some men tried without success to hunt the tanks with grenades. Its situation was very precarious, out on its own with nobody else around but a few D Company strays, so Captain Phillips 'decided to fall back about 200-300 yards to a wadi we had crossed & take up a posn there.... So we passed the word round the Coy & back we went. Dug in on the northern edge of the wadi.' C Company, with only one man killed and one wounded, was by far the most intact of the companies.

About this time Colonel Pleasants, who had stayed in touch with B and D Companies, ordered them back 1000 yards, as there was obviously no chance of holding their ground. Back to the minefield came the survivors, plus their handful of prisoners; there they stopped to reorganise and gather in stragglers. It was not yet midnight—less than three hours from the time the unit had left its start line.

The spot where [18 Battalion](#) returned to the minefield was right beside the gap where [6 Brigade's](#) vehicles were still filing through on their way north to [El Mreir](#). [Brigadier Clifton](#) ⁴ of [6 Brigade](#), hearing the story of the fight on the ridge, and noting that the companies had cleaned out their stock of anti-tank grenades, immediately ordered the unit to stay and guard the minefield gap until further notice; so Colonel Pleasants passed the word round to dig in, which the men were already trying to do.

This was not as easy as it sounds. The men on the forward edge of the minefield were well enough off, as they had a nice sandy wadi bottom to dig; but farther back the ground rose to a bare rocky hump worse even than Ruweisat, and

some of the men had to hack out hunks of rock and laboriously build themselves sangars, as slitties were quite impossible. To make things even less congenial, the night was unusually cold and dewy, so that after the warmth of the digging had worn off everyone shivered in the sangars, and sleep was almost out of the question.

So matters stood until nearly dawn, by which time C Company had again made touch with Battalion Headquarters. Then, as light began to creep into the sky and the surroundings grew dimly visible, it became clear that the men up on the rise were going to be in a bad position later in the day. So Pleasants revised the layout slightly, drawing the unit a little closer together, and moving the most exposed men from the high ground down into the wadi. The troops, numb with the cold, did not voice any of the usual criticisms of the change, so glad were they to move round and get their circulation going again. The day was lightening fast as they moved to their new positions, but, thanks to the easier digging, they were all out of sight by the time it was light enough to see any distance.

While this was going on, Lieutenant Burn was spending a sleepless night trying to locate the A Echelon column—after the painful Ruweisat experience nobody felt like taking more risks on being left out on a limb with no support weapons. The column had moved forward in the wake of the attack, but had been held up by the queues of vehicles behind the minefield gap, and lost touch with the main part of the battalion until shortly before dawn. The support weapons then dispersed in a slight wadi, except for a platoon of Vickers and two troops of six-pounders, which closed up behind the minefield and went into position near three other anti-tank guns which had been lent to the [18th](#) by [Brigadier Clifton](#), and which had up to now been its only safeguard against the enemy tanks.

Daylight revealed Jerry not far ahead, clearly visible on the crest of the little ridge where the battalion had had its fireworks in the night. There were infantry walking round and digging, and behind them two or three tanks. A few stray Italians discovered not far from the minefield made off, followed by everything [18 Battalion](#) could throw at them, but seemed to get away unscathed—the popular opinion was that the bullets could not catch up with them. Second-Lieutenant McLean with three carriers made a sortie through the minefield to try to scoop up these Ities and to contact any British tanks that might be around, but came under such heavy fire from the enemy tanks that he had to order a retirement at full speed.

The enemy on the ridge were a rare target for the support weapons, which opened up as soon as it got light enough to see, the Vickers and mortars tackling the infantry and driving them to ground, whence they reappeared only at odd moments during the day. The tanks made a half-hearted attempt to advance on the minefield gap, but thought better of it and retired to the lee of the ridge, no doubt influenced by [18 Battalion's](#) mortars and a few salvos of 25-pounder shells in their vicinity. For the rest of the day tanks and six-pounders peered at each other over the ridge, neither side taking any very vigorous steps against the other. Later a few tanks of 22 Armoured Brigade put in an appearance, but did not seem anxious to buy trouble, which at that stage would have been futile.

Throughout a searing hot day the battalion sat there uncomfortably, right in a line with the tanks and the six-pounders, under desultory shellfire from the west. The boys, from the low-level viewpoint of their slitties, cursed the heat, the flies and the war in general. It was a particularly joyless day, its misery accentuated by hunger and thirst. But there were consolations. It seemed unlikely that this show would become another Ruweisat, for the [18th](#) was well supported this time, and the enemy in front (though he had plenty of shells to squander) was not as aggressive as the previous week, but seemed content to hold his ground and discourage [18 Battalion](#) from attacking again.

This was probably partly due to the minefield, and partly to [18 Battalion's](#) general set-up. Just in front of Battalion Headquarters was a knoll, perfectly placed for observation, from which infantry and artillery eyes gazed at Jerry all day. The infantrymen watched with relish a small Honey tank trying to get up this knoll to shoot, but stalling and sliding back every time, till finally it gave up the struggle. Its commander, a wizened little fellow, came under some verbal fire as a 'bloody dicky-bird', from his appearance and his habit of blowing a shrill whistle blast to direct the slightest movement of his tank. In such a bleak situation the boys naturally made the most of any light relief that might come along. Especially in the afternoon, when, to add to the existing unpleasantness, the [Luftwaffe](#) began to come round.

A few days free from air raids were beginning to make the troops think of the [Luftwaffe](#) as a spent force, so its appearance now was looked on as definitely unfair tactics. From 1 to 4 p.m. there were continual bombing forays on the minefield gap,

and a lot of bombs fell on the battalion and its supporting anti-tank guns, two of which were knocked out and others damaged, with casualties to their crews. The 18th also had some wounded from the bombing, lost one carrier, and the RAP truck was skittled, but the worst damage was to nerves and tempers.

The really serious news did not penetrate down to 18 Battalion Headquarters until quite late in the day. In the morning Colonel Pleasants had been sustained in his determination to hold the minefield by the thought that his right flank at least was secure with 6 Brigade to protect it. But when eventually 18 Battalion made touch with Divisional Headquarters it heard a grim tale of events up north in El Mreir. There the German armour had struck before dawn, had beaten the British tanks to the battlefield by hours, and had overrun and captured most of 6 Brigade. Still farther north, 5 Indian Division had been knocked back and the new British 23 Armoured Brigade cut to pieces. This was shocking news for 18 Battalion, for it took away all its fancied security on the right, and left it feeling very bare, jutting out in a little salient of its own.

The relief, then, was great when Divisional Headquarters decided that there was no point in leaving the 18th where it was, and that it would pull back that night to rejoin its B Echelon a mile and a half east of the minefield gap, next to the Maoris, who were holding the left flank of 5 Brigade's firm base.

At 8.45 p.m., when the light was quite gone, the 18 Battalion companies moved quietly from their positions and came back through the minefield, followed by Battalion Headquarters, the Vickers and anti-tank guns, which had taken such punishment from the Stukas and had so many portées damaged that it took all night to haul them out. The men in the companies did not know yet of 6 Brigade's disaster, but they very well knew how tired and hungry they were, and how thankful they were to be leaving that foul place. By 11 p.m. they were back at their new position, wolfing bully stew before turning in to catch up some of their arrears of sleep.

For the rest of the night the mortars and carriers stayed at the minefield as a rearguard. Shortly before dawn on 23 July they pulled out and headed for the new position on a compass bearing, but went astray and had to hunt for the unit after daybreak; finally they found it, but not before they had made another important

'find', reported by Lieutenant McBeath:

We went out in a carrier in an endeavour to locate the Bn. and whilst we were driving round we noticed two figures walking towards us from the north and we finally identified these, one turned out to be Brig. Clifton (6 Bde) who was making his way back after escaping, we gave him a ride back.

In the nomadic, slap-dash desert warfare such events did not seem half as fantastic as they sound in retrospect.

Compared with the unfortunate 6 Brigade, 18 Battalion had had light losses, and it was generally agreed that the withdrawal of the forward companies had saved a lot more casualties. But even as it was, the unit had lost more men than it could afford, weak in numbers as it had been to start with. About thirty were wounded, 35 missing, 20 of whom were later found to be dead. Badly felt was the loss of Captain Beachen, an original 18 Battalion officer, a quiet, reserved man and a reliable, steady officer, one whom all his men—even while they sometimes mimicked his inability to pronounce 'r'—respected highly. The battalion's original officers were taking a bad knock in this 1942 summer, and there were not many left now.

The El Mreir disaster was 13 Corps' last attempt to smash its head through the brick wall in the Alamein central sector. Major-General Inglis, furious at being let down again by the armour, outspokenly declined to consider any other operation of the same kind, and with this refusal every Kiwi agreed. The loss of so many good men in such a fiasco so soon after Ruweisat, plus all the discomforts of the desert summer, had 2 New Zealand Division in a sour, discontented mood, not so much against Jerry as against the Eighth Army's methods, and particularly against the British armour. The demand on all sides was: 'Why can't we have our own armour?' It was a question that was to completely change the life of 18 Battalion before many months had passed.

¹ Brig C. L. Pleasants, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Halcombe, 26 Jul 1910; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn and Armd Regt Jul 1942-Mar 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Sep-Nov 1944; 5 Bde Nov 1944-Jan 1945, May 1945-Jan 1946; twice wounded; Commander, Fiji Military Forces, 1949-53; Commander, Northern Military District, 1953-57; Central Military District, 1957-.

² Capt C. W. Hawkins, MC; Auckland; born NZ 10 Feb 1910; accountant; wounded Dec 1943.

³ Capt A. C. Beachen; born NZ 20 Jun 1909; builder; died of wounds 21 Jul 1942.

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

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 22 – TRIAL BY HEAT

CHAPTER 22

Trial by Heat

The battalion was now spread over a mile and a half of undulating desert just north of the [Alam Nayil](#) ridge, with A, B and C Companies in order from the right, and Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company half a mile back in a shallow sandy basin. The slopes round here were very gentle, and there were no good landmarks to orient yourself, but it was surprising how the bumps and hollows—often only a few feet of difference—limited the view. The enemy, some two miles away, was visible only from the highest points, and the most constant reminder of him was a battery of British guns just behind the battalion which seemed to keep the air perpetually vibrating with their hard, metallic whangs. Jerry in his turn landed a few shells on [18 Battalion](#) from time to time, 'particularly,' remarks the war diary crossly, 'at meal times'. B and C Companies, on open forward slopes, got more than their share of this shelling; back in the sheltered Headquarters wadi life was much easier, and you could even play cricket or football if it was not too hot.

Within a week [18 Battalion](#) had been part of [4 Brigade](#), [5 Brigade](#) and the Reserve Group, jumping from one to another so quickly that you tended to lose track of where you were. Now, to complete the rounds, it came into [6 Brigade](#). Its new position, on the south-west corner of [2 NZ Division](#), had been occupied earlier by [24 Battalion](#), which had now been pulled out of the line after its mauling at EI [Mreir](#). At first [18 Battalion](#) had no immediate neighbours here, and the carriers had to go out patrolling empty ground on the flanks, but within a day or two the remains of [6 Brigade](#) moved in, [26 Battalion](#) going to [18 Battalion](#)'s right flank and [25 Battalion](#) to [Alam Nayil](#) on the left.

The New Zealand line was now continuous, with [5 Brigade](#) on the right and [6 Brigade](#) on the left, and it looked as if the Division might be there for a long stay, so the battalion set to work to make itself as much at home as possible. To begin with, the most urgent sanitary needs were dealt with—all the battlefield junk lying about was disposed of, Italian trenches filled in, corpses buried. Then the boys turned their attention to their comfort and safety. Company positions were reorganised in a permanent form, the rough slitties dug on arrival or bequeathed by [24 Battalion](#) gradually acquired such refinements as sandbagged sides and canvas roofs, fighting

pits were perfected, headquarters and cookhouses and trucks were dug in. On Corps orders the whole front was wired, sappers laid thick belts of mines ahead of the infantry, mortars and Vickers and anti-tank guns were sited to cover every foot of the front, and the whole position took on a [Maginot](#) quality such as the Kiwis had never before experienced.

The seven stationary weeks that followed were a trial by heat, heat such as nobody back in New Zealand could ever have imagined, heat that could not be escaped above ground or below it. The flies were as persistent as ever, water just as scarce. The fine powdery sand blew about in dust-storms that sometimes blotted everything out. Nearly everyone had 'Gyppo tummy' to some extent, and the smallest scratch was liable to develop into a festering 'desert sore'. Life was dirty, boring and unpleasant.

On 14 July [18 Battalion](#) had gone into action at Ruweisat with nearly its full complement of 800 men. After EI [Mreir](#), not counting A Company at [Maadi](#), it could raise just over 400. An immediate call went out for A Company to come up and replace the unlucky D Company, and on 25 July the two companies changed over, D (only half strength now) going back to the peace and quiet of [Maadi](#). Two batches of reinforcements, totalling 220, brought the unit up to something like full strength again early in August, but it did not stay that way for long, as each day took its quota of sick men, so that by the end of August numbers had dwindled again nearly to 500. In these two hot, unhygienic months the sickness rate in the Division was higher than it had ever been.

Yet there were compensations for all these drawbacks. With a short supply line from Base, mail came up fairly regularly, and there were a few parcels from home. There was tinned beer available if you could afford it, too warm to drink during the day, but delightful in the evening when it had had time to cool off. Just as popular was the washing service, by which dirty clothes could be changed for clean ones twice a week. Perpetual war was waged on the flies without much success, but one helpful invention was a tubular net hitched to the rim of a tin hat, which (even if it made you look like something from another planet) gave your face some protection from the hungry hordes.

Early in August, as a change from bully beef and M & V, fresh meat and

vegetables began to appear on the menu about three times a week, and about the same time leave began again, a few men going to [Cairo](#) or [Alexandria](#) every six days. These signs of increasing civilisation were welcomed on all sides, but they did not last long, as towards the end of August another imminent flare-up in the battle forced the Division back to tinned food and killed the leave scheme. There were grumbles at this, of course, but they were perfunctory ones and not serious, for by this time the July gloom had disappeared and the Division was almost its old self again.

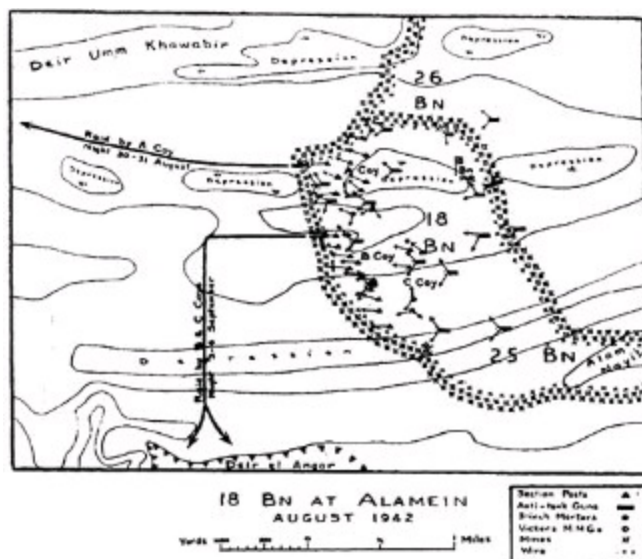
Before the battle had been static for very long a set daily pattern of life began to emerge. By daylight nobody in the forward companies moved round if he could help it, and a stranger suddenly set down in the middle of the New Zealand lines would have had no idea of the teeming underground life all about him. 'A boy's best friend is his slittie' was the slogan. A slittie certainly gave a little protection from sun and sand, and there was no sense in parading round asking for attention from Jerry. So during the long days there was lots of spare time, and few ways of passing it, apart from thinking up ideas for keeping a little more of the scorching heat out of the trenches, and designing new sorts of fly traps.

After dark the desert sprang to life. Meals, ammunition, wire, sandbags, mail all came up, sick men went back. Engineers went out forward with mines, or came round with compressors and power drills to deepen holes in the stubborn rock. The infantrymen went to their battle stations and stood picket, gun crews took their posts, patrols went out through gaps in the minefields to roam no-man's land. Then, like the ghosts' revels which cease at cock-crow, all this activity subsided with the first gleams of dawn, and the daily torpor settled over the desert.

With the switch over into [6 Brigade](#), [18 Battalion](#) came into closer contact with one of the Division's unforgettable characters in [Brigadier Clifton](#), a cheerful, democratic commander who spared no effort to put zing into the dullness of static warfare. The Brigadier's schemes for 'rotating' Jerry consisted largely of variations on two main themes, night patrols and harassing shoots, but he showed high ingenuity in making the most of his limited scope for variety.

Night patrolling began on 26 July, five nights after EI [Mreir](#), when small parties went out westwards to cover engineers blowing gaps in Jerry's minefields. This was

not just wanton destruction, but was part of a big programme of alarms and excursions organised to divert Jerry's attention from an attack farther north by **30 Corps**. The attack was no more successful than Ruweisat or EI **Mreir**, but the fun and games on the New Zealand front brought down a very satisfying response from Jerry, who put up flares and opened defensive fire in obvious agitation. Nightly from then on patrols from every battalion prodded his line, **18 Battalion** regularly



18 Bn at Alamein august 1942

sending out two or three—nuisance patrols to lay mines across Jerry's tracks or to cut his phone wires, large fighting patrols to stir up trouble or get prisoners, small reconnaissance patrols looking for information without trouble. Only rarely was there much excitement, though there were many small brushes with the enemy; throughout August 18 Battalion had no more than five wounded on patrol. The enthusiastic **Clifton** was apt to grumble at his patrols' apparent lack of results, but Jerry was nearly always on the alert, with tanks and quick-triggered machine-gunners well forward and even small searchlights shining towards our lines, and all the battalions were too short of men to take foolhardy risks. In any case, the patrols did more than appeared on the surface. They mapped Jerry's defences with great care and accuracy, which was confirmed a little later when aerial photos of the front first began to be used. Some of the more venturesome patrollers—for example, **Sergeant Bill Goodmanson**¹ of A Company, Sergeants Bill Kennedy and Reg **Pickett**² of B, CSM Archie Fletcher and Sergeant Claude **Tulloch**³ of C—wangled their way out night after night, and in the end could talk as familiarly of landmarks and defences

on Jerry's front as on their own. They were also effectively carrying out the [Eighth Army's](#) policy of giving Jerry no rest, of hitting him when and how they could, of keeping him on the jump. It was a pretty sure guess that Rommel was stacking up for another attack, and the more his preparations could be disturbed, the better.

More spectacular and noisy than the patrols were the harassing shoots, carried out sometimes at night and sometimes at dawn, usually from spots in no-man's land looking into the enemy's lines. The key to these excursions was the carriers, which, besides regularly going out beyond our minefields for a look round first thing in the morning, sometimes went quietly out in the dark along some convenient depression, taking with them a few Vickers and 3-inch mortars, plus ammunition. The usual procedure was for these weapons to give Jerry a brief but solid plastering, the carriers joining in the party with their guns, then loading up and legging it for home before Jerry could get his own guns ranged. Sergeant Dick Bishop records the story of one such shoot:

There was quite a heavy fog.... We went right out to the German wire & waited there till the fog lifted, when we could see troops walking about as large as life less than 1000 yds. away. We got away without having a shot fired at us & the next morning we went out again with a Vickers mounted on each of our four carriers. We were in position before first light & soon after daybreak could see troops moving about quite unconcernedly. We could even hear them calling to one another.... It was only to be expected that they could see us & in the finish they lobbed a mortar bomb across. The first one went about five hundred yards too far, the next four hundred & the third one fifty by which time we had all four Vickers going. Each one got five hundred rounds away & each carrier fired its Bren as well.... We quietened all opposition & no more mortars were fired till we were on the way out.

It was typical of the carriers, and of their commander ([Captain Laurie](#) ⁴), to try to brighten up their job in this way. Often the 25-pounders co-operated by putting over a few rounds at the right time; Lieutenant [Jackson](#) ⁵ of the mortar platoon relates that on returning from one such outing they 'were informed by O.P. officer... that Gerry had sent about 3 tanks down to nail us but they had been dispersed by directed 25 pdr. fire.'

Another experiment for rotating Jerry, tried out towards the end of August, was

for a 'recce' patrol to wireless back targets to the artillery. It is not recorded whose idea this was, but [Brigadier Clifton](#) was delighted with it. In his diary he says:

[18 Bn](#) tried WT (18 set) with recce patrol and it works very well indeed. Put arty to real targets for first time at night.... Upsets Boche. He fired fixed line stuff everywhere.

It was impossible to tell how effective this was, though some patrols declared that they heard wounded men crying out. But it undoubtedly got on Jerry's nerves and made him waste his ammunition.

The story of these seven weeks, despite all the drawbacks of the [Alamein](#) summer, shows a gradual increase in [18 Battalion's](#) keenness and drive. For one thing, the despondency arising from Ruweisat and EI [Mreir](#) naturally tended to lift as time went on. For another, the aggressive patrolling and its accompanying assurance that now we were on more than equal terms with Jerry gave a great boost to morale. Thirdly, the sweeping changes in [Eighth Army](#) leadership in August, the advent of the famous Alexander-Montgomery team, was felt by everyone, right down to the grumbling private sweating in his slittie. General Montgomery, with his 'NO WITHDRAWAL AND NO SURRENDER' message and his appearance in the front line—he toured the battalion's forward positions on 23 August, something no Army Commander had ever done before—had the priceless gift of instilling his own self-confidence into everyone. Life did not suddenly become a bed of roses, but there were, everyone felt, better times coming.

The 'no withdrawal' order was more than just empty words. On 16 August orders came down for every unit to make large reserve dumps of food, water and ammunition, all dug in and camouflaged. This job kept a lot of men busy for several nights, including parties of engineers with their compressors and 'poppers', and when it was finished [18 Battalion](#) was self-contained and able to exist for six days if cut off from supplies, with a big central dump in HQ Company's area and smaller ones forward with each rifle company. At the same time the transport in the front line was drastically reduced, only a bare minimum—mainly jeeps and light trucks—staying with the units while the rest went away back 45 miles to a new divisional B Echelon area. Even the anti-tank portées were thinned out, half going and half staying; carriers were the only exceptions to this sweeping order. There were a few hostile

comments from the men who had so recently toiled on the pits for all these vehicles, but their annoyance, like all army grouches, was soon over and forgotten.

The new policy also brought the Kiwis some new neighbours, [132 Brigade](#) of 44 British Division, just arrived in the desert, which moved in on the south side of the New Zealand 'box'. For a week its units sent parties of officers and NCOs to their corresponding New Zealand units for 'indoctrination' in desert conditions, [18 Battalion](#) playing host to 4 Royal West Kents. This could not be called a great success, for the visitors, though quite friendly, seemed to resent playing new chum to Dominion troops, and did not take kindly to their indoctrination. They certainly did some unusual things. A spectator from [18 Battalion](#) recalls:

There was the really extraordinary spectacle of some 32 2-pr anti-tank guns of 132 Bde... being taken outside the wire, six at a time, to be zeroed using a derelict Honey tank as an aiming mark. Each gun fired at least five shells and we all felt that it would have been interesting to know what deductions the enemy made from it all.

This long-suffering Honey tank, sitting a little way out from the wire in a wadi on [18 Battalion's](#) northern flank, was a convenient practice target. The battalion's own anti-tank boys used it occasionally, but, unlike [132 Brigade](#), they did not risk going out in broad daylight. Towards the end of August their shoots were helped along by 2-inch mortars firing flares, a new idea for lighting up targets at night, and one evening three Valentine tanks went out to this unofficial range and did some flarelight shooting. This experiment, though interesting, was only moderately successful—the tanks and guns were able to lay on a target very quickly, but the range of the flares was too short for most practical purposes, and one windy night they blew back over our lines. The scheme, much to the relief of the 2-inch mortar men, was never tried out in action.

July's wear and tear on the nerves was much lightened in August by the virtual disappearance from the sky of that abomination, the Stuka. Jerry might be saving up for his big attack, but for the time the British fighters had the upper hand by day, and almost every night [RAF](#) bombers passed overhead and could be heard going for the enemy not far away. Sometimes they hung round his front line dropping flares which gave our patrols a few anxious moments. During the month two German planes hit the ground near [18 Battalion](#), one a Messerschmitt fighter-bomber and the

other a Junkers 88 which crashed with a tremendous bang not far from C Company in the very small night hours of 29 August. German planes at night were quite the exception, though there was a minor panic one night when, after one of their rare visits, 25 Battalion reported paratroops dropping nearby. The whole of 6 Brigade stood to and prepared to repel boarders, but the paratroops turned out to be harmless propaganda pamphlets, most of them written in Urdu. A few 18 Battalion men managed to souvenir some of these, but there were not nearly enough to go round. However, they gave everybody a good laugh; and laughs were scarce in the Alamein summer.

The idea of a raid on the enemy was not new. In mid-August the Maori Battalion staged a most rewarding raid at EI Mreir, killing or capturing nearly 100 Italians, and earned high praise even from General Montgomery. It was a model operation—the enemy's positions had been carefully reconnoitred, the raiders' movements had been planned almost to the inch, the teamwork between infantry and artillery was very smooth. It was unlikely that 6 Brigade would let 5 Brigade get away with this honour and glory unchallenged. Brigadier Clifton told Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants that he wanted a good-sized raid turned on, and Pleasants suggested going for Deir Umm Khawabir, the biggest of the long east-west wadis on the New Zealand front, which ran west from 18 Battalion's northern flank. This seemed to be as good as anywhere. There was a good approach along a line of wadi bottoms and the Italian defences were nice and thick. So the suggestion was heartily approved. The job was given to A Company, the obvious choice, as its patrols had been prowling about this area and knew the layout pretty well.

For a small hit-and-run raid, this show took a lot of preparation, almost as much as a divisional attack, or so it seemed. There were diversionary fire schemes by 25 and 26 Battalions, artillery fire before the raid and carefully timed concentrations on Khawabir while it was in progress, Vickers fire on the defences, engineers to make gaps in the minefields if necessary, provosts to light the route out and turn the lights round for the benefit of the returning raiders, a salvage party with a truck to tag along behind and pick up anything useful that was left lying about. Every commander from General Freyberg down to Captain Pike of A Company pored over patrol reports and air photos, which were being used for the first time on a big scale. With all this to help it along, it would have been surprising if the raid had failed.

As it was, it was a brilliant success, the kind of 'do' that lifts the spirits of everybody concerned. Everything went like clockwork. Twenty-fifth and 26th Battalions began their diversions on the ridges south and north of Khawabir a little before zero hour, the artillery (nearly all the Kiwi 25-pounders plus some medium guns) opened up as arranged half an hour in advance and kept up its fire ahead of the raiders till their job was all but finished. A Company itself moved out through our wire when the artillery opened up, advanced a mile and a half due west to the enemy's wire, waited there till zero hour with the shells falling a few hundred yards beyond it; then at 10 p.m. (30 August), as the artillery lifted another 300 yards, the company slipped through a gap in the wire, pushed forward through the smoke and dust, and sailed into the enemy. The Ities were too bewildered by the shelling and the sudden appearance of A Company in their midst to offer much resistance. Some were shot in their trenches, some before they even seemed to realise what was afoot. One or two machine guns fought briefly, but met a swift fate, like this one recounted by Sergeant Bill Goodmanson of 7 Platoon:

An Italian M.G. opened up on us and ... I had two men wounded....They could not depress their gun enough to do any damage & 'Snow' [[Porter](#) ⁶] held them down until I could toss a '36' [grenade] in and that finished that.

Small parties of raiders penetrated deep into the defences, rounded up batches of prisoners, and destroyed an anti-tank gun. Goodmanson goes on to recall the adventures of his party:

We lost contact with the Coy ... and I finished up with eight men. We were having a hell of a good time when one of the boys said that flares [the signal for recall] had gone up a long time ago. I was just going to pull out when we ran into the anti-tank gun, well, that had to be fixed & it was fixed. When we pulled out the 'Wops' carried my wounded boys back home at the point of the bayonet until 'Stiffy' [Lt-Col Pleasants] met us with the Bren Carriers & everybody was happy.

About 11 p.m. a tired, sweat-soaked but exhilarated A Company made its way back through the enemy's wire, leaving behind it many dead Italians and bringing back thirty-three prisoners. Best of all, the company had not lost a single man killed, only three wounded. It had had things nearly all its own way—even the usual wild retaliatory fire speeding it on its homeward path was lighter than expected, for by

this time, as will be seen, the enemy's guns were beginning to be fully occupied elsewhere.

At a time when the [Eighth Army](#) was starved for excitement, A Company's foray attracted attention that it would never have got at a more lively time. [Brigadier Clifton](#), [Lieutenant-General Freyberg](#), and Lieutenant-General Horrocks of 13 Corps watched proceedings with interest from a forward observation post in A Company's area. Next day there were congratulations and pats on the back all round; even [Clifton](#) seemed to think the enemy had been satisfactorily rotated. It was agreed that Captain Pike had made a particularly good job of planning and leading the raid, and his team had responded well.

Back at Battalion Headquarters, after the show, interest centred for a while on one lone German paratroop among the prisoners, who, in a fit of pique, told his captors in barely understandable English that Rommel was attacking again that very night, and that in a couple of days their positions would be reversed. Later, back at [6 Brigade](#) Headquarters, he evidently thought better of his boasting, and told the interrogating officer that there was to be no attack; but by this time events had borne out his first statement beyond all doubt.

The British had guessed right in thinking that Rommel was about to attack again, and they were right, too, in picking that his attack would come at the south end of the [Alamein](#) line, where [7 Armoured Division](#) held an open, mobile front, in contrast to the tight line farther north. Rommel had been planning to this end since early August. His main mobile forces, both German and Italian, would gatecrash [7 Armoured Division's](#) minefields in the south, push a little way past, then swing round to the north, cut off [2 NZ Division](#) and the rest of the British line, and drive to the sea east of [Alamein](#). The German go Light Division would advance through [Alinda](#) and [Munassib](#), then turn north and come in on [2 NZ Division's](#) southern flank just east of [Alam Nayil](#), while a striking force of Italians with a German stiffening would do the same thing on go Light Division's left, hitting the New Zealand positions not far from [18 Battalion](#). There was to be a big fireworks display at [Ruweisat](#) to divert the British attention from the real business in the south.

The night finally arranged for the balloon to go up, after several delays due to shortage of petrol, was 30-31 August, the very night of the [Khawabir](#) raid. At 10 p.m.

—exactly the same hour as A Company got in through the Italian wire— Rommel's Panzer Army crossed its start line and advanced to the attack that was intended to annihilate the Eighth Army.

¹ WO I W. R. Goodmanson, MM, EM; Lyttelton; born Lyttelton, 23 Dec 1915; farm labourer.

² Lt R. A. Pickett; Morrinsville; born Morrinsville, 17 May 1915; draper's assistant.

³ Sgt C. D. Tullock, m.i.d.; born NZ 3Jan 1907; quarryman; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

⁴ Maj E. C. Laurie, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 9 Jul 1908; commercial traveller.

⁵ Capt B. G. S. Jackson; Palmerston North; born Foxton, 12 Feb 1913; school-teacher; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

⁶ Tpr D. F. Porter; Huntly; born Auckland, 18 Apr 1918; farmer.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 23 – FAREWELL TO THE BLUE

CHAPTER 23

Farewell to the Blue

Rommel's last bid for Egypt had little immediate effect on 18 Battalion except to give it a sleepless night. At 2 a.m. on 31 August, while the excitement of A Company's raid was still simmering down, an emergency call came from 6 Brigade to stand ready for action at a moment's notice; but nothing more developed that night, though the whole battalion manned its fighting pits till dawn, alert and expectant, listening to the shellfire beating a tattoo to north and south and watching the flickering flashes along the horizon. It was one of those anticlimaxes so common in war. When day broke the men were still sitting there in battle array, sleepy and flat, asking one another if this attack they had heard so much about had really begun, or was it just another false alarm?

Not till later in the day did they hear of the night's events to the south, how Jerry had pushed laboriously through the minefields and was shaping up to the British armour in 2 NZ Division's rear. Then for three days, while the two armoured forces clashed indecisively and Rommel, deprived of quick victory, was forced by lack of petrol to call the show off and withdraw, 18 Battalion had nothing but rumour to feed on.

But the front was not so quiet now. With the opening of the attack the New Zealand artillery seemed to have taken an electric shock, and the sound of shells passing overhead on their way south tended to merge into a continuous song from dawn to dark, so that if it stopped for a while you felt something was wrong. The enemy had also woken from his summer sleep, for there was movement out in no-man's land where no enemy had been for weeks, and patrols reported that he was moving up closer, digging and building sangars on the north rim of a previously empty hollow called Deir el Angar, not much more than 1000 yards from C Company. Enemy shelling grew heavier and more frequent. For the first time since Ruweisat mortar bombs fell on C Company, and there was even a little sniping if anyone showed himself incautiously.

The battalion was bound to react strongly to such cheek. As soon as the enemy was reported at Angar the 3-inch mortars went into action against the new sangars,

and on the evening of 31 August 14 Platoon of C Company sallied out at them, along with three carriers and three Valentine tanks borrowed for the occasion.

This was a noteworthy event, for never before had the 18th had tanks all to itself in a small-scale show. But even here the lack of sympathy between tanks and infantry, one of the curses of the Eighth Army, became evident right at the outset. The tanks, galloping ahead far too fast for the men on foot, got in among the sangars and had a most enjoyable party, tossing grenades round, running over sangars and trenches, and machine-gunning the unfortunate Italians. Enemy mortar bombs began to fall all round, and the C Company men, in the words of an eye-witness, 'saw minor fires start on the outsides of the tanks and concluded that they had been destroyed'. But this was quite wrong, for the report goes on: 'They returned safely however and reported that they had had Italians squealing, yelling and climbing all over them surrendering but the tanks had no means of bringing them back.'

No. 14 Platoon did not think much of this story. The tanks, it felt, could have waited till the infantry had caught up and been on the spot to take over prisoners. As things were, the infantrymen had no chance to get near the fun or the loot.

Not only on the ground, but in the air, things livened up after Rommel's attack began. Jerry had apparently been saving up his planes and crews for the event. From 31 August big formations of Stukas began to infest the skies, also big clumsy Junkers 88s and wicked little Messerschmitts, coming over in droves to bomb and strafe ahead of the attackers. But the days were past when the Luftwaffe could bully the British with impunity. Not only were RAF bombers over several times a day and most of the night going for Jerry's artillery and transport, but our fighters were usually out on patrol ready to pounce on German planes, and 18 Battalion was treated to a series of spectacular dogfights. Our 'ack-ack' display, too, raised loud admiration; the Luftwaffe was invariably greeted with a tremendous barrage that filled the sky with little black shellburst puffs, and whenever the planes came within range the battalion's Brens and rifles jumped into action and added their welcome. Many a raider, thanks to the vigilance and skill of the Bofors men, never got back home.

On the first day of the attack the battalion witnessed a particularly memorable crash, the story of which is told in its intelligence log:

One Stuka flew over our area from East to West after getting hit by our AA. Flew over about 15ft high and was engaged by small arms fire. Nearly crashed in B Coy area and finally landed ... about 3500 yards out. 2 men ran from plane and MG's opened up on them. Our arty also shelled the plane in an attempt to destroy it.

That night A Company sent a patrol out to the crashed plane to blow it up, but it was heavily guarded, and in the bright moonlight the patrol could not get near it.

By an unusual coincidence, almost exactly the same thing happened five days later, when a Messerschmitt, after flying low over the battalion on its way home, landed on its nose halfway across no-man's land. This time the enemy was kept clear by Vickers fire, and after dark a demolition patrol went out from A Company and succeeded in completely spoiling the plane for Jerry.

These early September days were very trying ones, fearfully hot, fearfully dusty, and full of uncertainty. Everyone knew that the [New Zealand Box](#) might be attacked; nobody knew when or from what direction an attack might come. There were yarns going round that Rommel's attack had fizzled out; until 3 September they were only rumours, but that afternoon something more definite at last filtered down. Jerry was indeed retreating. The Kiwis were going to cut off his retreat (not strictly accurate, but that was the story), and [18 Battalion's](#) part was to be another raid on the sangars at Angar, with no tanks this time, but with support from the artillery and Vickers.

To the boys, with A Company's profitable raid still fresh in their memory, this idea sounded very good, and there was a general air of pleased anticipation that evening as they made ready. The notice was fairly short and preparations had to be hurried, but that seemed to be the regular thing in this desert war, and everyone was hardened to it now.

The idea behind this new show was to narrow down the lifeline running back from Jerry's attacking troops to his permanent line, and afterwards, if everything went right, perhaps to cut it altogether. The idea was first suggested on 1 September when the attack was at its height. When the German tide turned and began to ebb there seemed no good reason why the counter-attack should not go on as arranged; it would at any rate worry Rommel and make his withdrawal more

difficult. So it was decided that on the night of 3 September 2 New Zealand Division would sally out of its fortress, push south and establish itself along the north edge of the [Alinda-Munassib- Muhafid](#) depression line, that gash in the desert where the Kiwis had played hide and seek two months before. It now meant an advance of four or five miles from the New Zealand wire, over an almost flat stretch of country occupied by the doughty 90 Light Division, on whose left was the mixed bag of German paratroops and Italians who had come up to Angar and were making such nuisances of themselves to [18 Battalion](#).

The main attack this time was to be by 5 and 132 Brigades. In [6 Brigade](#), 26 Battalion was to move out and protect 132 Brigade's right flank, while still farther to the right [18](#) and 25 Battalions would make diversionary raids on Angar and do as much damage as possible before pulling back behind their wire again. To heighten the deception, artillery and Vickers were to shoot up the Angar positions before the raid; it was hoped that this demonstration would attract all enemy eyes while the main business of the evening by 5 and 132 Brigades got under way silently and unnoticed.

Before the attack began B Company was to open up a gap in its minefield; then at 11 p.m. the attacking companies, B and C, were to file out westwards through this gap, form up out in the middle of no-man's land with B on the right and C on the left, and advance due south towards Angar, some two and a half miles away. After them would come a supporting column of carriers and anti-tank guns. On arrival at the objective the companies were, according to Sergeant Bill Kennedy, 'to penetrate the enemy lines, halt at a given very-light signal..., re-form and return to our own lines with our wounded and any enemy prisoners'. Put as baldly as all that it sounds like a picnic, but nobody expected to get away without trouble, for the Italians when cornered could fight hard at times.

There was trouble before the raid even began. Perhaps roused by the preliminary Vickers fire, Jerry began to shell the front heavily, distributing his favours widely up and down. He seemed to know, or suspect, that something was up. However, the Vickers programme was over before the companies were due to move, and the shelling eased off too. But there was more trouble coming.

By one of those oversights that are so apt to occur when things are done in a

hurry, the minefield gap was not cleared until B Company was on the move, and then it was a rush job, as the companies were to go in hard on the heels of their artillery supporting fire and so had to work to strict timing. The first platoons of B Company got through the gap with no trouble, and so did the leading carrier just behind them; but an anti-tank portée coming next hit an unsuspected mine and stopped right in the fairway. The rest of the column, following close behind, had nothing for it but to back out of the minefield—no job for nervous men on a dark night under fire. By good luck only one man was hit, but that was the end of the night's performance for the carriers and anti-tank guns, and the rest of B Company and all of C were late getting to the start line. Captain Brown of C Company tells of his company's scramble to make up the lost time:

We had to file down the gap past the destroyed 2 pdr portee and straight out on to the start line.... By the time C Company were starting to reach the start line the arty fire plan had commenced. There was no time to shake down—the rear pls simply ran out from the minefield gap, turned left and ran south to get up close to our arty Barrage.

This was no way for a methodical unit like [18 Battalion](#) to begin an attack.

Then, to quote Captain Brown again:

After progressing about 400/500^x [yards] south the Italians started to fire north. It was one of the heaviest small arms concentrations I can remember during the whole war—we were saved because between our start line and the objective the ground dipped about 5 ft and all the Italians' fire went over our heads or most of it.

Mortar bombs also splashed round the area in front of the sangars, and there were several casualties before the companies got to striking distance, but they reached the enemy's line still in good formation, and battle was joined at hand-to-hand range.

For B Company on the right the actual encounter among the sangars was quite an anti-climax, for few Italians had cared to remain. The three platoons worked their way down through the positions more or less independently, making a systematic search and dragging out one or two unwilling prisoners, but there was little actual fighting.

C Company, on the contrary, had quite a lively time. Some Italians on its front played safe and made off, and others surrendered without argument, but some machine guns kept firing from the company's left flank, and a few steadfast Ities faced the attackers and exchanged hand grenades with them till they were killed or captured one by one. C Company itself took a lot of casualties in this short clash, including all its platoon commanders—Lieutenant Taylor ¹ of 14 Platoon and Second-Lieutenant Philips ² of 15 Platoon killed, and Second-Lieutenant Hirst ³ of 13 Platoon wounded.

Then Captain Brown goes on to say:

Soon however it was obvious that the momentum of our attack had spent itself and that the enemy were becoming more active and I could expect a counter attack before long. I decided staying on any longer would achieve nothing but would certainly make it difficult for us to get out. So I put the success signal (Very lights) up and organised the withdrawal.

It was high time to go, as the enemy was coming to life again, and perhaps realising what a small force he had against him. Not only was the machine-gun fire thickening up, but mortar bombs were beginning to drop at the northern edge of the sangar line, just where the boys would have to pass on their way home. However, there was no help for it. The word went round to pack up and hit the trail.

This withdrawal, by far the most difficult and trying part of the whole show, brought out the battalion's best qualities. It would be foolish to class it with the epic march over the Cretan mountains, but the same loyalty and hardihood were there on a smaller scale. If one man can with justice be singled out, it must be C Company's CSM, Archie Fletcher, who worked like a horse to keep the company together and under control during the fighting, and to ensure that all the wounded got back. The two companies together had set out about 130 strong, and of these 11 were dead and some 30 wounded, a heavy loss for a small-scale affair. The survivors, under fire from the rear (the most unpleasant sort of fire there is), kept their heads and retired in good order, bringing with them not only the wounded but 52 assorted Italians as well. 'The getting back of so many wounded,' says Captain Brown, 'I thought was magnificent'; and CSM Dave Wilson ⁴ of B Company comments: 'I feel great credit

was due to our Platoon Commanders for keeping such great control over their Platoons during such a difficult period.' It was satisfying to know that they had left scores of dead and wounded Italians behind them.

While this was going on among the Angar sangars, things were very unhappy back in [18 Battalion](#)'s own lines. The shelling earlier in the evening had been bad enough, but when our 25-pounders opened up in support of the raid they provoked a storm of shells such as Jerry had not put over for months. The hardest-hit spot was B and C Companies' exposed ridge, luckily almost bare of troops for the time being, but the whole area got a plastering—a long one, too, for when the returning B and C Companies came in sight it was still going on. Jerry seemed to be paying special attention to B Company's minefield gap, and there were also machine-gun bullets zipping round there; some of B Company made their way through the minefield itself where it was slightly quieter, and the rest waited till the 'hate' slackened off a bit, while most of C Company preferred to take a short-cut home through the mines on their own front.

B Company now had another job to do—to get that tell-tale anti-tank portée back out of the minefield before Jerry saw it and began using it as an aiming point, and also a stray jeep that had somehow run on to the mines. All hands, tired as they were, piled in and manhandled both vehicles back to safety; then the one carrier that had got out was driven back in, and when day dawned the front looked as peaceful as ever.

For those of [18 Battalion](#) who had no part to play in the raid, this night was an endless jumble of noise, lights and shells. First the noise of random enemy bombing (for the [Luftwaffe](#) was throwing everything about that night to cover Jerry's withdrawal), then the noise of our guns and the enemy's spirited reply. A little later a great crescendo of noise farther east, where the main attack met furious opposition before it was well under way. And lights—aerial flares and Very lights and tracer, hour after hour. It was the most spectacular night on the New Zealand front for a long time, and nobody got much sleep, particularly as the German guns kept whanging shells into our lines till dawn.

The attack was not a great success; [18 Battalion](#)'s sideshow produced as good results as any of it. Interference with Jerry's withdrawal was hardly noticeable and

very temporary. Part of [5 Brigade](#) penetrated to Munassib and spread dismay among the enemy there, but [132 Brigade](#) suffered a series of misadventures and finished up back where it began, with nothing to show for it except hundreds of casualties. Lieutenant-Colonel Peart, now commanding [26 Battalion](#), had been mortally wounded, to the great regret of [18 Battalion's](#) older members, who still regarded him as one of themselves.

The men of the [18th](#), having no supernatural powers, could not foresee the future. Had they been able to, they would have had the shock of their lives. For this Angar raid was the last action that [18 NZ Infantry Battalion](#) was ever to fight.

The next few days were anti-climax, for both the German attack and the New Zealand counter-attack had fizzled out, and both sides had to recover. The shelling on [18 Battalion](#) did not abate much, the [Luftwaffe](#) was just as busy, dogfights just as frequent. But there was no more talk of attacking, and the line seemed to be settling down again into its humdrum summer routine, the men swatting flies and swearing about the heat. There were still some night patrols, but they were quiet and inoffensive, mostly small 'recce' parties looking over the enemy's new positions—though a couple of them crept in close to Italian digging parties and shot them up before pulling out for home.

From 4 to 7 September [18 Battalion](#) was without Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants, who took over [6 Brigade](#) temporarily, [Brigadier Clifton](#) having gone out on an ill-starred morning excursion which ended up in a prison camp. About the same time the battalion lost an old friend in Padre [Dawson](#),⁵ who had been with it for two years and was regarded as permanent. His successor, Padre [Gourdie](#),⁶ was treated at first with the polite reserve that all new padres have to suffer, but he set energetically about overcoming this, even tramping round the companies in the heat of the day, a pastime few cared to tackle.

When things simmered down again after the Angar flare-up it looked as if the battalion was stuck in its hot, dirty corner of the line for good. But about four days later a new word began to be whispered round the unit, and that word was 'relief'. Nobody knew who began it, but there it was, and it gained strength when strange British officers appeared in the area with map boards. Despite all the horrors of the [Alamein](#) summer, [18 Battalion](#) was still ready to have a crack at Jerry any time, but

the idea of a relief, of going back to a quiet place where Stukas and shells would not come buzzing round, was like a beautiful dream. The war diary for 9 September, with one of its rare human touches, remarks: 'We are to be relieved but we have been disappointed before.' Nobody dared place too much faith in the story.

But even while the rank and file was busy trying not to believe the relief rumour, arrangements for relief were really going ahead, and [6 Brigade](#) was churning out an operation order giving all the details. Definite news of it came through to a joyful battalion on 10 September. Its place in the line was to be taken that night by [5 Royal West Kents](#) of [132 Brigade](#), and [18 Battalion](#) was to go back with the rest of [6 Brigade](#) to the B Echelon area at [Burg el Arab](#), where, said the operation order, 2 NZ Division would have 'a week's rest before re-organisation and start of offensive trng'. This was most wonderful news—to a soldier a week in the future is eternal, and what is to happen at the end of it can be left till the time arrives.

Packing up that night was not the usual burdensome chore. One thought sparkled in every mind, that in a few hours the dust and stink and flies of [Alamein](#) would be left behind for a while, and that they would be reclining at ease far from the war. Even hanging round waiting for the newcomers, who were two hours late coming in, could not dampen [18 Battalion's](#) delight. As each company was relieved it moved off on foot for a rendezvous with trucks two miles east, and never did two miles slip so easily under the feet. All the heavy gear was carried out, except the 3-inch mortars, which, to their crews' disgust, had to stay behind for another whole day because the West Kentish mortars stuck in the sand on the way in. The main convoy, its passengers laughing and joking despite the hour, left for [Burg el Arab](#) at 3 a.m. on 11 September.

It was no ideal holiday trip, especially before dawn. The night was pitch black, the route a series of bumps, the dust thick; the convoy moved in fits and starts, and once a driver went to sleep and split the line into two, so that the tail had to gallop over the rough track to catch up. By the time the battalion reached [Burg el Arab](#) the boys were very happy (once bivvies were up, slitties dug and desert grime washed off) just to take it easy for the rest of the day. And when meal times came—fresh food, plenty of it, and big hunks of cool watermelon—they were even happier.

There was yet another surprise coming up. Scarcely were the men settled in at

Burg el Arab when the whisper was going round: 'We're going back to Maadi.' Incredible, but true. The unit was to go back to rejoin its own 4 Brigade, and would see no more of Alamein for some time. But there was a postscript that pulled everybody up with a jolt—24 Battalion, which was to replace 18 Battalion up the blue, was to take over, not only much of the 18th's weapons and gear, but a lot of its men as well. This was rather appalling to a unit which had just been welded by two and a half months of action into a smoothly-working team, and was as jealous of its name as 18 Battalion. But there seemed no way out of it.

On 13 September the battalion was dragged from sleep as the first tinge of dawn greyed the sky, and at 5.15 a.m. its convoy was on the way, spinning down the lovely tarsealed road with no bumps, no dust, no stops and starts. The men, who had forgotten what a sealed road was like, fairly basked in the luxury of it. And at 3.30 p.m., when the clean huts and tents of Maadi hove in sight, with D Company standing round to welcome the trucks in—well, they could hardly take in the fact that they were really back among unlimited water and showers and picture theatres, with fresh food to eat and real mess huts to eat it in, with wet and dry canteens on the spot, and newsboys shrieking their wares. There was a ridiculous thought at the back of your head that maybe this was a mirage, and would vanish after a while. The contrast was too great and too sudden.

For many of the men the dream faded too soon, for next day the axe fell. Eighteenth Battalion, said the authorities, was to keep only 350 men, fewer than ever before except when it had come off Crete. Who stayed and who went was decided purely on length of service with the battalion—old hands stayed, newer arrivals went. There was heart-burning and disappointment, there were protests and arguments, and the war diary laconically declares: 'Very tough break all round'. In the afternoon 209 men packed up for the last time in the 18th and moved over to the 24th. Colonel Pleasants made them an address of thanks, but there was little that could be said.

And there was no leisure to sit and moan about the good men the unit had lost, for within a day or two things began to happen which took the mind and tongue of every man permanently away from the past, and centred all interest in the future.

¹ Lt A. E. Taylor; born NZ 22 Jun 1914; draper's assistant; wounded 23 Jul 1942; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

² Lt R. A. Philips; born [England](#), 15 Feb 1908; sheep farmer; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

³ Lt I. H. Hirst, MC; [Te Puke](#); born NZ 15 Feb 1915; farmer; wounded 4 Sep 1942.

⁴ WO I D. S. Wilson, m.i.d.; [Whakatane](#); born [Glasgow](#), 2 Jan 1912; salesman; wounded 4 Dec 1941.

⁵ Rev. F. O. Dawson, MC, m.i.d.; [Putaruru](#); born [London](#), 23 Feb 1909; Anglican minister.

⁶ Rev. R. McL. Gourdie, DSO, ED; [Shannon](#); born [Ashburton](#), 21 Apr 1913; Anglican minister; SCF J Force Nov 1945-Jun 1946.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 24 – ‘TANKS OF OUR OWN’

CHAPTER 24

'Tanks of our Own'

Away back in 1940, in the dimly-remembered days before the Kiwis had ever been in action, the idea of an armoured force in the Division had first been suggested, all unknown to the men who were to fight in its front line. Had they known of it they probably would not have thought much of the idea. They were the best infantry in the world, weren't they? And they were going to show Jerry a thing or two when they met. In those days the Division had yet to have its lessons in the destructive power of tanks against unprotected infantry.

Two years later, with Ruweisat and [El Mreir](#) still burning the memory and [Belhamed](#) not so many months old, the story was very different. Not only had the legend of Kiwi invincibility been broken down, but all these disasters could have been avoided by better understanding between infantry and tanks. However, as long as New Zealand infantry and British tanks had to work together, it seemed unlikely that such an understanding would ever come about. Hence the demand 'Why can't we have tanks of our own?', which as the desert war went on had grown in strength until it was an angry outcry.

[Lieutenant-General Freyberg](#) was not the man to be influenced by any popular agitation, but long ago he had come to the conclusion that his division must have tanks of its own if it was to fight successfully in the desert. The New Zealand Government had agreed. The first steps had been taken in 1941 with the formation of a tank brigade to train in New Zealand and eventually, so the proposal ran, to go overseas.

This brigade, but for the Japanese aggression in the [Pacific](#), would probably have come to [Egypt](#) in a body, and [18 Battalion](#) would have been foot-sloggers till the end of the war. But early in 1942, with the brigade almost ready to sail, the [New Zealand Government](#) decided that the country should not be milked of all its trained troops. The position, said the Government, would be reviewed in July.

From [2 NZ Division's](#) point of view July was a highly suitable time to reopen the question. The Government was just as indignant as the men on the spot over the wasteful losses at Ruweisat and [El Mreir](#), and now agreed, with a little prodding by

General Freyberg, to release some or all of the tank brigade for the Middle East. This question 'some or all' was not settled till early September, so until then the future of 18 Battalion and the other 4 Brigade units hung in the balance; but the final decision was that only one tank battalion would leave New Zealand, and that it would be split up to reinforce 4 Brigade, which was to be taken out to train as an armoured brigade.

Not till 18 Battalion reached Maadi did it know what was coming, but within a day of its arrival the whole brigade was buzzing with the story. In the battalion the first reaction was favourable, with reservations. Only one or two diehards preferred to transfer to another infantry unit, but the general thought seemed to be 'wait and see'.

It was only a day or two before they learnt more details. The first official news came straight from General Freyberg, who on 17 September addressed officers and senior NCOs of 4 Brigade and gave them some details of their new organisation. But even before that some of the preliminary work was under way, and the brigade was preparing to go back to school. For months the hardest-worked word in camp was 'courses'.

Almost as soon as 18 Battalion reached Maadi it organised some elementary courses of its own, vehicle maintenance, signal procedure, driving lessons for all non-drivers. A little later came the first 'basic' tank courses—driving and maintenance (D & M for short), gunnery, wireless. Some were held at the Middle East Armoured School, others at the New Zealand School of Instruction at Maadi. Some of the first men on gunnery courses were lucky enough to go to the American Maintenance School at Almaza, away out in the desert beyond Cairo, where they wallowed in the luxury of American Army huts and American rations and sheets and pillowcases, and came back as full of talk about the 'Yanks' as about what they had learnt from them. Before long well over half the men were away on courses, and the unit could muster only a very thin turnout on parade. Men came back from their courses with a strange new jargon, and all around you might hear talk of such matters as the Point Three-oh Browning and the gyro stabiliser and epicyclic gears and Christie suspension, which a little earlier would have been pure gibberish.

Those left in camp carried on infantry training in the meantime, but they could

hardly be expected to raise much enthusiasm for that now, particularly as all infantry equipment was handed over to 24 Battalion or back to the Ordnance stores. In fact **18 Battalion** was now as destitute as it had been in its first days at Hopuhopu; the men had their personal gear and rifles, there were a few trucks and jeeps in a central pool, and that was about all. The drill and weapon training was really only a way to fill in time until the unit got some new equipment and qualified instructors came back from their courses. Big parties of men were called on from time to time to take convoys of trucks up the blue to the Division, and their commanders were glad to let them go and not have them hanging round camp.

Outside working hours there was plenty of opportunity for play. There was evening leave to **Cairo**, and for most of the men seven or fourteen days' leave. With paybooks well in credit, nearly everyone was in a position to make the most of this, and scores of men went off on Mr Goldhaber's famous tours to **Palestine** or **Luxor**, while others went to **Cairo** or **Alexandria** and spent their leave quietly or rowdily, according to taste. It was the right time of the year to buy Christmas presents for New Zealand, though it was shocking the way that **Cairo** prices had gone up. **Maadi Camp**, too, was a good place to relax in. Training was in the mornings only; after lunch you could play tennis or cricket, or swim at the **Maadi** baths. For the evenings **18 Battalion** had two canteens going within a few days, and before long Padre Gourdie had a recreation tent open which later became the unit's main social centre.

The prospect of a long spell in **Maadi** was one of the big attractions about this armoured business. After months of bully stew with sand in it, the food was wonderful. So was the comparative freedom from flies. So, above all, was the relief from battlefield tension, the pleasure of not having to stand to before dawn, the knowledge that you need not go round all the time with half an ear cocked for a shell or a Stuka. In due course, so everyone understood, the new 4 Armoured Brigade would be in the lead when the Division chased Rommel out of **Egypt**, but there was no need to let that prospect spoil their present enjoyment.

The culminating point of this enjoyment was **18 Battalion's** third birthday on 3 October ('and a Saturday at that', observes the war diary), which was celebrated with a vast and highly successful party. Like all birthday parties, this one was faintly tinged with regret for the passing years—a lot of good men gone—not many of the First Echelon still around. Oh well, not much point in dwelling too much on the past;

here's to the present and the future, and to us sailing into Jerry in our tanks. So down the hatch, and have another.

Two days later, before all the revellers had quite recovered, [18 NZ Infantry Battalion](#) officially died, and [18 NZ Armoured Regiment](#) was born.

The infant [18 Regiment](#) was at first an armoured regiment only by courtesy. It had no tanks and only the vaguest idea how to work one. But it was learning. There were more and more courses, some of them as far away as [Palestine](#), others at Tel el Kebir over towards the [Suez Canal](#), others just round the corner in [Maadi Camp](#). At first it seemed rather a random business, as if 4 Armoured Brigade was picking up its education wherever it could find it. However, in mid-November, with qualified officers and NCOs now streaming back from their courses, the brigade was able to set up its own school and launch a 'tank commanders' course' which did a lot to clarify everyone's ideas on the subject.

This was the most comprehensive course of all—a fortnight on gunnery, a fortnight on D & M, a fortnight on wireless. According to [Brigadier Inglis](#), the idea behind it was to give the old hands a working knowledge of all the essentials before the tank reinforcements arrived from New Zealand. There was so much to learn—British Crusader and American Grant tanks, how they were strung together and what made them go, six different types of gun (not counting the smaller machine guns), the intricacies of the No. 19 wireless set with which every tank would be equipped. Nobody could hope to be an expert in all of them, but everybody had to be an all-rounder, and this was what the brigade course catered for. It did not plumb the depths of its subjects, which was the job of the 'specialist' courses, but it was all solid work, and well worth while.

Some of the first [18 Regiment](#) men to come back from specialist courses went to the brigade school as instructors. Others stayed to pass on their new knowledge within the regiment, with at first very little to work on. Early in October the regiment got one solitary two-pounder gun, and a fortnight later three old Grants and three Crusaders, which were promptly taken to bits to provide as much local training as possible. The regiment made the most of these dismantled tanks. After being pulled to pieces, maltreated and all but turned inside out for several weeks, the guns were put to work on the firing range, some of them with home-made wooden mountings.

For training in fire orders and control the turrets were set up on two model landscapes, a 'pellet range' and a 'puff range', both carefully made to scale, copied from the British armoured school at [Abbassia](#). These ranges did not pretend to reproduce action conditions, but they were a step in that direction, and the regiment was very proud of them. On the 'pellet range' shots from a pellet gun proved how correct the tank commanders' fire orders were, and on the 'puff range' an assistant hidden under the target, on a floor marked off in hundred-yard ranges, moved round and put up small puffs of chemical smoke where the students' shots would have landed, so that they could see and correct their errors.

Up to the end of 1942 the war diary has some comments from time to time which point up the slow but steady progress towards eventual perfection:

30 October: 'The time lag should be just about over now and we will be running full time courses in the Regt very shortly.'

9 November: 'The Commanding Officer announced the adoption of proper Armoured Regimental formation ... "A" and "C" companies become "A" Squadron; "B" Company becomes "B" Squadron; "D" Company becomes "C" Squadron; and HQ Company becomes HQ Squadron.'

17 November: 'Training ... continued, everyone feeling that they are getting down to business.'

23 November: 'Our own specialised training is very successful. Everyone is very keen and arguments concerning the respective merits of different types of guns, tanks and the different training methods seem to occupy a large proportion of all conversations.'

11 December: 'Squadrons have more or less organised to the extent of planning their Tank drivers, Gunners, truck drivers, etc. and find it easier now to select nominations for the different training courses.'

16 December: 'This end of [Maadi](#) is like a battle ground these days. Regiments have their ... ranges, and have ... the new Tank M.G's the Besa and Browning. 30 to practise with.'

21 December: 'With the sub-calibre range and puff range and signal revision, driving and maintenance instruction on unit trucks, the training appears as complete as possible until further equipment and training materials are forthcoming.'

It was indeed as complete as possible, and [18 Regiment](#) had come a long way in three months. Its infantry technique, once its pride and joy, was half forgotten, though parade-ground drill, Tommy gun, Bren and rifle shooting were to be permanently kept up to scratch and not allowed to get rusty. Week by week interest and skill in its new job were increasing, and by the end of the year everyone was looking forward to trying out his hand on real tanks. To add point to this impatience, Rommel and his soldiers were now in retreat many hundred miles west of [Alamein](#), and if they did not hurry, said the men of the [18th](#), they would miss the final victory in [Africa](#).

This does not mean that they were not enjoying the comfort of [Maadi](#). They were making the most of the food, the leave and the free time, the sports. Cricket and tennis had now given place to football. Everyone was fat and fit. With pay credits sagging badly, there was more resistance to [Cairo](#)'s charms, and the canteens and camp huts were much fuller, especially the Padre's tent, which really came into its own late in October when the regiment moved to a fresh place away out at the end of a new bitumen road, a long way from the hub of [Maadi](#).

Now, too, the temperature was much more reasonable. In October afternoon training began. Battledress appeared early in November, then extra blankets, for winter nights in [Egypt](#) can be very cold, and by Christmas there was often a keen wind even by day.

Between Christmas and the New Year, nearly three months after its official changeover, [18 Regiment](#) was at last outfitted with black berets. This was a great step forward. Not only were they more comfortable, warmer and better in all respects than the ridiculous 'caps F.S.', but they were an outward and visible sign of the unit's armoured status. They arrived just in time, for the old hands, though they might not have anything looking much like a tank round the place, could look and feel more like 'tankies' when the expected reinforcements arrived from New Zealand.

This influx of 130 trained tank men was a big event in the [18th](#). Before their arrival extra tents had been put up, and the regiment had sent ten trucks off to cart their heavy gear from [Suez](#); then, late on the evening of 5 January, the reinforcements themselves came in by truck from the railway siding down by [Maadi](#) village. All this pampering caused a few curls of the lip among the originals, who

audibly remembered the early days when they had lumped all their gear uphill to [Maadi](#), and when they got there had practically to make the camp themselves. The men of this new generation weren't what their forebears had been!

But the new arrivals fitted in well, and the most bigoted original had to admit that they were pretty good types. Their training, the old hands were relieved to find, had been done on Valentine tanks, so that with Grants and Crusaders they started out fairly even. Nearly all the new NCOs dropped their stripes, removing a potential source of trouble. On the whole it was quite pleasant to have some fresh faces round, and a bit of good talent to add to the unit's sports teams. The biggest disadvantage was that the reinforcements all swarmed into [Cairo](#) on leave, packed out the trains and the clubs and the bars, and aggravated the beer shortage that had been making itself felt for the past few months.

Training was now past the elementary stage, but the regiment could not yet call itself a trained tank unit by any means. A lot of men were still going to courses, and it was obviously going to be several months before 4 Armoured Brigade was fit to take the field. The talk of leading [2 NZ Division's](#) victorious dash across North Africa had completely died away—victory in [Africa](#) was apparently close, especially when [Tripoli](#) fell and the chase went on westwards into [Tunisia](#). There was some envy of the Division, quite naturally so, for [4 Brigade](#) had borne more than its share of the first hard, unrewarding campaigns, and now that we were at last on the winning side the brigade was a thousand miles away from the fun. Well, its turn would no doubt come; but it was a bit galling at such a time to have to worry about pinpricking base camp vexations such as kit inspections and thieving Wogs.

Out in its isolated home on the edge of [Maadi](#), [18 Regiment](#) suffered a lot from theft in the first few months of 1943. For a time the most vigilant pickets failed to stop night visits from the squalid villages on the edge of [Cairo](#), not very far away, by Egyptian thieves who vanished with petrol tins or truck parts or rifles—one famous night all the rifles were silently removed from two tents while the occupants slept blissfully on. The unit made quite good friends with an Egyptian police lieutenant and his attendant black tracker who always came to investigate the thefts, sometimes with good results, sometimes without. In the end the unit, by patient scrounging of wire and pickets from here and there, succeeded in building a fence, booby-trapped with flares, right round its camp. The police lieutenant had little

patience with such elaborate precautions—in his view, a thief shot dead would be the best way to stop the trouble. However, the fence seemed to act all right.

Besides this persistent annoyance the regiment suffered one or two sudden misfortunes of the kind that are always apt to happen. There was first the great gale, remembered by old [Maadi](#)-ites as the worst storm ever, which swept the camp in the early hours of 23 February. Howling wind and rain flattened a dozen tents in [18 Regiment](#), including Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants' tent and RQMS Jack Richards' two store marquees, and flooded out most of the rest. The old hands who had been half drowned at [Baggush](#) were not so surprised as the new reinforcements, who had never expected anything of the kind in [Egypt](#). But by the same evening the camp was back to its normal tranquillity and the men were at work repairing the storm's ravages. Two months later came the great fire which destroyed C Squadron's store tent and everything in it one night, just after the squadron had come back to camp from a manoeuvre, and about the same time the regiment had several men injured in an accident with some ammunition.

But these misfortunes were few and far apart, and separated by weeks of interesting and profitable work. Early in February the war diary had remarked:

Given the equipment... and our best instructors back from the Depot, Regiment could now take care of almost all training.

It did not yet have the equipment, and the [4 Brigade](#) school was still eating into the ranks of the trained instructors, but the regiment was doing a lot of its own training and building up its teamwork. By April, when light shirts and shorts began to reappear and footballs were being superseded by cricket balls and basketballs once more, the reinforcements had been solidly welded into the unit, the tank crews in the fighting squadrons had been pretty well sorted out and were shaking down together, and the stage had been reached when they were ready to go out of camp in tanks and get practical experience in handling them—if they had had the tanks.

The luckiest squadron at this time was C Squadron, which was to have the light, fast Crusader tanks. Its first four real fighting tanks arrived late in January, and until April there was almost nothing but Crusaders about, so that the squadron was able to build up a long training lead, to take its tanks and play about with them, and from

February onwards to go out with them to [4 Brigade's](#) brand-new tank range, a vast tangle of hills and wadis some 15 miles out from camp up Wadi Digla, where you could play hide-and-seek and shoot off your guns to your heart's content with no danger to anyone. In the meantime A and B Squadrons could do little but carry on with ordinary training, the same thing over and over again now, waiting for their tanks to come up in the lift.

These two squadrons were to be the heavy squadrons, with Grant tanks to provide the unit's main fire power. But as things turned out the [18th](#) never got any Grants of its own, for in February the heavy squadrons changed to Shermans, and some of their tank commanders went off on Sherman courses. This was decidedly a change for the better; the Sherman was the latest, most powerful American tank, a great advance on the high-built, vulnerable Grant. It was a 33-ton monster bristling with guns: in the turret a 75-millimetre gun, and parallel to it, always pointing at the same target, a .30 Browning known officially as a 'co-axially mounted machine gun' but to the tankies as a 'co-ax'; another Browning on top for anti-aircraft protection; and yet a third (called a 'lap gun') mounted further down in the front of the hull. At the same time the tank was well protected, with armour two inches thick all over except underneath, so that the five men inside—commander, gunner, wireless operator, driver and co-driver—were pretty well invulnerable to anything except armour-piercing shells.

But Shermans were maddeningly slow coming in. Even when the first of them arrived there were only two, one each for A and B Squadrons, and no indication when any more would appear. The tank crews of these two squadrons had to be content with an occasional hour or two in the tanks when their turn came round, and at other times revised their signal work or went out for target practice with two-pounders and Besa machine guns at the tank range. It was all very frustrating.

Apart from its tanks, [18 Regiment](#) was slowly re-equipping. In March the Reconnaissance Troop of Headquarters Squadron (counterpart of the old carrier platoon) got its first two scout cars. There were more trucks, enough to give each squadron a few of its own. Early in March 38 LAD, under Captain [Grant](#),¹ arrived on 'permanent attachment' to [18 Regiment](#), which means that to all intents and purposes it became part of the regiment—a very important part. An LAD (Light Aid Detachment) is a small mobile workshop to overhaul and make minor repairs to

tanks and trucks and guns, and an armoured regiment, more than any other sort of unit, needs something of the kind on tap all the time. Before long 38 LAD's 'tank hangar' was a prominent landmark in [Maadi](#), and Captain Grant, WO II Tom [Lawson](#)² and their henchmen had become something like family doctors to the regiment—for tanks, like children, need careful looking after and sympathetic nursing to keep them in good healthy condition. For small on-the-spot repairs each squadron had its own mechanics, known in tank jargon as 'flying fitters', though in base camp they had to do very little 'flying'.

April was a notable month, for in it the regiment really began to feel its depth as armour, and to spend most of its training time at the tank range or still farther up [Wadi Digla](#), holding small-scale manoeuvres, firing on the move, doing long-range indirect shooting. Successful salvage round the desert battlefields by parties of enterprising scroungers had built up a good stock of ammunition, and there was no need to be niggardly with it. From now on the main training theme was—grab every chance to get out of camp with the tanks; learn more about the other fellow's job; shoot and shoot and shoot till control and handling of the guns become automatic; drive your tanks up and down all sorts of ground by day and night and keep them in fighting trim. This last, now that they were using real live ammunition, included the important periodical testing and adjusting of the gun sights, done by stretching crossed wires over the muzzle of the 75-millimetre gun, peering through the firing-pin hole in the breech and laying the gun on some distant object, then adjusting the sighting telescope on to the same target.

C Squadron now had almost all its Crusaders, and A and B between them had a full troop of three Shermans, so that by passing the tanks round each troop could have an occasional small exercise of its own. Half of C Squadron at a time, plus the lucky troop from one of the heavy squadrons, went out for three days in April, and came back sandy, dishevelled and very pleased with themselves. Teamwork was getting better all the time, and the painstaking early training was paying off now; perfection might be a long way off still, but the first round was over and the rawest edges smoothed down.

Then May drew to its end, and for a few weeks training was disrupted by other events that came crowding in from outside.

There was, first, the invasion of [Maadi](#) by [2 NZ Division](#), coming back from [Tunisia](#) loaded with honour and loot and bubbling with high spirits. The whole camp lent a hand to prepare for it; for several days armoured training had to stop while [18 Regiment](#) put up tents and drew stores for the anti-tank and anti-aircraft regiments. All over [Maadi](#) tent forests sprouted overnight, and then, with the Division pouring back, [Maadi](#) and [Cairo](#) became twin Bedlams. There were noisy reunions with friends from other units, including the boys who had had to leave the [18th](#) nine months before. And some of these reunions were at the same time farewells, for another event was building up which even eclipsed the excitement of the Division's return.

In January 1943 a man in [18 Regiment](#) wrote this to his family in New Zealand:

There seems to be a lot of talk in N.Z. about sending the surviving members of the 1st Echelon home. Forget it. It's an utter impossibility.

This echoed the opinion of every Kiwi who had seen the Division sagging at the knees after [Ruweisat](#) and [El Mreir](#). Yet by May this crazy fantasy was a reality. With [Jerry](#) knocked out of [Africa](#) and more reinforcements on the way from New Zealand, [Brigadier Inglis](#) was able to announce to [4 Brigade](#) on 23 May that a furlough scheme was coming up, full details soon.

Then a few days later, when details were out, eligible men listed and the names drawn from the hat, it became clear that the disintegration of the old original [18 Battalion](#) was about to be completed. Out of about 150 originals still in the unit, 119 were booked for New Zealand.

But there was nothing gloomy about this parting. From 29 May, when the draw was announced, to 14 June, when the lucky ones left for [Suez](#), there were parties and celebrations going on nearly all the time, and when it was all over a sigh of relief seemed to run through [Maadi Camp](#) at the prospect of getting back to normal. It had been almost a holiday fortnight, but a gruelling and expensive one.

The furlough men had moved out to a special camp on 3 June, and for a week after that [18 Regiment](#) seemed very empty. But only for a week, for on 11 June the loss was more than made up by a new batch of nearly 150 reinforcements fresh from home. This addition was not much to the taste of the old Desert Digs who had been

with the 18th in its infantry days, as now they found themselves outnumbered by the newcomers, their grey hairs not always treated with the reverence they deserved. But the 9th Reinforcements were promising lads, most of them, and the regiment could now push on with training without the handicap of half-empty squadrons.

During this lean period in the training there were two big ceremonial parades in Cairo, the first on Empire Day, when 150 picked men from 18 Regiment marched in the ranks, and the second on United Nations Day, 14 June, when 4 Brigade made its first public appearance in its tanks, heading the parade through streets full of admiring Wogs. Perhaps the imminence of this parade had opened the hearts of the Ordnance people, for during the previous fortnight new Shermans had been streaming in as never before, and A and B Squadrons now had six each. The unit's 'technical' people, under Captain James,³ who were responsible for collecting new tanks and seeing that they were in proper order, had one of their busiest times.

On 15 June, with the dust of the furlough men's departure still settling down over Maadi, the regiment with some reluctance came back to earth and concentrated once more on its neglected training. The new reinforcements, with a few rebellious mutterings, went off to the 4 Brigade school to relearn the elementary stuff they swore they had done a dozen times already. The fighting squadrons hammered away at the puff range, thrashed out imaginary battles on a sand model, or went out to the tank range by troops and then by squadrons, for three days or a week, continually seeking perfection in driving, shooting and tactics. C Squadron, still the envy of the rest, went off for a week on its own, with tank transporters, fitters and B Echelon all complete, 80 miles out towards Suez, and came back full of knowledge about the intricacies of maintenance and replenishment, about the right way to dispose of supply trucks and other 'soft-skinned' vehicles, about a tank's nasty habit of sticking in soft ground.

On 26 July, for the first time, the whole regiment headed out into the wilderness past the tank range for a full week's regimental manoeuvre, the culmination of all those months of schooling since the first men, scarcely knowing one end of a tank from the other, had gone off on the first courses. The unit did not yet have the finer skills of armoured warfare at its fingertips—some of them could be learnt only in the presence of the enemy—but it was out of its apprenticeship now, had thoroughly absorbed the basic principles of its new trade, and was ready to work out how best

to use them in practice. Its tank work was still bound to limp a bit, as its 14 Crusaders and 19 Shermans still fell far short of what it ought to have. But an armoured regiment's job is not only shooting and manoeuvring; there are, just as in the infantry, all sorts of less spectacular jobs, reconnaissance and communications, intelligence and supply and repair work, all with their specialists who had for months been quietly pegging ahead with their own training. Now the regimental manoeuvre would bring all the pieces of the jigsaw together and make them fit.

And they fitted very well. Everything possible was crammed into the five days of the manoeuvre—an advance into action with scout cars snooping ahead; the tanks moving into a set 'laager' formation by day and night; B Echelon coming up from behind with food, water, ammunition, fuel for the tanks; attacks by the tanks alone or behind a company of 22 (Motor) Battalion in carriers; attack and defence at night; a whole day's maintenance on tanks, trucks and scout cars. There were, of course, plenty of points on which the drill could be improved—the purpose of a manoeuvre is to find them out so that they can be put right. The senior officers and those responsible for tying up all the bits and pieces of the regiment had an exhausting but rewarding week's work. The boys in the squadrons found it all very enjoyable; though they knew little about the overall idea, they had plenty of time between moves to sit and take life easy, which had not always been the case in the squadron manoeuvres. The summer sun beat down into the wadis and made it uncomfortably hot inside the tanks, but even that was much more bearable than at [Alamein](#) a year before. The highlight of the week was the attack with the motorised infantry, which was a spectacular affair, the lines of tanks and carriers charging ahead at 18 miles an hour, A Squadron 'plastering the area with 75 mm. H.E. and small arms fire', as the war diary enthusiastically puts it.

The next week, while all the tanks got a good check-over, the squadrons went back for a few days to the puff range and sand model, and brushed up their infantry work, which was more than ever inclined to slip. Then the regiment was off again for another week to the freer air of the tank range, shooting squadron by squadron and running round on small-scale exercises, tanks versus anti-tank guns, with 22 Battalion co-operating as the 'enemy'. One day C Squadron borrowed A Squadron's Shermans for practice, for C Squadron was to change over gradually from Crusaders to Shermans, and was quite likely to find itself as far behind the others as it had

previously been ahead. This week, unhappily, was marred by the death of Lieutenant [McCowan](#),⁴ one of the regiment's first trained instructors, who was killed when a scout car capsized down a bank.

Week after week the manoeuvres became more and more complicated. Tanks against other tanks, tanks against anti-tank guns (represented sometimes by barrels cunningly placed among the dunes); running fights up and down the wadis; moves from place to place with scout cars guiding the squadrons; night moves through a minefield, with infantrymen clearing and marking safe paths. It was good to get some practice in co-operation with the infantry, said those who remembered past misunderstandings and tragedies. But they felt that the practice did not go far enough, and that both tanks and infantry could do with a lot more of it before they could team up happily in action.

While these advanced manoeuvres were going on [18 Regiment](#) was still acquiring its tanks and transport bit by bit. New Shermans, a few at a time (C Squadron did not get rid of its Crusaders till the first week in September). More trucks, nice new four-wheel-drive jobs, to replace the last of the clumsy old cattle trucks and bring the unit up nearer to its full quota. More scout cars for the Recce Troop and the Intercommunication Troop (reincarnation of the old signal platoon). A few more reinforcements kept coming in, mostly old members trickling back from hospital. By the end of August the regiment was nearly up to full strength. Some more of its originals left with a second furlough draft on 3 September, with much less song and dance than the first one, leaving only about a dozen in key jobs who could not be replaced just yet.

At the end of August there was a general feeling that another journey was in the air, and that [Maadi](#) would not see them much longer. For nearly a year [4 Brigade](#) had been out of things, and while this Base life had a lot to recommend it, it had gone on for long enough. An efficient tank force, such as the brigade now was, could not expect to be left idle. It would undoubtedly go with the Division into action next time. Where? Well, that was the prize question, but most people picked [Europe](#). Jerry was on the losing side now, the war had been carried over to [Italy](#), all sorts of speculations were going on about new fronts elsewhere. It would be fitting, some people felt, if [2 NZ Division](#) was to lead a triumphant campaign up through [Greece](#). No, said others, we're going to [England](#) to be in on the invasion of [France](#). Yet others

were sure that General Montgomery, now in [Italy](#), would get the Kiwis back to their beloved [Eighth Army](#). But wherever the rejuvenated New Zealand Division was to go, it certainly would not be left behind much longer.

September arrived, events began to move faster, and the departure quickly changed from rumour to reality. The regiment's last exercise at the tank range was rather spoilt by an order that tanks which had done more than 700 miles were to stay out of action until the Division left [Maadi](#). The first Shermans had stood up to a lot of rough treatment from various semi-trained crews, and now were quite elderly Shermans that had to be treated gently if they were to go well in action.

Next the men learnt their immediate destination, Burg el Arab, where the Division would do large-scale manoeuvres. Eighteenth Regiment's official training programme for the week beginning on 6 September included 'checking new tanks, maintenance of old tanks, and general preparations for move'. From 8 September everything was fuss and bustle, inoculations and kit inspections, camouflage paint slapped on to all the vehicles, gear stowed on the tanks, personal belongings sorted, a year's junk thrown out. 'After 12 months in this area,' remarked the war diary, 'the salvage truck is kept busy disposing of surplus or unwanted stores.' On 9 September Regimental Headquarters issued its orders for the move—A Squadron's tanks to go on transporters and the rest by train, complete with full crews and food for five days, all the rest of the unit by road. On the 11th an advance party left for [Burg el Arab](#) to prepare for the unit's arrival, while the rest of the boys whooped things along on their last free evenings in [Cairo](#); on the 13th everyone packed spare gear in his base kit and handed it in to store; next day the first tanks went on their way, and at 7 a.m. on 16 September, twelve months and three days after the tired Old Digs of [18 Infantry Battalion](#) had reached the haven of [Maadi](#), the new, fresh, unblooded [18 Armoured Regiment](#) left there for the last time.

If [18 Regiment](#) had expected a nice camp at [Burg el Arab](#), handy to the [Mediterranean](#) and with all comforts, it was disappointed, for its new home was in a dirty, dusty locality four miles from the coast. To have a swim you had first to get smothered in dust in the back of a three-tonner, or to march the whole way in an organised party and arrive soaked with sweat. [Maadi](#) and its amenities seemed a long way behind, especially to the newer reinforcements who had not known the dirt

and squalor of [Baggush](#) or [Matruh](#) or [Alamein](#). [Alexandria](#) was an hour's run away, and for the first ten days there was plenty of leave there, trucks going in and out daily. Ever since the days of the old change-of-air camp [Alexandria](#) had been in high favour with the Kiwis, cooler than [Cairo](#) and more spaciouly set out, with lovely swimming beaches within easy reach. There were also conducted parties to the [Alamein](#) battleground, now empty and desolate but as forbidding as ever, with the sand beginning to fill up the trenches and drift high round the wrecked tanks and trucks which still littered the desert.

The first week at [Burg el Arab](#) was pretty easy, all the tanks being checked over once again, new ones being run in. The very day of the move from [Maadi](#) the last six Shermans arrived to bring the regiment up to its total of 52. A few days later the unit got a dozen new three-tonners; these were still short, but the leeway was being gradually made up. Full training began again on 24 September with a small regimental manoeuvre, an advance by squadrons with 25-pounder fire falling just ahead. At the time the whole division was forbidden to use wireless, which brought home forcibly how dependent the armoured units now were on wireless, and how badly their style was cramped when they had to keep touch by hand signals.

Next came an important landmark in the Division's life, the first full divisional manoeuvre with its own tanks and infantry acting together. To the boys in [18 Regiment](#) its importance was not apparent. It was the old story—the bigger the manoeuvre, the less there was to do, but the more awkward hours you had to keep. This time the regiment's tanks and scout cars left camp at midnight, forced their way for 12 miles through an almost solid bank of dust, stopped and dispersed in the dark, then sat idle for twenty-four hours, festooned in camouflage nets, the crews playing cards in their sparse shade to while the time away. A sudden burst of energy at dawn next day, the tanks edging carefully forward through a narrow taped track in an imaginary minefield, a swift but short advance to nowhere in particular, then nothing more till evening. The tankies had so far seen hardly anything of the infantry they were supposed to co-operate with, only a few dim figures in the dusk. The minefield gap, they understood, had been cleared by infantry for the tanks' benefit, but there had been no infantrymen in evidence there either.

Next day seemed better, the three squadrons moving forward to the attack with shells passing overhead and falling in front, inaudible above the roar of the tank

engines and the clanking of the tracks. This is good, said the boys, this is the sort of tank work we like. Only their commanders knew that plans had come unstuck, that flank support had not materialised as arranged, and that, had there been any real enemy there, **18 Regiment** would have been shot to bits.

Back at **Burg el Arab** on 2 October the tank crews had to get busy and spend several hours on the vile job of cleaning thick coats of dust off their tanks. However, this should not be necessary again for a while, for everyone now knew that they would very soon be sailing for **Europe**— **General Freyberg** had said so quite plainly to all their officers and senior NCOs on the last day of the manoeuvres. Just where they were going he had not said, but **Europe**, definitely, and soon.

From now on everyone had his nose down to it getting ready for the trip. The regiment issued its instructions on 2 October. No more leave now—there was plenty to do, and the move was very secret. All New Zealand badges, titles and fern leaves had to disappear. Tanks and trucks to have a final check, truck canopies to be cut down to the height of the cabs for stowing on board ship. Everything the unit possessed to be loaded on the trucks or packed in boxes as general cargo. Unit code numbers and colours to be painted on every vehicle and every box. The



ITALY MAP No.1

packing alone was a major job; just as a householder never realises how much junk he owns till he has to shift house, so it was with **18 Regiment**. There were boxes piled on boxes, all chock-a-block, cookhouse stores and quartermaster's stores

and office stores, sports gear and tools and canteen goods. And ammunition—not only was each tank loaded up with its full complement, but there were 93 tons of the stuff left over, all to be packed so that it would not come adrift on the journey.

Although their destination had still to be officially announced, everyone knew that it was [Italy](#). They had been given cold-weather gear, battle dress and thick underclothes, sleeveless leather jerkins that were by no means elegant but were to prove real friends in the wet, raw European winter. Precautions were already being taken against malaria, long trousers at night and sleeves rolled down, sickly-smelling mosquito cream on face and hands, little yellow pills that had to be swallowed down quickly with a draught of tea or else left a vile taste in your mouth.

Yes, their days in the glare and aridity of [Egypt](#) were nearly over, and nobody was sorry. Even Maadi had palled in the end. Everyone was eager for something new, and [Italy](#), people said, was very beautiful. There was a war on there, which made it even more attractive, for [2 NZ Division](#) was well rested, full of new keen men, and itching to try out its new strength, to get its own tanks and infantry out at last on Jerry's trail.

¹ [Capt N. J. Grant](#); [Hawera](#); born [Normanby](#), 14 Jan 1905; motor mechanic.

² [WO I T. E. Lawson](#), m.i.d.; [Onehunga](#); born NZ 17 Dec 1913; motor and general engineer.

³ [Capt C. N. James](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Jun 1904; clerk; deceased.

⁴ [Lt J. W. McCowan](#); born NZ 23 May 1918; clerk; accidentally killed 11 Aug 1943.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 25 – BACK TO EUROPE

CHAPTER 25

Back to Europe

About half of 2 NZ Division (the 'first flight', as it was called) had gone away about the time that 18 Regiment began to pack its goods, and was already presumably in Italy, or well on the way, before the packing was finished. After that the 18th was not kept hanging round Burg el Arab for long. On 9 October the scout cars and soft-skinned transport left, followed over the next four days by the tanks, which were railed away squadron by squadron. With the vehicles went about 250 drivers, a third of the unit—two to each tank, one to every other vehicle with 10 per cent spare men.

A mechanised unit is very helpless without its transport, as the regiment now found. The trucks had become mobile homes full of accumulated comforts, boxes of carefully hoarded food, tea and sugar and tinned milk, primus stoves, extra clothes and blankets and boots. Old 'ammo' boxes welded on the outside of the tanks served as containers, and every spare inside corner was usually packed with food. Without their vehicles the 490 men left behind were reduced to living on their official rations, which in the Division was positive penury. There were a few trucks left around, enough to carry on the daily beach service; but the men and their mountains of gear, clothes and blankets, rifles and ammunition, bivvy tents, gas masks, plus empty water cans for good measure, would have to rely on borrowed chariots to go any distance, for nobody could carry such a swag of stuff very far.

On 12 October the 'unhorsed cavalry' of 18 Regiment was taken away from Burg el Arab in a fleet of Tommy trucks. They left with no regrets, for in their last two days there one of the desert's worst dust-storms blew up, a real beauty, as if Egypt was turning on a special farewell for these Kiwis who had infested the country for so long. But their next port of call, Ikingi Maryut, was equally dusty and objectionable.

Ikingi, the last stop before the Alexandria docks, was a series of neat little 'ship camps', five in all, with tents all lined up in parallel rows, which in itself was enough to depress the Kiwis. Units were to be divided among the ships in their convoy, so that if a ship was sunk—cheery thought—no unit would suffer too badly. On arrival 18 Regiment was broken up among three of the camps, a squadron each, with

Regimental Headquarters and HQ, Squadron split among the three. Then the men settled down, pulled out their packs of cards, gathered round in their two-up rings, and waited for their next orders.

The camps hummed with activity on 12 October as the second flight assembled, and from all directions heavily laden men materialised, struggling in with their burdens. But then followed four days of laziness and boredom, with nothing to do except odd things like handing in your Wog money (if you had any left) and getting British Military Authority notes instead. It was quite a mental exercise now to forget all about 'ackers' and think in terms of shillings and pence again. There were still daily trucks to the beach, a very fine beach, better than [Burg el Arab](#). There was a fair supply of beer available for those who could afford it. But every day there were long hours to kill. The evenings were better, for the good old mobile cinema came round, and Shafto's tin and sacking edifice at [Amiriya](#) was within walking distance—there were still a few veterans left who remembered with satisfaction what a fine blaze it had made on a similar occasion two and a half years before. Leave to [Alexandria](#) was forbidden now, but a few enterprising lads made their way in and played the old game of dodging the provosts. You had to do something to fill in the time.

On 16 October the small amount of heavy equipment still in camp—cooking gear and tools—was carted away in trucks towards [Alexandria](#). On the 17th the camps were astir well before dawn, and by 7 a.m. half the men were off to the docks, squashed tightly with all their gear into Tommy three-tonners. Later in the morning the trucks came back and picked up the other half. This was The Day, and everyone was glad, for they had had a bellyful of [Egypt](#) and were eager to get over to a civilised country where they would at last get some action.

[Alexandria](#) was crammed full of ships of all sorts and sizes, troop and cargo ships, British warships from an aircraft carrier to a submarine, French warships, and, most interesting of all, a row of gleaming Italian cruisers at anchor, now very tame indeed. Not that the men of [18 Regiment](#) had leisure to inspect all this array except in brief glimpses. They were hurried to the wharves where lay their own ships, big massive liners, [Llangibby Castle](#), [Nieuw Holland](#) and [Letitia](#). Climbing the gangways was agony, everyone bent double, sweating and swearing under his load. But this was only for a minute or two, and then there was a chaos of milling bodies in the

living quarters, all jostling to find places to drop their gear and get up to vantage points on deck. By lunchtime everyone was aboard, and during the afternoon the ships moved out one by one into the stream, where the boys, most of them for the first time, could enjoy the sight of a large convoy assembling.

There was no room to spare on the ships. Troopship conditions had changed since the good old days, and most of the accommodation now was in huge airless 'blocks' where at night the men (unless they could sleep on deck) slung hammocks above their meal tables. A lot of precious space was taken up by all the stuff they had lugged on board. But the food was pretty good and spirits were as high as they had ever been, and discomfort could be laughed off.

All that night the ships lay at anchor. Early next morning there was more coming and going as the convoy (sixteen merchant ships and six escorts) finished forming up and got under way. Then [Alexandria](#) faded astern, and delightful, repulsive [Egypt](#), the luxury of [Maadi](#), the noisy vivacity of [Cairo](#), the filth of [Alamein](#), became a memory, already beginning to blur imperceptibly.

Apart from the crowding, troopship life was pretty much as everyone remembered it. The officers made rather perfunctory efforts to keep the boys occupied with relay races and tugs-of-war in which nobody took more than a polite interest; otherwise there was little to do but wander round or lean over the rail or squat on the decks playing cards, now and then interrupted by one of those tiresome boat drills. As always, there were the crown-and-anchor kings defying the law, there was the jockeying for places in the fresh-water queues, there were picket jobs and mess orderly jobs, there were talks and community sings in the evenings. For two days the ships moved quietly westwards with hardly a roll, [Africa](#) always in sight, watchful aeroplanes buzzing reassuringly overhead. Still westwards the third day, no land visible now. Then, while everyone slept, the convoy swung north across the open [Mediterranean](#), and when the fourth day broke it was steaming serenely along, with [Sicily](#) not far away on the port side, and Kiwis in their hundreds lining the rails to gaze. From that distance the land looked much the same as [Africa](#), an overall tawny yellow, an occasional white gleam marking a town; but, unlike [Africa](#), craggy mountains seemed to rise straight out of the water, with one bulky mass which the well-informed picked as [Etna](#). Most of the ships turned in towards [Sicily](#), but by the

afternoon the rest were running along the jagged shore of [Calabria](#), for most of the New Zealanders the first sight of the mainland of [Europe](#).

[Taranto](#) at seven o'clock next morning looked very attractive, with Italian warships anchored all over the place, big clean-looking buildings lining the waterfront, a grim old fort jutting out into the water. But a closer inspection, after the ships had wound their way in through the huge submarine booms, negotiated a narrow canal to the inner harbour, and could see behind the white facade, was much less favourable. The town looked sad and grubby, and so did the few civilians lounging round. Here was no lovely green grass and trees, only dust and stony streets, with now and again the sagging skeleton of a bombed building. If this was really [Italy](#), it was not all it was cracked up to be, thought the boys, as they struggled down the gangways, stacked their heaviest gear on the quays, shouldered the rest and marched away up sloping cobbled streets towards the back of the town.

Once clear of [Taranto](#) and out into the country beyond, things were better. It was hot, and for men out of the route-marching habit the ten-mile walk to their new camp was exhausting, but they were still interested enough to look round and take in the neat white farmhouses, the plastered stone walls with lizards running up and down them, the reddish soil, the miles of olive groves, the vines heavy with ripe grapes. To the small select band of originals it all brought back vivid memories of [Crete](#) and southern [Greece](#).

Their camp was not really a camp at all, just an olive grove with stone terraces and one or two scattered bivvy tents belonging to the advance party. But by evening the whole place was bristling with bivvies, everyone had made himself at home, and half the boys were already off exploring. The units of the first flight, only a few miles away, had tales to tell of friendly peasants, cheap grapes, cheap red wine—'Watch out for the plonk,' they said, 'it's treacherous, we've had our lesson,' good advice which the second flight totally disregarded.

It did not take long to settle down. On 25 October, three days after their arrival, some training began, largely route marches round dusty country lanes and through tiny villages. There was afternoon leave to [Taranto](#), but only the enthusiastic sightseers went, as you usually had to tramp the whole way, and there was not much to do in [Taranto](#) anyway. It was more fun when off duty to poke round among

the villages and visit the farms, though the filth of the villages was something of a shock, and so were the queues of depressed but voluble women waiting to buy food, and the hungry gangs of children who besieged the soldiers in the streets crying out for cigarettes and biscuits. There obviously was not much to eat in the towns. The peasants seemed better off, as fruit was plentiful and the Kiwis could buy all they wanted in camp—grapes, figs, almonds, even small crisp apples. It was impossible to make out what on earth the Ities were talking about as they gabbled on at top speed, but the language of commerce is easily grasped, and the boys soon found that bully beef and salt and cigarettes were better currency than money. Even dentures were 'trade goods'—the small boys who hung round the camp would happily part with bunches of grapes for the pleasure of seeing a soldier take out his teeth and brandish them in the air. The entertainment business worked in reverse, too. Most of the 18th will remember the boy who, day after day, for a few biscuits or a cake of chocolate, gave operatic concerts in a clear, true voice to appreciative audiences under the olive trees.

Then the rains came and caught everyone unawares.

Like the rest of the Kiwis, 18 Regiment had almost forgotten what rain was like. In Egypt, except on odd occasions, such precautions as drainage had been quite unnecessary. But not in Italy. On 28 October, just about 5 p.m., a downpour disrupted dinner and sent everyone scampering to the bivvies. But diving for shelter was only burying their heads in the sand, for rivers began to cascade down the stone terraces, and the men had to emerge, rain or no rain, and dig frantically to divert them. Some of the dwellers on the upper terraces took down the stones to release the banked-up water, with catastrophic results for those below. It was a sharp lesson in the treachery of Italy. The bivvy tents, in their first real test, nobly warded off the water from above, but could not deflect that which poured in underneath. It was two days before the rain eased off and something could be done about drying out the blankets and clothes that had got in the way of the torrent.

It was common knowledge from the beginning that their stay in these pleasant olive groves would be very temporary; so when ordered on 2 November to move 200 miles north next day, nobody in the regiment was surprised. It was a pity to leave the sweet yellow grapes of Taranto, but in a country like Italy there would no doubt be more wherever they went. The transport had not arrived yet, except for four or

five essential vehicles such as a water cart and the quartermaster's truck, so the unit was still dependent on the ASC to carry it.

The first day of the trip north, 3 November, took the regiment through rolling farm country, mostly of no particular beauty, but very few of the boys were content to ride hidden under the truck canopies where they could not see. The back of each canopy was a sea of faces, some men stood on the tailboards, others perched up behind the cabs. The farther north they went the more thickly populated was the country, small farms everywhere, lots of little towns, some of them stuck up on the highest, steepest hills they could find. A few of the first villages they passed had queer high conical stone roofs, just like crops of big grey dunces' caps sprouting from the houses ('trulli' they were called), but this seemed to be a very local idea, and was seen no more after the first two hours. That night the convoy halted and pitched bivvies on a bare windswept ridge, and next day, after an unpleasantly cold night, went on through country that gradually flattened out to a wide bleak plain, till at midday it came to [Foggia](#). Everyone knew of [Foggia](#). Here were the big airfields that had been one of the [Eighth Army's](#) main objectives. It was too flat to see much of them, but there was a series of [Air Force](#) camps close to the road, and the air was full of planes circling round, or taking off and landing just beyond the camp buildings.

So far, apart from the few bombed buildings in [Taranto](#), there had been amazingly little sign of war. A few demolished bridges had caused a ripple of comment down the convoy, otherwise the countryside looked pretty well unscathed. But [Foggia](#) town was in shreds, a sad contrast to the smaller towns. Only the originals who had been in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) had seen anything like it before, and even [Larisa](#) and [Canea](#) had not been any more bashed about than this.

Just over 20 miles past [Foggia](#), at the entrance to a large but somewhat dingy town called [San Severo](#) (each town had a big blue name plate up beside the road, so that you always knew where you were), the convoy turned aside on to a dusty country road for a few miles, and there, on a pleasant open slope, were [18 Regiment's](#) tanks and trucks at last, all waiting in the sunshine for the boys to turn up. After three and a half weeks' separation this was quite a family reunion. For the rest of the day tongues wagged tirelessly as their owners lounged on the ground or against the vehicles, and all details of the trip from [Egypt](#) were told and retold with

suitable embroidery. The drivers had quite a story to unfold.

From [Burg el Arab](#) the vehicles had gone to huge marshalling parks' not far from the [Alexandria](#) docks, whence they had been called forward in small groups to load. No big imposing liners for them; they had been slung unceremoniously into the holds of 'Liberty' ships and other sturdy but ugly cargo tramps, the drivers had found sleeping space where they could, and on 18 October they had formed up in the harbour and sailed away, a vast convoy of over fifty ships, barrage balloons dotting the sky wherever you looked, destroyers and planes prowling protectively round.

Living conditions on board had been fairly rough even by soldiers' standards. The food had been all a matter of luck— some ships had turned on rattling good meals, others starvation rations. Otherwise the beginning of the trip had been perfect, five lovely calm days, with one notable evening when they had passed the hospital ship [Maunganui](#), with full lights on and great floodlit Red Crosses visible for miles. Another day the destroyers had dropped depth-charges in the distance, and the dreaded word 'submarine' had passed from mouth to mouth. (Padre Gourdie notes: 'There was full attendance at the Church service I took shortly after that incident'.) Two days were spent at [Malta](#), anchored off [Valetta](#), the water so calm and warm that some of the boys had even swum ashore for an unofficial look round. Then, on the last lap northwards to [Italy](#), a most unwelcome change to rough seas and heavy rain, with one spectacular electrical storm; then lucky indeed were the men who had covered space to live in. On many of the ships the men had merely dossed down on deck wherever they could. Now, with the rain pelting down, some captains took pains to keep their passengers dry and comfortable, others did not care, one or two were quite hostile. Life on the tramps had suddenly become much less of a picnic.

Then [Bari](#). [Bari](#) in the rain, its gleaming white palm-lined waterfront all bedraggled and miserable seen through a curtain of rain in the gathering autumn twilight. Hours of waiting, all through a cold evening, while the derricks creaked and winches clattered and vehicles swung off the ships one by one under the hard light of arc lamps. A short drive to a temporary camp at the [Bari](#) Stadium, a short sleep and a rude awakening in the small hours with a thunderclap overhead and a torrent of rain. What an introduction to romantic [Italy](#)! 'We spent the rest of the night,' said one driver, 'huddled under trucks, awaiting daylight.'

Next day a few men had been allowed a few hours off to have a short look at [Bari](#) while the rest got their vehicles ready to move on. The tanks had come up to [Lucera](#) on transporters, then the rest of the way under their own steam; the other vehicles had driven up from [Bari](#) in little groups, mostly in the rain, their drivers shivering in the unaccustomed cold; and by 3 November, a day ahead of the rest of the regiment, they had all assembled here ready to receive the boys arriving from [Taranto](#).

There was plenty of room here for the regiment, no other units within miles, and the squadrons lived a long way apart, with the transport and tanks well dispersed and carefully camouflaged (though of the [Luftwaffe](#) there was never a sign), and bivvies clustered round each vehicle. For the first time farmhouses and outbuildings were pressed into service as cookshops and messrooms, and Regimental Headquarters roused everyone else's envy by installing itself in a splendid ten-roomed mansion with a tower and battlements. [Eric Young's](#) ¹ [YMCA](#) canteen, usually under canvas, was in a stable with a stone floor, very cosy and popular in the evenings with a roaring fire going—for the weather was getting colder, and light shirts and shorts had again given way to battle dress.

It was not easy for the tank crews to get their hand in again, for this part of the country was so full of small farms and wandering peasants that they were not allowed to use their guns, and could not manoeuvre across country without getting tangled up in someone's crops. They could drive in and out of the lanes and get some practice in handling the tanks, but no more. Most of the training was 'fitness' stuff, cross-country runs and route marches, and a lot of footballs appeared from storage. In their spare time most of the boys found their way to the [San Severo](#) wineshops, dark little holes most of them, run by pirates with oily smiles. The Kiwis were now busy forgetting about the British Military Authority money and learning to deal in Italian lire, 400 to the pound, so that even small sums sounded a lot.

On 13 November [18 Regiment](#), along with the rest of 4 Armoured Brigade, was ordered up to an obscure little mountain hamlet called [Furci](#), 45 miles nearer the front as the crow flies, 80 by road. The regiment was to leave on the morning of 15 November, fully stocked up with supplies for a week, full water trucks and cans, fuel for 250 miles. This meant a general scurry round to get things ready, but in the

midst of the bustle the move was postponed till the 16th, a valuable day's respite which enabled everyone to take things a little easier. The far-sighted ones, with the sameness of army rations in mind, bargained with the local peasants for pigs and chickens to take with them; one group of conspirators, displeased with the price asked by one man for a turkey, quietly removed his whole flock on the morning of departure, a very illegal action which led to trouble with the military government later.

At 8 a.m. on 16 November, after an early breakfast, the regiment left its pleasant hillside and headed north, the tanks along a marked track that dodged the roads, scout cars and B Echelon along the main road through [San Severo](#).

Stories had already been trickling back from the battlefield, horrid stories of rain and mud and demolitions and traffic jams and mines. Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants and several other officers had gone up to visit armoured units in the line and came back bringing some useful tactical and technical hints, but shaking their heads over the prospect of mobile mountain warfare in winter. The whole front from [Apennines](#) to Adriatic was mountain, there was no escaping that. And the winter had not really begun yet, but already the [Eighth Army](#) was having difficulty. Back at [San Severo](#) there had been some good solid rain, but between downpours the ground had dried fast, so fast that the men could not help thinking these woeful tales a bit exaggerated. They had not yet seen for themselves what water could do to an army.

Now, too, the name of the [Sangro River](#) had first begun to circulate. It meant nothing much to anybody. The Eighth Army was evidently held up there, and the Kiwis, said the report, were to go in and help break Jerry's resistance. After that the [Eighth Army](#) was to swoop forward up the coast, then turn west right across the country to [Rome](#). Jerry was to be kept on the run and not allowed to settle down on a fixed line. Things were looking up, and you never knew, the Kiwis might yet eat their Christmas dinner in [Rome](#).

For the wheeled vehicles the trip north, though free from accidents and bad delays, was difficult and tedious. The gently rolling country and straight roads round [San Severo](#) soon gave place to steeper, more rugged hills, sharp bends, muddy deviations round blown bridges. One big river, the [Biferno](#), was in flood, and the only way across was a temporary bridge that looked alarmingly rickety with the torrent of

thick yellow water swirling under it. Here the Adriatic was only a mile or so away; a little farther on was the huddled-up little port of [Termoli](#), then the road turned inland through thick wooded country, where the men saw the first real signs of the battles that had raged here not so long ago. Beside the road were the corpses of tanks, at least a score of them, both German and British, and scattered, forlorn little groups of crosses.

More ridges, another struggle with a sticky deviation and a narrow bridge at the Trigno River, and then the boys began to find out just what the Italian highway engineers could do to keep life interesting. The hills became steeper yet, the road skirted miles of water-gouged gullies in zigzags that fascinated the passengers but bewildered the drivers. On some bends the bigger trucks could not get round without backing and taking another swing, quite a risky operation on a narrow road with cliffs falling away from it. By the time the convoy reached [Furci](#) late that afternoon the drivers were worn out. The lucky ones went into the town itself, with firm standing for their trucks in the narrow cobbled streets, and dry billets in the houses; the others, in an olive grove on the outskirts, got their first real taste of Italian mud. The ground among the trees was a mass of grease in which wheels revolved helplessly, and often the passengers had to get out and heave, themselves ankle-deep in mud, to move the trucks to their places. The contrast to [Egypt](#) could not have been more striking. Having shoved the trucks into position and festooned them with camouflage nets, the boys pitched bivvies in the driest spots they could find, carpeted them with small olive branches or any straw they could forage from the nearest farmyards, then sat down to wait for the tanks, which were due next day.

The tanks got into difficulties almost as soon as they left San [Severo](#), for their special track was narrow and slippery, and took them up and down steep slopes and into what one man has described as 'some rare places'. The best speed they could make was ten miles an hour, often less. Their goal for the day was [Termoli](#), but they did not get there, for the [Biferno](#) bridge was unfit for tanks and the flood waters were impassable. Even then about a dozen tanks straggled and were well behind the main body, catching up one by one during the late afternoon and evening.

There was nothing for it but to stay on the south bank that night and ford the river next morning, a very nasty job, with the water in places almost up to the driving slits. Then on through [Termoli](#), past the same battleground that had so

interested the boys in the trucks—the charred remains of a dozen Shermans gave the tankies a nasty feeling in the pit of the stomach. Colonel Pleasants, unwilling to churn up the crowded main road any more, directed the tanks on to a secondary road farther inland, leading (so the map said) by a roundabout way to [Furci](#).

But this unscheduled move led to a fine mix-up. The secondary road was terrible, narrower, steeper and curlier than the main road, passing through little hilltop towns whose streets were sometimes not much wider than the tanks. At one bad corner a driver accidentally earned the gratitude of the rest by knocking down the projecting corner of a house as he went by. Only 26 miles from [Termoli](#) the column was stopped short by blown bridges; exploration of another road which should have led towards [Furci](#) brought no better result; it was now so late in the day that the tank crews bedded down where they were, and next morning (18 November) turned round and went all the way back to [Termoli](#). Obviously it had to be the main road, so the tanks—except those which had stuck or broken down, and one which had run over a mine—pushed on without delay. The first of them joined B Echelon at [Furci](#) at 3 a.m. on 19 November, some thirty-six hours late, their crews haggard with lack of sleep and fed up with this [Italy](#) that they had heard so many lies about. Others stopped for the night halfway to [Furci](#), slept soundly and arrived later on the morning of the 19th. ²

[Furci](#)'s surroundings were very picturesque. The village itself, perched on the point of a ridge, commanded a view all round of other rugged hills topped by other tiny villages, each with its church tower sticking up out of a thick cluster of houses. The hills were covered for mile after mile with olive groves and white or pink or red farmhouses. To the east you could see the sea between the ridges, to the west the Apennine peaks were dwarfed by a magnificent mountain mass gleaming with snow. But the men could not really appreciate the grandeur of the scenery, for they were too occupied with their own immediate problem of how to keep dry. Steady rain on the night of 19 November and next day did not help matters. The mud became a regular quagmire, and there was not a dry boot in the place. If you touched the canvas of your bivvy rain dripped in on top of you—and in the cramped space of a two-foot-high bivvy you cannot avoid touching it at times.

Little wonder that the Kiwis were already beginning to fight shy of bivvy life, and

that billets in houses or storehouses or even stables were eagerly sought after. RSM Jack Richards tells of the quest for dry quarters which was becoming standard practice in [2 NZ Division](#):

Whenever possible we would sleep in billets.... We push a reconnaissance party forward to our predetermined halting place. This party bags all the houses in the vicinity and holds them until our arrival against all rival claims. The occupants, if there are any, we allow them living quarters, say one room, and help ourselves to the rest.

There were never enough 'casas' to go round; the competition for living space was keen, and the first in got the best. [Furci](#) was pretty full before [18 Regiment](#) came along, so it had to take what was left, and the unlucky ones stayed outside.

It seemed now as if the regiment's first action was very close. The Division was moving up handy to the front line; from [Furci](#) the artillery fire could be clearly heard grumbling round the hills. The New Zealanders, so the current story ran, were to attack across the [Sangro River](#) on the night of 20 November, after which [18 Regiment](#) would move up to join in. There was a rumour that 19 Regiment had already been in action, lost some tanks and quite a number of men, not very cheerful news for those waiting in some anxiety for their turn to be shot at. However, the outlook was not all bad. Up front, as far as anyone could judge, there seemed to be more shellfire going away than coming in, and the regular stream of British planes, fighters and medium bombers, overhead was most encouraging. Whatever happened, it seemed unlikely that Jerry could turn on an air show comparable with [Crete](#) or even [Alamein](#).

But there was little time for speculation, for there was plenty to do on the tanks. Guns tested and adjusted ('T & A' in tankies' language) for the first time since leaving [Egypt](#), tracks tightened up as far as they would go in order to ride more easily over the mud, fuel and ammunition replenished, all the endless little attentions that tanks need. The wireless operators had no chance to test their sets or rehearse their procedure, for the strict wireless silence that had been in force since leaving [Maadi](#) had not yet been lifted. This had added to the vexations of the trip up, for all the way forward from [San Severo](#) the two halves of the unit had been out of touch, and single tanks that had lagged behind had had no means of letting

the rest know where they were, but had had to find their way back as best they could. Everyone fervently hoped that they would not have to go into action without their wireless, which made coordination and control immeasurably easier. Indeed, the whole system of battle procedure depended on wireless.

The next move forward began at very short notice on the afternoon of 20 November, first the tanks and scout cars, then next morning B Echelon. The vehicles now had to be coaxed back through the mud on to the road, a heartbreaking job for all hands had it not been for Captain G. R. Andrews, an old [18 Battalion](#) identity of [Crete](#) days, who came along on loan with two tractors and made light work of whisking the trucks out. Over the next few weeks George Andrews and his tractors became very well known round the [18th](#), always welcome, always ready to lend a hand where the mud was thickest.

Progress north from [Furci](#) was dreadfully slow. The road was, if possible, even worse than farther back, winding up and down the ridges in tight zigzags, so that in some places you could look down from the crests and see what looked like six or eight parallel lines of road straight below. Add to this the rain, the slippery, potholed surface, dozens of demolished bridges and deviations deep in mud, congested traffic going both ways with sometimes barely room to pass, and it is something of a miracle that convoys got anywhere at all. Drivers became very short-tempered, and could relieve their feelings only by exchanging abuse with other drivers coming the other way, or with the harassed provosts fighting to keep traffic flowing at the deviations. By the afternoon of 21 November B Echelon had struggled as far as [Gissi](#), atop the next ridge north of [Furci](#), where it packed into the already overcrowded village, while the tanks and scout cars had made their way some 15 miles forward, past the next village of [Casalanguida](#), stuck up on a sheer rocky spur between two deep river gorges. They ended up in a barren spot north of the town, tanks and cars parked close together in a sloping paddock overhanging a gully and looking straight across to [Casalanguida](#), just over a mile away. Living space here was scarce and precious, and some of the men got small patches of floor in buildings to sleep on, but most had to brave the storms in their bivvies.

This was the fringe of the real front line, only eight miles from the [Sangro](#), where fighting was still going on as much as the weather would let it; but [18 Regiment](#), protected by a sharp crest between it and the front, was very peaceful,

except for an occasional big shell that came whirring over towards the river crossing south of [Casalanguida](#). The [Luftwaffe](#), to everyone's great pleasure, was still absent. The most constant reminder of the war was the endless procession of vehicles, supply convoys and troop convoys, jeeps and cars and motor-bikes and ambulances, feeling their way up and down the road. But this peace and quiet was misleading, for down in the [Sangro](#) valley things were due to explode, and the regiment was certain to be involved before many more days were past.

¹ [Mr E. W. Young](#), YMCA secretary; [Christchurch](#); born [Auckland](#), 12 May 1914; clerk.

² Appointments in [18 Armd Regt](#) on 19 November:

CO: Lt-Col C. L. Pleasants
2 i/c: Maj H. M. Green
Adjutant: [Capt P. A. Thorley](#)
IO: 2 Lt J. R. Marra
HQ Tp: Lt G. P. Donnelly
Gunnery Offr: Lt R. H. Ferguson

HQ Sqn
OC: Maj P.B. Allen
2 i/c: Capt W. H. Ryan
Recce Tp: Lt C. O. McGruther
Sigs Offr: [Lt E. H. J. Fairley](#)
Tech. Adjut: [Capt C. N. James](#)
LAD Offr: [Capt N. J. Grant](#)
QM: [Capt A. M. B. Lenton](#)
MO: [Capt S. B. Thompson](#)
Padre: Rev. R. M. Gourdie

A Sqn
OC: [Maj A. H. Dickinson](#)
2 i/c: Capt P. J. C. Burns
2nd Capt: [Capt B. G. S. Jackson](#)
Tp Comds: Capt R. J. Stanford
Lt H. F. McLean
[Lt T. M. R. Maskew](#)
Lt T. J. Cullinane
Attached: Lt J. L. Wright

2 Lt P. H. Edmonds

B Sqn

OC: Maj J. B. Ferguson

2 i/c: Capt K. L. Brown

2nd Capt: Capt G. B. Nelson

Tp Comds: Lt C. W. Hawkins

Lt W. H. McHale

Lt B. C. D. Rawson

Lt A. D. McGill

Attached: Lt R. D. Horton

Lt T. M. Scott

C Sqn

OC: Maj R. G. Parkinson

2 i/c: Capt H. H. Deans

2nd Capt: Capt B. W. Tipling

Tp Comds: Lt E. G. Shucksmith

Lt D. G. Thomson

Lt O. H. Burn

Lt C. S. Passmore

Attached: Lt R. M. Dacre

RSM: WO I J. L. Richards

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 26 – THE BRICK WALL—GUARDIAGRELE

CHAPTER 26

The Brick Wall—Guardiagrele

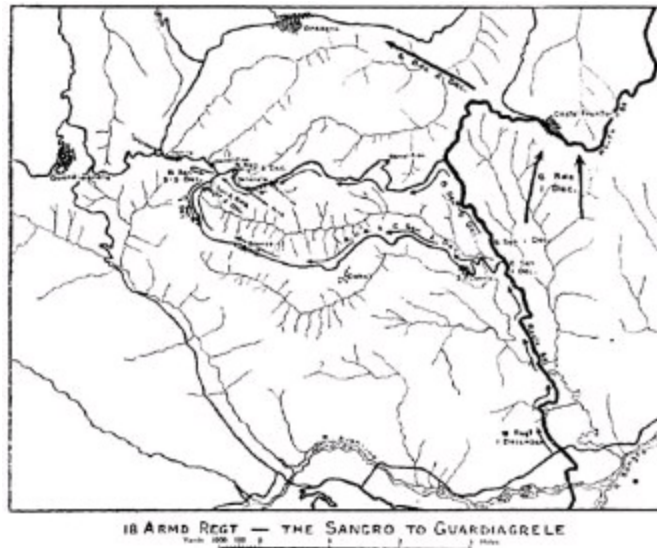
By 20 November 1943, 6 Brigade was all set to attack, but the rain and the river took a hand, and everything was put off for forty-eight hours. The Sangro, never a placid stream, was running high and swift, and even if the infantry had got across, it would have been a struggle to keep it there. On 22 November things were no better, the water was rising even higher, the crossing was again postponed, and 18 Regiment was ordered to lend a squadron to the divisional artillery to stiffen up the supporting fire when (if ever) the infantry did cross. Here at last was the 18th's first real job, though it did not seem to promise much excitement.

In the grey, damp, drizzly dawn of 23 November A Squadron left Casalanguida on its way up to the front line. It had only nine miles to go, but the move took all morning, for the tanks went forward one by one, ten minutes between each, so that the last one—there were twelve—moved off two hours after the first. The idea was to avoid traffic jams and shellfire on the road, but the men could not help thinking it a bit exaggerated, as only a few short stretches of the road were in Jerry's view, and visibility was pretty poor anyway.

The road wound down a spur to the Osento River, a nightmare spot where for days traffic had inched its way through a series of dreadful deviations that not all the engineers' skill could improve. Up again to Atessa, perched dizzily on top of a tangle of cliffs, in normal times a sleepy little market town but now a busy traffic centre, a mass of coloured signposts bearing cryptic numbers and initials under the familiar fernleaf. Downhill again, over and round a complicated jumble of hills and streams, and then by cart tracks deep in mud up a steep conical hill striped with olive groves, officially named Torretta, but from now on universally known in 18 Regiment as 'Dicko's Hill'.

Coaxing the tanks up Torretta was a terrible job. 'One by one,' says Major Dickinson, ¹ 'we wallowed up the ridge, each tank making the going worse for the one behind Four were immobilised, being bellied and run out of tracks, but had got close enough to the crest where indirect fire could be directed by the commander standing on top of his turret.' By mid-afternoon the other eight tanks were in 'hull

down' positions (that is, just behind the crest of the hill with turrets and guns poking up over it), nicely hidden behind a hedge and blanketed under their camouflage nets, looking straight across the [Sangro](#) valley to the hills north of the river.



18 Armd Regt — The Sangro to Guardiagrele

The Sangro certainly looked formidable. Across the wide river flat meandered the water, sometimes in one stream, sometimes broken into three or four channels with mud and shingle banks in between. Beyond it rose the hills, rolling back higher and higher and meeting the sky in a long ridge topped by the church spire of a large town, [Castelfrentano](#) by name, later to become very familiar to the Kiwis. High above the left flank soared the jumble of snowy peaks—the Maiella—that had first been seen from [Furci](#). It was a magnificent but rugged panorama. And there, on those hills that looked so close you could almost spit across to them, sat Jerry, doubtless waiting to let fly as soon as the [Eighth Army](#) ventured into his territory.

That was to be the same night, 23 November. Sixth Brigade was again poised for the attack, the artillery all ready to blast Jerry's positions. A Squadron's orders from the CRA (Brigadier [Weir](#)²) were to shoot only at opportunity targets that came into view—this would limit its usefulness to daylight hours, but Major Dickinson ordered a stand-to for 3 a.m., when the balloon was to go up. After the tanks were in position the men spent the little remaining daylight getting bivvies up and grumbling loudly that this [Torretta](#) could not provide a single decent casa to live in, then lay down to take things easy in readiness for their early morning call.

There was an unpleasant surprise ahead. Just at twilight a scattered salvo of shells came crashing round, puncturing bivvies, cans and blankets, one dud bouncing fair and square on the back of Lieutenant Cullinane's ³ tank. For more than half the squadron it was the first time under shellfire, and they did not like it any more than the old hands did. As things turned out, these few shells were the only ones to come around in the five days A Squadron spent on [Torretta](#)—nobody could fathom why Jerry sent them over, unless somebody had carelessly shown a light—but that one experience was enough to dissuade the men from walking round too much in the open in daylight, and most of them took to sleeping under the tanks, where they had a little better protection.

Before all this happened, even before A Squadron was properly in position on [Torretta](#), the attack had been postponed again, for it was still raining and the [Sangro](#) was swollen far above normal. It seemed as if this show was never going to come to anything. So the squadron had to contain its impatience and wait to see what the next day or two would bring.

Despite its drawbacks, front-line life on [Torretta](#) was not unpleasant on the whole. It was pretty free and easy, as front lines are when the fighting is slack. Apart from digging out the bogged tanks (which the boys succeeded in doing with no outside help) there was little to do except pickets. On the second morning a convoy of scout cars came up with a cargo of stores, and the limited supply of ammunition was more than doubled when some 22 (Motor) Battalion carriers brought up 3000 shells for the 75-millimetre guns. All this had to be lugged by hand up the slushy tracks from the foot of the hill, but it was worth the effort once the stuff was up there.

The food arrangements were the worst part. Major Dickinson comments:

We were ... irritated by failure on the Q side to envisage tank life whereby each crew of five cooked and fed itself. Although Sqn Q did its best, tanks always had the problem of apportioning bulk rations into tank lots. At this stage we seemed swamped with dehydrated food, it was the devil's own job to divide bags of potatoes, carrots, cabbage (like hay), and minced meat into a dozen equal quantities when there were no suitable small containers or measures. We still had the worst part ahead, and that was to cook the stuff, which nobody liked anyway.

The best you could do was to heave everything in together to make stew, which was tolerable mainly because there was little else, and for breakfast to crush up biscuits with condensed milk into a thick sweet porridge. Luckily the water famines of the desert were past—in fact there was all too much of it—and tea and sugar were plentiful, so that at almost any hour of the day you could be sure to find someone with a brew of tea on hand.

The boys at [Casalanguida](#) fared better, for they could have such things as fresh meat and vegetables and bread, which were now appearing on the menu occasionally, but which could not conveniently be carted up to A Squadron. In this respect, if in no other, [Italy](#) had it all over [Africa](#). Supply in the desert had always been a chancy business. Here, with not so far to go, with the [Luftwaffe](#) virtually out of the sky, and in a country that could grow things, the system was better organised and the food more varied. From [18 Regiment](#) it was only a short daily run back to [Gissi](#) for rations. The luscious fruit of the [Taranto](#) days had disappeared with the approach of winter, but the villages and farms could still provide unofficial supplies of tomatoes (hung from the rafters to dry) and apples (stored for the winter in big treetop baskets of woven branches). It seemed quite likely, too, that the Kiwis would still be around when next season's crop came on.

The dream of an armoured dash across [Italy](#) to [Rome](#) was now fading fast. Any chance there might have been of gatecrashing Jerry's line had been drowned in the icy [Sangro](#) water. Now, since the latest postponement, the only likely method was a full divisional attack with lots of weight, delivered as soon as the river dropped far enough. From 24 November the traffic past [18 Regiment's](#) roadside homes at [Casalanguida](#) and [Gissi](#) was much thicker than before, trucks sometimes nose to tail, as [5 Brigade](#) went up into the line beside [6 Brigade](#). The [18 Regiment](#) boys, watching this procession glumly, had some excuse for wondering what had been the point in training them and outfitting them with these great clumsy tanks that could not even move for mud. Here they were, very bored, very wet, the only part of the Division not in action, spending their time with picks and shovels mending the roads.

But on 25 November, after so many days of rain and disappointment, the sky cleared and the sun shone, with a fresh drying wind. It seemed too good to be true. And when the next two days passed without more rain, it looked as if the Kiwis' luck

was on the turn. By 27 November the river had dropped to a reasonable level, the mud had become slightly less sticky, and the attack over the [Sangro](#), so often postponed, was on at last. The main body of [18 Regiment](#) had no orders yet, but was waiting, all stocked up with food and 'ammo' and fuel, ready to advance when it got the word. For the last two days the boys had eyed with approval the almost non-stop bomber service pounding Jerry's positions; on the afternoon of the 27th the hills beyond the river were half blotted out by bomb smoke. This was [Crete](#) in reverse.

At 2.45 a.m. on 28 November, exactly a week late, five infantry battalions attacked up the hills north of the [Sangro](#), and at the same moment all the New Zealand artillery crashed into action, and the two-month-old wireless silence was at last lifted.

Even from many miles away, a full-scale artillery barrage inspires awe. At [Casalanguida](#) the regiment was close enough to get the full benefit of this one, the lightning display continuously flashing all over the sky, the drumbeat of the guns and the song of the departing shells so loud that sleep was out of the question. You could only watch and listen through the whole three and a half hours of it, and wonder how the poor devils up front were getting on.

The poor devils actually did very well, took nearly all their objectives with surprisingly light losses, built a bridge over the [Sangro](#), got a few of 19 Regiment's tanks and a good strong force of supporting arms across, and set about strengthening their toehold on the heights before pushing on. Now [18 Regiment's](#) turn was coming. At 5 p.m. on the 28th, after a day of scanty but encouraging news, the regiment was ordered up handy to the [Sangro](#) next morning, ready to cross during the day.

While the rest of the regiment waited impatiently at [Casalanguida](#), A Squadron had ringside seats for the show, had been almost deafened by the guns behind and below [Torretta](#), and at dawn had seen all there was to see in the valley, which was very little. A group of Shermans bogged in the marshy riverbed away to the right; almost straight ahead the Bailey bridge which had sprung up overnight, with jeeps and light trucks and anti-tank guns already crowding across it; an occasional shellburst here and there; but no sign of Jerry, which was a bitter disappointment to the squadron. The boys were longing for something to shoot at. One tank, under

Major [Stanford](#),⁴ had been detached to go over the river with 19 Regiment, 'swan' round and report targets back to A Squadron, but it bogged down like most of the 19th, and this promising avenue was closed.

But the squadron was not going to miss its shooting. By about 9 a.m. a few 19 Regiment tanks had arrived at the foot of the hills just opposite [Torretta](#) and were beginning to climb the slopes, and our infantry could occasionally be seen toiling uphill. So Major Dickinson, as disappointed as the rest, turned the guns on to targets—or what looked as if they ought to be targets—on the hills above the advancing Kiwis, partly to make his boys happy, partly for the benefit of a war correspondent who arrived up with camera just at that time. Under such unsatisfactory circumstances did A Squadron fire [18 Regiment's](#) first shots of the Italian campaign.

The shoot turned out a 'fizzer'. In such close, wet country it was very hard to see where the shots were landing; and A Squadron was evidently exceeding its orders, for Dickinson recalls: 'the CRA ... came on the air in a hurry to see if it was a counterattack or some good target we'd seen, and made us stop'. It was a very vexing day.

Next day started off sunny and clear, still with very little activity over the river except fighter-bombers wandering up and down. No more chance of any shooting. But the time was coming when the regiment would be going over the [Sangro](#) to follow up the attack, so the A Squadron crews set to work to get their tanks ready to go, pulled the bogged tanks on to firmer ground, and packed up their belongings, which naturally tended to get strewn round after a few days. At the same time the rest of [18 Regiment's](#) tanks were moving forward over the hills from [Casalanguida](#), down through [Atessa](#), to the foot of [Torretta](#), where they parked less than a mile from A Squadron. Nearly the whole regiment was in motion on 29 November, for B Echelon split up temporarily, part of it moving on to [Casalanguida](#) while the rest stayed in billets at [Gissi](#).

The next afternoon (30 November) tanks and scout cars moved on again. So far nothing half as heavy as a Sherman had crossed the [Sangro](#) by the Bailey bridge, and there were those who doubted whether the tanks would make it. But the engineers who had built the Bailey were confident and reassuring, and they were justified, for tank after tank rumbled over in safety. The second half of them crossed

in the dark, drivers straining their eyes to see the narrow road, commanders perched on the hulls in front to correct any veering off course. By midnight the whole regiment was lying up in fields and scattered buildings on the north bank, waiting for word to press on. Now that the hanging round was over everyone was in good spirits, and keen to 'get stuck into Jerry'.

Next day's orders, when they finally came through, were a bit of a let-down. True, the regiment was to push forward, plus a company of 'motorised infantry' of 22 Battalion, along Route 84, a good paved road leading northwards away from the [Sangro](#) and straight into Jerry's positions. But it was to be only a sideshow to draw Jerry's eyes and guns away from 5 and 6 Brigades, which would make the real main thrust across country towards [Castelfrentano](#), dominating the main ridge. The tanks were not to get mixed up in heavy fighting— Brigadier [Stewart](#), ⁵ [4 Brigade's](#) new commander, probably knew very well what [18 Regiment](#) was liable to do when he firmly cautioned its senior officers, 'I don't want any cavalry charges.'

The night was quiet, with no shellfire near, but next day dawned freezing cold, with hail showers sweeping across the valley, the sort of morning when blankets call temptingly. But there was no lying in bed for [18 Regiment](#). In the half light of dawn it was off, moving out on to the road, the atmosphere quite eerie in the blue haze of exhaust smoke, everyone's breath a white fog. First two scout cars, with Second-Lieutenant [Colin McGruther](#) ⁶ in charge, to look for mines on the road; then B Squadron, a troop at a time, in single file, 50 yards between tanks; then Regimental Headquarters; and C Squadron in the rear. A Squadron, which was not included in the advance meantime, watched rather enviously as the rest formed up and filed off.

Route 84 first climbed over a low saddle, then round the shoulder of a spur, where the 22 Battalion boys were waiting. Then on went the cavalcade, the tanks at not much more than a walking pace, the infantry riding on them, some 22 Battalion carriers with Vickers guns immediately behind B Squadron. It was after 8 a.m. now.

Less than an hour later, before C Squadron had even got under way properly, the first shells fell near B Squadron's leading tanks two and a half miles up the road.

At first the fire was not heavy enough to worry the tankies, and the column pushed on at much the same pace, though the infantry lost no time jumping off the

tanks and taking to the fields beside the road. Ahead lay a crossroads where a narrow road led off westwards, down a slope and steeply up the other side to the cramped little ridgetop village of [San Eusanio](#); New Zealand patrols had already reported Route 84 clear as far as there, but what lay beyond nobody knew.

Now things began to go wrong. The scout cars reported mines at the crossroads. Second-Lieutenant Bill [McHale](#)⁷ took the leading tank forward to cover the mine-clearing party, but his appearance over a small crest brought down a burst of fire from somewhere ahead, including some big anti-tank shells that came down the road like express trains. The tank turned off the road for shelter, but only a few minutes later a direct hit damaged the turret, wounded both McHale and McGruther, and [18 Regiment](#) had suffered its first battle casualties. This mishap held things up for a while, and nobody seemed very clear what to do next until Major Ferguson,⁸ coming up on foot to see what the trouble was, picked up the mines. There were not many of them—a row of big flat Teller mines, quite capable of laying out Sherman tanks, buried under the road metal, another clump down at the bottom of the gully on the [San Eusanio](#) road. With these out of the way the road was theoretically clear, but B Squadron's next attempt to get forward met with a storm of protest from the invisible enemy. The road from here climbed gently up the side of a spur to the top of the main ridge, two miles farther on; there was Jerry's main winter line, and he was plainly resenting these Kiwis trying to come in and take possession.

This finished the advance for the day. 'I tried to push on a bit,' says Major Ferguson, 'but there was an 88 mm. A/tk. gun firing down the road and we couldn't spot him although his shells knocked out one of my tanks and damaged another.... The enemy shelling was pretty intense and we just stayed put and banged away.' In this country of trees and bumpy hills Jerry held most of the cards. The leading troop of tanks, firing away all the time, got off the road as best it could, nosed its way in behind houses and carried on the duel. One by one the rest of B Squadron braved the fire and came up, until all its tanks were there, behind such scanty cover as they could get, belting away towards where Jerry ought to be. Darkness found both sides still at it, hammer and tongs.

While all this was going on, the rest of the regiment, farther back, had almost as unpleasant a time, for Jerry, thoroughly roused, plastered the whole length of Route 84 at intervals. Early in the afternoon disaster struck Regimental Headquarters,

some 600 yards behind the [San Eusanio](#) crossroads, for Captain [Thorley](#),⁹ the adjutant, was killed, and a little later Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants was slightly wounded. C Squadron spent some hours sitting on the road, its tanks nose to tail, behind the shelter of low ridges, until called forward to the crossroads in the afternoon to back up B Squadron.

There was not much daylight left when C Squadron arrived, and there was little that it could do, but its tanks spread out in an olive grove just on the left of the crossroads, and opened fire somewhat at random, in the same general direction as B Squadron. Then shells began to come back, and just about dusk the squadron was swept by a savage bombardment which shredded the olive trees and sent shrapnel splashing on the tanks. This 'stonk' seemed too accurate to be mere chance; from nowhere grew the rumour that Jerry had an observation post with a radio not far away, and dark glances were cast at the gaunt houses of [San Eusanio](#), gazing at the crossroads from only 1000 yards away. A patrol from 22 Battalion had gone into [San Eusanio](#) earlier, covered by some of B Squadron's guns, had reported it clear and was now in possession, but nobody in C Squadron knew anything about that.

The first day in action could not be called a sparkling success, yet [18 Regiment](#) could boast of having carried out its orders, kept Jerry busy and drawn his fire away from the infantry, who could be seen in the afternoon advancing steadily up the shaggy gullies on the right towards Castelfrentano, apparently with little argument. The tankies' good wishes went with them, for if Jerry was pushed out of that dominating position, the resolute gunners in front of [18 Regiment](#) would probably have to clear out too. The cost of the [18th's](#) help had been one killed and six wounded, one B Squadron tank knocked out and three damaged, one of C Squadron's disabled by a ricochet. Not as bad as it might have been, though heavy enough for one day.

Night brought only a little relief. B Squadron formed the best laager it could, tanks fairly well protected and their crews sleeping in houses. As soon as it was dark 2 and 3 Companies of 22 (Motor) Battalion moved up and placed themselves astride the road in front of the tanks, a very comforting buffer in case Jerry got any nasty ideas about counter-attacks. The shelling went on at intervals all night, several houses took direct hits, and nobody had very much rest. The New Zealand artillery

was firing vigorously from back behind the [Sangro](#), but [18 Regiment](#) closed down for the night, as there seemed no point in any more blind shooting. Replenishment parties came up with tank fuel and ammunition, everyone managed to scratch up some sort of a meal, and in every house innumerable cups of tea were brewed. Back at Regimental Headquarters Major Green came up from B Echelon and took command.

Then 2 December dawned with everything quiet ahead. This was much better. There were no fresh orders from 4 Brigade, but Major Green directed B Squadron ahead up the spur to the main ridge, from which Jerry, unless he was playing possum, seemed to have gone. At 7.30 a.m., after a quick bite of breakfast, the tanks began to move out to the road, now a much more friendly place with no shells sizzling down it. The 22 Battalion companies were already on the move in the chilly morning light; the tanks, still wary and suspicious, moved on one at a time in short hops from house to house, covering one another and keeping an eye on the infantry. But they need not have worried, for Jerry was really gone. By 10 a.m. the leading infantry was on the ridge. B Squadron seemed doomed to frustration, for only 250 yards short of the top, at a spot where the tanks could not bypass it, Jerry had dug a deep wide ditch across the road, with Teller mines and barbed wire in front. Infantry parties set to work furiously with shovels filling in the ditch to one side of the road; Major Ferguson, who had been up in front directing his tanks' advance, removed the mines, which had been laid in a hurry and not very cunningly. Now the tanks could inch their way over the obstacle, but they were in no hurry to do it, for just past there the road topped the ridge and went over on to the northern slope, exposed to Jerry's shells. It seemed much more healthy to stay behind the ditch in the meantime. The tankies took the opportunity to brew up tea at leisure, to wander round a little and admire Jerry's defences, the deep dugouts with every comfort (even electric light), the well-sited camouflaged trenches, obviously representing weeks of work.

They were not to be left in peace here for very long. That morning, 2 December, all the Division from [Lieutenant-General Freyberg](#) down was jubilant and optimistic. The main German winter line on the [Castelfrentano](#) ridge had been burst wide open. Jerry had bolted with scarcely a fight, and seemed unlikely to stop again for a while. So the Division was urged on, with all speed, [6 Brigade](#) from [Castelfrentano](#) and [4](#)

Brigade from Route 84, westwards towards the hills, to the next group of ridge-top towns, Orsogna and Guardiagrele, the keys to the next roads north. Fourth Brigade's next stops were Guardiagrele (six miles away in a straight line, nine by road) and San Martino, two miles north of it.

Here was a rare chance for a two-pronged drive. Just over the crest from B Squadron the road forked, Route 84 turning east to Castelfrentano, a narrower road west to Guardiagrele and San Martino. The San Eusanio road also led that way, separated from the first by an impossible gorge, but curling round and joining it after four or five miles. All right, said Brigadier Stewart, we'll go both ways. Twenty-second Battalion on the northern road, with B Squadron, 18 Regiment, attached; on the San Eusanio road 18 Regiment, with 1 Motor Company of 22 Battalion attached. 'Both parties,' concluded the order, 'to push on day and night'.

The B Squadron boys spent some hours in happy ignorance that these rush orders were on the way. It was 4 p.m. when the orders arrived, delivered direct by General Freyberg, who came dashing up the road in a jeep to see how things were going. By 4.30 p.m. the force was on its way, 2 Motor Company going first on foot on both sides of the road, then B Squadron, moving through the olive groves where possible. Much to everyone's relief, Jerry had stopped his shelling, and the show started off very quietly. The tanks on their way along put a few shells for luck into every house they came to, but there was no opposition anywhere.

Only a mile along the road Lieutenant Hawkins, leading his troop up a sunken track that cut off a big double bend in the road, had the first of the night's adventures. Major Ferguson tells the story:

Cliff Hawkins... found a huge shell or bomb crater blocking his further progress so he stopped.... Then suddenly a Jerry appeared out of a dugout... and wanted to surrender. Cliff couldn't switch his gun on to him because of the sunken road so he very diffidently fished out his pistol and pointed it at the Jerry. The Jerry spoke English and asked if he could return to his dugout to get his blankets. Cliff said 'Yes' so the Jerry disappeared again but reappeared followed by 14 other Jerries also carrying their blankets etc.

This, 18 Regiment's first close-range encounter, was a nice instance of the power

that is yours when you have a tank. Not only does Jerry surrender to you, but you can even afford to be magnanimous about it. In the old infantry days you dared not let a prisoner go back to a dugout for blankets—that would have been inviting trouble.

Dusk was falling now, and soon it was so dark that the tanks had to take to the road, close up nose to tail and feel their way along, in some danger of taking a 'header' down the hill that dropped away steeply to the north. This was no sort of work for tanks, but 'day and night' were the orders, so they floundered on, well behind the infantry now, till a report came back from up front that there was a big demolition blocking the road.

From now on the story of B Squadron turns into the personal adventures of Major Ferguson, who went ahead on foot with the infantry, exploring for routes for the tanks and calling them forward when possible. The tankies sat and froze, cursing the tanks they had been so proud of, not knowing what was going on ahead but blackguarding their luck in missing the fun, with no idea that they were the important part of a spearhead that was penetrating Jerry's flank and causing him widespread panic. They only knew they were cold and bored, and could not even light a primus to make a cup of tea.

But to the people up forward it was clear that Jerry was not expecting visitors so soon. After finding a steep, narrow track, barely possible for tanks, that got B Squadron round the crater, Ferguson hurried ahead in time to hear another crater blown just in front of him and then to see, a little farther on, a Jerry tank blown up on the road, its ammunition going off in all directions. With an old civilian as guide, the tanks were laboriously brought past these two obstacles by a stony lane winding in and out among the houses of a straggling little village; then Ferguson again went on and was present at an important moment when the leading infantry pounced unexpectedly on a young German officer and his two companions.

Up to now Jerry had been having a really bad time. Quite by accident 4 Armoured Brigade's thrust up Route 84 had found the boundary between his [26 Panzer Division](#) on the west and [65 Division](#) on the east, at a time when these two divisions were badly out of step, neither of them knowing just where the other was. The Panzer Division's main line lay along the [Castelfrentano- Guardiagrele](#) road,

facing south, so the westward advance along this road by B Squadron and 22 Battalion threatened to outflank it entirely, and forced 26 Panzer Division to retire hurriedly to its next line, not built for winter comfort, but naturally very strong, along a commanding ridge from [Guardiagrele](#) to [Orsogna](#). This withdrawal was carried out almost under 22 Battalion's nose. The tank in the village street was blown up by its crew because it was damaged and could not get away fast enough. And the young officer, captured while directing the withdrawal of his last rearguards, was [26 Panzer Division's](#) 'most capable and bravest' battalion commander. For those few hours between sunset and midnight Jerry was truly unhappy.

But with this final kick the New Zealand luck ran right out. A little farther on, just past the saddle where the [San Eusanio](#) road came out, in a little wood of stunted oaks that straggled over a round hill, 22 Battalion met the first outpost of the [Guardiagrele- Orsogna](#) line, a determined little force which evidently planned to stay where it was for a while. Ahead of the tanks a regular duel flared up, Brens and Spandaus rattling, the occasional thud of a grenade. Then a sudden roar as another demolition went up, a beauty this time, 40 feet of road cascading down the hillside, and no way past for the tanks without crashing into 22 Battalion's party on the hill. There was nothing to be gained by trying to go on. Luckily there were plenty of casas round, for the straggling hamlet ([Salarola](#) by name, though very few ever got round to calling it anything but 'the village') extended nearly to the junction with the [San Eusanio](#) road, and was still comparatively whole. Here the tired tankies dossed down, ready to go on again at short notice if Jerry pulled out, but praying that they would have time for a few hours' sleep first. Back on the road behind them a party of engineers with bulldozers was already busy filling in the two craters.

All this time C Squadron and Regimental Headquarters had been inching forward along the [San Eusanio](#) road. Before dawn on 2 December C Squadron was on the road again, down into the gully and up the other side through [San Eusanio](#), where, says Trooper Roy [Hancox](#),¹⁰ 'the Ities nearly went mad they were so pleased to see us. They were in the streets with wine bottles to give us a drink if we stopped We had crowds round us with wine & calling us comrades.'

Before midday 1 Motor Company and some scout cars belonging to Divisional Cavalry advanced west from San Eusanio. As soon as the 'day and night' order arrived Major Parkinson¹¹ of C Squadron went forward¹¹ to study the road and see

how far his tanks could get, and then at 3.30 p.m. the whole squadron moved on up the ridge, finding to its dismay that the road soon degenerated into a rutted cart track, steep and slippery in places, snaking along the ridge with some sharp drops on either side. The country ahead looked all up and down, most of it covered with thick trees, with [Guardiagrele](#) straight in front glowering from the head of a great ravine. The Div Cav boys had reported trouble ahead, shellfire from the west, signs of Jerry to the north; but the tanks had no trouble for four miles, till they reached the grubby village of [Bianco](#) standing astride the road on top of the ridge. They could not see what Div Cav was so excited about. One or two fast shells came in from [Salarola](#) across the gully to the north, but they did not amount to much. The squadron had a brief shoot in return and demolished some houses in [Salarola](#), and then night fell and C Squadron stayed where it was for the time being, while 22 Battalion patrols went on to cover the remaining two miles to the intersection with B Squadron's road. Major Green was up with the infantry, often indeed ahead of them, for Brigadier Stewart had again urged haste, adding that the tank column first past the junction of the two roads would have priority. The track past [Bianco](#) would be a tricky undertaking in the dark, but if it was clear the tanks would have to push on and take their chance.

It was not clear. A mile from [Bianco](#), just where the track began to curve round the steep head of the gorge, Jerry had dug a ditch across it, not a very big one, but shrewdly placed where no tank could possibly wriggle round it. So while C Squadron waited at [Bianco](#) a bridging tank was urgently summoned from [4 Brigade](#) Headquarters, came groping ponderously up the track, and before long had a folding bridge ('scissors' bridge in army lingo) across the ditch, a rough shaky bridge certainly, but enough for the tanks to get over. At 2 a.m. the tankies were roused from their rest and set off again, as B Squadron had done earlier in the night, tanks nose to tail, crawling along the track at a walking pace. Very few of the men, as they crossed the bridge over the ditch, realised what it was or how it had got there.

Soon after 3 a.m. the head of the column reached [Salarola](#) and stopped again, the leading tank just short of the road junction. The fighting on the hill above had died down by now. Major Green found Major Ferguson, heard B Squadron's story, and decided that till daylight C Squadron's column would stay where it was, parked on the side of the track in the lee of the hill. Then, if the advance was to continue, B

Squadron would have the honour. Once more the weary men in the C Squadron tanks lay down to finish off their broken sleep.

At daybreak all was quiet ahead. Twenty-second Battalion's patrols came back with the good news that Jerry had gone from the hill, obviously in a hurry, judging by the masses of gear scattered round among the trees. It looked like the previous morning all over again. As soon as it was light B Squadron's tanks spread out back down the road from [Salarola](#) ready to carry on the advance, while the senior officers walked forward over the hill to see what they had to tackle next.

A mile ahead of the [Salarola](#) junction the road ran across another narrow saddle, with gullies dropping away on both sides, and then divided again, one branch running north-east along the high ridge to [Orsogna](#), the other disappearing in a tangle of hills towards [Guardiagrele](#). Just in front of this road fork was a tiny village, hardly worth the name, just a railway station and a handful of houses, called [Melone](#) according to the map. This humble little settlement, it was plain, had a tactical value out of all proportion to its size, for the [Orsogna](#) road looked down on the New Zealand positions, with [Orsogna](#) itself horribly prominent away to the right. Obviously a footing on the [Orsogna](#) ridge would mean a lot to 2 NZ Division. The force at [Salarola](#) was in a position to make a quick attack and unlock the door to the ridge, but [Melone](#) looked an awkward place to get at. You could approach it only by the narrow saddle, two hundred yards across at the most; and just behind the village, dominating the vital road fork, rose a vertical bluff with trees all over it, a perfect place for defence.

The reconnaissance party walked almost to [Melone](#) without provoking any sign of life, so it looked as if Jerry might not be there after all. Back at [Salarola](#) an attack was hurriedly organised, 2 and 3 Motor Companies to make for the road fork (which now bore the code-name of waiouru), B Squadron to go over the hill, dodging the big demolition on the road, and support the infantry from as far forward as possible. For a little while everybody had to rush round at top speed to get ready, and soon after 8 a.m. the show was under way.

Jerry was at home all right, and was not welcoming callers. When the tanks poked their noses over the hill and began to move down a track towards [Melone](#) everything broke loose at once, shells and mortars, Spandaus and rifles from the

bluff above

waiouru.

The leading platoon of 3 Motor Company, which was inside [Melone](#) and well on its way to

waiouru

when the shooting began, had to dive for shelter into the nearest houses. No. 2 Motor Company, farther back with the tanks, got the full benefit of the shelling, had a number of casualties in a very short time, and took what cover it could find on the inhospitable hillside. The tanks were strung out all the way down



Reunion dinner, Cairo, 1943

Reunion dinner, [Cairo](#), 1943

the hill as far as the entrance to [Melone](#), where the leaders found their track blocked by mines and had to stop. Clearing the mines under the eyes of those sharpshooters on the bluff would have been impossible. In any case it would have been lunacy for the tanks to go on without the infantry.

Here matters rested for a little while. Major Ferguson went forward to [Melone](#) and discussed the situation with 22 Battalion's company commander, but there was clearly no future in waiouru, so he took it on himself to call the attack off. The infantry was pinned down and had lost too many men, the fire was not slackening off at all, it was obviously useless to carry on. The tanks began to pull back to the top of the hill to look for better firing positions, and also to draw Jerry's shellfire so that the

infantry might have a better chance of getting out of its nasty position.

Fording the Biferno River



Fording the Biferno River



A Squadron tanks on Torretta, with the Sangro valley beyond

A Squadron tanks on Torretta, with the Sangro valley beyond

18 Regiment moves up towards the Sangro



18 Regiment moves up towards the Sangro

On the Orsogna-Ortona road—the German tanks that didn't get away, 16 December 1943



On the Orsogna- Ortona road—the German tanks that didn't get away, 16 December 1943

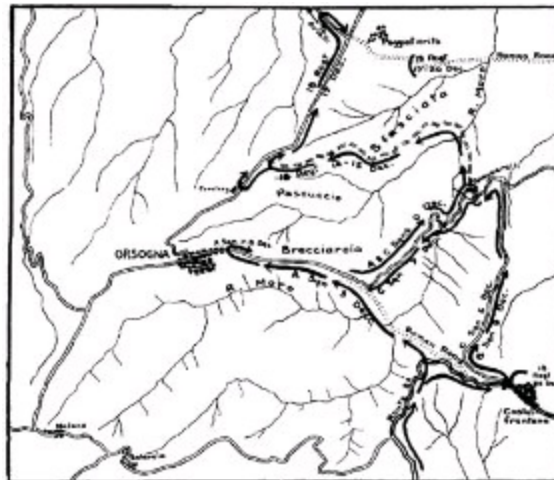


New Year's Day at Castelfrentano

New Year's Day at Castelfrentano



The last of the 'originals' go home on furlough



MOVES OF 18 REGT AT ORSOGNA, 3-20 DEC. 1943

Moves of 18 Regt at Orsogna, 3-20 Dec. 1943

This move worked fairly well. Most of the shells moved uphill after the tanks, which stopped at the crest and blazed away at the bluff while the infantry withdrew. Four tanks were hit and disabled before they could get behind any sort of cover; the mobile ones went over hull down behind the hilltop and carried on the war from there. They hammered [Melone](#) and [waiouru](#), they shot up whatever they could see on the [Orsogna](#) road.

Farther back at [Salarola](#), also, Jerry was flinging shells about recklessly. Late that morning one fateful shell hit a tree above Major Green's tank, showered it with shrapnel, and mortally wounded him. When Hugh Green died even the hardest old desert campaigner, used to sudden death and apt to pass it off with a shrug, felt it a

personal tragedy. Dapper, debonair, amiable, on friendly terms with everybody in the 18th, he could truly be called a regimental institution. 'A marvellous chap' is one man's tribute. 'Loved by all, both officers and men,' says another. He was a solid leader, completely dependable, never ruffled, and his infectious courage made you follow wherever he went.

Now Major Ferguson, back from his fruitless dash to [Melone](#), took command of the regiment, and a little later ordered C Squadron back to [Bianco](#), away from the congested [Salarola](#) junction, where it could not do much good and was only risking casualties for nothing. Jerry's reaction to the morning's attack had been much fiercer than anything he had turned on previously, and it looked as if the New Zealand walk-through might be over. The urgent need at [Salarola](#) was not more tanks, but more infantry, for 22 Battalion was down to a mere handful of men, and a tank attack on waiouru was clearly out of the question. So while B Squadron's tanks kept up their fight from the hill, C Squadron moved slowly back the way it had come through a storm of German shells. Three-quarters of a mile back, where a few roadside houses offered some shelter and living space, the tanks stopped, took up firing positions, and spent the rest of the day slamming shells into [Melone](#), which was in plain view across a gully. Jerry did not stop his shellfire until the evening, but C Squadron, pretty well protected by the stout stone houses, could—for a little while anyway—thumb its nose at Jerry's shells.

That evening the [Salarola](#) position was reorganised in a slightly more permanent fashion. Regimental Headquarters moved from its raw, damp hillside to the greater comfort and safety of the village. All the B Squadron tanks that would still run went back there too, to the envy of the crews of the disabled tanks, who had to stay, much against their will, on the cold hilltop with their steeds. After dark trucks from A Echelon came up with fuel, ammunition and food, and never were trucks more welcome. According to the rules, the tanks were to be replenished nightly with fuel and ammunition, but the previous night there had been no chance; now, however, the engineers with their wonderful bulldozers had filled one crater and made a deviation round the second, so that trucks had a reasonable road up to [Salarola](#).

But the waiouru problem was still there, and the chances did not look bright. A 22 Battalion patrol that night found Jerry still in [Melone](#) and very alert. So no regular

attack was ordered for 4 December, only an artillery bombardment at dawn, followed by another patrol to go in under the guns of B Squadron and test the opposition in daylight. What was to happen after that? Well, it depended on the patrol, but everybody was to be ready to 'get cracking' at short notice if Jerry packed up.

This was a most unsuccessful, disorganised excursion. The infantry patrol, as soon as it showed itself in the open, was driven to the ground by machine guns and mortars from the bluff, and B Squadron (with Captain K. L. Brown now in command) had to move fast over the hill to help. Captain Brown says:

There was no time for recce, just quickly gather all the running tanks—I think about 5 or 6—went flat out across the hill, down the other side not more than about fifty yards where I found about 25 22 Bn. fellows lying... in an open paddock being very badly machine gunned and mortared. I drove through the infantry with the tanks, and literally stayed in front of the infantry lifting the fire off them, and allowing the infantry to get out. I would say most of our tanks were hit by mortar fire.... It was most unpleasant. Once the infantry were clear, about 20 minutes, we withdrew back out to our safe side of the hill.

The mortar bombs chased the infantry all the way home, and B Squadron's hill was plastered periodically all day, even after the tanks had moved back over the crest. The tankies had a wretched day, aggravated by pouring rain which made the hill disgustingly greasy. One tank went over a bank and stuck there; the rest made their way back to [Salarola](#) with great difficulty in the evening. To the tankies, soaked and shivering, the warm [Salarola](#) houses, with fires going and perhaps a bit of wine that someone had found somewhere, were wonderful, even though shells kept crashing round most of the night. The solid stone houses were proof against any but the heaviest shells.

C Squadron took no part in the war that day. Away back on the [Bianco](#) road it was really too far away to give any effective help, and as it was getting shelled to no purpose, it was ordered farther back to a quieter place where it could maintain its tanks, keep them ready and in fighting trim. That evening it went two miles back to new billets in a tiny village called [Ciommi](#), nicely situated on the safe side of a bulky hill, a very pleasant spot if the weather had not been so foul.

Even back here tragedy was ready to pounce. During the day Major Parkinson set out in a scout car for the RAP to have a slight wound attended to. Some hours later, not far back down the greasy road, his body was found under the overturned car. This was another bad blow—within twenty-four hours the 18th had lost two senior officers it could ill afford, both original 18 Battalion officers, both first-rate fighting men. 'Joe' Parkinson, who had in Greece and Crete earned a fine reputation as a subaltern, was a very different type from Hugh Green—quick, brilliant, lithe, active and restless, perpetually young in spirit, even somewhat frivolous perhaps. More than almost anyone else in the 18th, you just could not imagine him dead.

And so to 5 December and another attempt on waiouru. This time a night patrol from 22 Battalion went into Melone and saw no sign of Jerry, so a tentative attack was laid on—two platoons of 22 Battalion to feel for Melone early in the morning; the rest of the battalion to come forward little by little if things went well; B Squadron again to give support from the crest of its hill.

At 7.20 a.m. the tanks were ploughing their way uphill for the third day running. The rain had cleared overnight, but had left a legacy of deep mud into which the tank tracks gouged deep ruts as they lurched up the track. The war diary describes their day in the briefest, baldest terms:

B Sqn stayed on top of the feature in spite of heavy shell and mortar fire until most of their ammunition was expended and then retired again behind the crest.

The hill was beginning to look like a Flanders battlefield by this time, the mud churned up by shells, trees splintered and bare. In such conditions it was fatally easy for tanks to bog down or slip over banks. That evening B Squadron could muster only four on the return trip to Salarola. Littering the hill, with tracks off or with shell damage or stuck in the mud at drunken angles, were no fewer than seven.

All for nothing, too. Jerry was still clinging to waiouru with tooth and claw. The platoons who led the attack on 5 December came under fire as heavy as before, had to pull back as best they could, and the show petered out before it was well under way.

That was the inglorious end of the great dash for Guardiagrele. After pushing

down houses of straw for two days on its way up from the [Sangro](#), [4 Brigade](#) had run against a brick wall and hurt its head. Twenty-second Battalion had lost heavily. Eighteenth Regiment, in spite of ten casualties on 5 December (mostly from one salvo of shells that landed fair in the middle of [Salarola](#)), had not lost many men, but its few days of fighting had reduced its 'runner' tanks from 37 to 26.

Next day, 6 December, a squadron of 20 Armoured Regiment, fresh into action for the first time, came up to the [Salarola](#) road and took over from B Squadron, which thankfully relinquished its place and moved back, with its four gallant tanks, to rest and refit near the [San Eusanio](#) crossroads, the scene of its first fight. The seven disabled tanks perforce stayed on the hill facing [Melone](#) until further notice, crews and all, with Lieutenant Brian [Rawson](#) ¹² in command.

These tanks were there for a whole month, a long-drawn-out month of rain and cold and boredom, their guns manned continuously in case Jerry got up to any tricks. The headquarters of this 'bogged tank guard' was in the ruins of a half-demolished casa. The tank crews scooped the ground out under the tanks, piled it high round them, and made dugouts to live in, cook in, and protect themselves from Jerry and the weather. During the day they had the hill to themselves, nobody caring to come and visit such a sticky spot, for Jerry, according to Lieutenant Rawson, 'had the area pretty well taped and it was pretty obvious his O.P. was in our rear and was able to keep his evil eye on us most of the time. The shelling was pretty vicious at times.' Picketing the tanks at night was a jumpy, nerve-wearing job, as patrols from [Melone](#) were apt to drop in, uninvited and unwelcome. To help deal with them the men took pains to lay out a defensive system, festooning the trees with burglar alarms made of empty tins strung on wires, taking the 'lap' machine guns out of their places low down in the hulls of the tanks and mounting them on the ground near by. There were even occasions when the German patrols got so close that hand grenades were used to persuade them to go away.

The first tank crews left on the hill were relieved by others on 18 December, and the second batch was there all through a wet Christmas and a snowy New Year. Their only contact with [18 Regiment](#) was by supply jeep at night. They fed quite well, as [Salarola](#) could supply the occasional fowl to supplement the rations; but the real luxuries of life were few, and acquired only by great efforts, as when [Sergeant Charlie Zimmerman](#) ¹³ and Corporal Jack [Clough](#), ¹⁴ egged on by sounds of alcoholic

song from Jerry's lines, ventured into [Melone](#) in broad daylight and returned with a cargo of 'plonk'. But for the most part they went without.

The saga of [18 Regiment](#) at [Guardiagrele](#) finishes here. In the first few days of 1944 the unit's recovery section helped to dig the tanks out of the mire and snow, fixed up their tracks, got the engines going again, and successfully extricated six of them, dragging them out with a winch and a long steel cable. When the regiment left the [Sangro](#) valley the seventh tank had to be left behind, a permanent memorial to a gallant, useless struggle.

¹ [Maj A. H. Dickinson](#), ED; [Tauranga](#); born [Auckland](#), 4 Jan 1917; civil servant; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

² [Maj-Gen Sir Stephen Weir](#), KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO [6 Fd Regt](#) Sep 1939-Dec 1941; [CRA 2 NZ Div](#) Dec 1941-Jun 1944; [GOC 2 NZ Div](#) 4 Sep-17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944-Sep 1946; Commander, Southern Military District, 1948-49; QMG, Army HQ, 1951-55; Chief of General Staff 1955-60; Military Adviser to NZ Govt Sep 1960-.

³ Lt T. J. Cullinane; born NZ 18 May 1908; grocer; killed in action 31 May 1944.

⁴ [Maj R. J. Stanford](#); [England](#); born [Palmerston North](#), 10 Jul 1917; writer.

⁵ [Maj-Gen Sir Keith Stewart](#), KBE, CB, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); [Kerikeri](#); born [Timaru](#), 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; [1 NZEF](#) 1917-19; [GSO 1 NZ Div](#) 1940-41; Deputy Chief of General Staff Dec 1941-Jul 1943; comd [5 Bde](#) Aug-Nov 1943, [4 Armd Bde](#) Nov 1943-Mar 1944, [5 Bde](#) Mar-Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944; comd [9 Bde](#) ([2 NZEF, Japan](#)) Nov 1945-Jul 1946; Chief of General Staff 1949-52.

⁶ [Capt C. O. McGruther](#); [Te Awamutu](#); born NZ 25 Mar 1918; farm labourer; twice wounded.

⁷ [Lt W. H. McHale](#); [Rotorua](#); born NZ 2 Feb 1918; real-estate agent;

wounded 1 Dec 1943.

⁸ Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson, DSO, MC, ED; Auckland; born Auckland, 27 Apr 1912; warehouseman; OC 7 Fd Coy May 1941; CO 18 Armd Regt Dec 1943-Jan 1944; 20 Regt Jan-May 1944; 18 Regt Jul 1944-Feb 1945; wounded 6 Dec 1943.

⁹ Capt P. A. Thorley; born NZ 19 Mar 1919; school-teacher; killed in action 1 Dec 1943.

¹⁰ Tpr E. R. Hancox; Auckland; born Auckland, 12 Jun 1920; P & T employee.

¹¹ Maj R. G. Parkinson; born Opotiki, 20 Aug 1913; general carrier; killed in action 4 Dec 1943.

¹² Lt B. C. D. Rawson; Christchurch; born Temuka, 26 Nov 1908; bank officer; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

¹³ Sgt C. L. Zimmerman, MM; born Nelson, 21 Dec 1917; farmer; killed in action 18 Dec 1944.

¹⁴ Capt J. C. Clough, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born Frankton, 11 Nov 1913; engineer; wounded 21 Oct 1944.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 27 – THE BRICK WALL—ORSOGNA

CHAPTER 27

The Brick Wall— Orsogna

While the rest of 18 Regiment was toiling in front of [Guardiagrele](#), A Squadron was still away back by the [Sangro](#). About lunchtime on 2 December word came back that it was now under 6 Brigade's command. It was very galling to have the regiment split up again—everyone was keen for it to shine in its own light, not in the reflected light of other units. In these early days there was fierce resentment of any suggestion that their beloved Shermans might become mere mobile artillery for the infantry brigades.

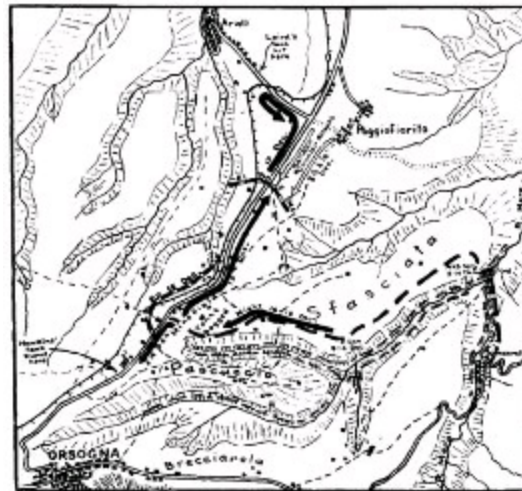
A Squadron was not called forward on 2 December; but at 7 a.m. on the 3rd, before most of the boys were out of bed, a sudden rush order came flying back that roused them into full wakefulness and sent them scurrying round to warm up the tanks, throw their gear on board and get going up Route 84, past [Castelfrentano](#) to 6 Brigade's forward position at [Orsogna](#). This [Orsogna](#) was nothing more than a name to them yet, and very few could have spelt it right, though they had vaguely heard of it as 'somewhere ahead there'. They had not yet come to loathe the very sound of the name.

On 2 December, after walking into [Castelfrentano](#) without a fight, 6 Brigade had set out across country for [Orsogna](#), moving roughly parallel to 4 Brigade's push on [Guardiagrele](#). For the Division [Orsogna](#) was a key point, standing square and solid on the skyline right in the middle of the New Zealand front, dominating its long high ridge and looking far out over the country north and south. At first 6 Brigade seemed likely to have no trouble there, for by the evening (while 18 Regiment was launching its thrust up the two roads to [Salarola](#)) 25 Battalion's leading troops, moving up a long narrow spur called Brecciarola, were right at [Orsogna](#)'s eastern gate, and all was quiet ahead. At dawn next day 25 Battalion was to enter [Orsogna](#) and take possession; after that the tanks would come into the picture, move through and lead the gallop northwards. This was the optimistic plan on the evening of 2 December.

But next morning saw this plan come thoroughly unstuck. Jerry, recovering from his disorganisation, had hardened up his defences in the night, had brought into [Orsogna](#) every man and every gun that he could rush up, with the result that 25

Battalion's leading company, walking jauntily into the town at dawn, fell into a trap. Disaster struck before anyone could stop it.

As soon as word of 25 Battalion's plight got back to 6 Brigade Headquarters the panic call for tanks went out; but getting the Shermans to the right place was a matter of hours, not minutes. They were right at the other end of the New



18 REGT ON THE ORSOGNA ROAD, DECEMBER 1943

18 Regt on the Orsogna Road, December 1943

Zealand sector, eight miles away in a straight line—by the twisty [Sangro](#) roads a good twelve miles, including a 'short cut' across the [Moro River](#) and up to Brecciarola by a muddy track that followed one of the Romans' splendid old roads but was now barely distinguishable. It did not look a feasible place for tanks at all. Two troops of A Squadron, under Lieutenants Ray [Maskew](#)¹ and Tim Cullinane, led the race, but with the best speed they could muster it was 11 a.m. before they reached Brecciarola, and by this time most of 25 Battalion's attackers were on their way to prison camps, the survivors had trickled back as best they could, Brecciarola was being shelled to tatters, and two German tanks were even sallying out from [Orsogna](#) towards [6 Brigade](#). The appearance of the Shermans redoubled the shelling, but they came forward to within half a mile of the entrance to [Orsogna](#), spread out among the olive trees, and a slogging match began that lasted till evening, Jerry pounding away at the tanks, the tanks shooting up buildings in [Orsogna](#) and any vehicles they saw beyond the town. This was A Squadron's real baptism of fire (the [Torretta](#) job hardly counted) and they stuck to their guns through a very difficult day, holding Jerry in check at [Orsogna](#) and disabling one of his tanks on the ridge road. The

German tanks on Brecciarola had vanished at sight of the first Shermans.

The rest of A Squadron, following after the first two troops at a slower pace, ran into bad trouble on the Roman road; it was savagely shelled from the time it left [Castelfrentano](#), three tanks stuck in the mud on the way, and only two got up to Brecciarola. They went into position among the trees a little way behind the first two troops, and for the rest of the day joined in the duel, slamming shells into [Orsogna](#) while in return Jerry's shells stirred up the mud round them.

At dusk five of the foremost tanks (the sixth had shed its tracks and had to be left behind) pulled back a bit, as they had spent the day right out in front of the infantry and would have been sitting ducks there at night. After the morning's exertions the fun and games seemed to have died down, and [6 Brigade](#) now had some infantry ahead of the tanks. The crews spent an uncomfortable night in their tanks, ready to go into action again if necessary, but apart from an occasional shell or two, nothing happened. A few jeeps and carriers loaded with fuel and ammunition groped their way up from [Castelfrentano](#).

So matters stood for two days, [6 Brigade](#) sending out occasional patrols to see whether Jerry was still there, A Squadron sitting quietly, not shooting or advertising itself at all, everyone wondering what was going to happen next. There was one stroke of bad luck when Lieutenant Maskew's crew was caught by a shellburst which killed Trooper 'Slim' Somerville ² and wounded Maskew and two others. On the evening of 5 December the squadron, except for Cullinane's troop, pulled back several hundred yards, as there did not seem much point in leaving all the tanks out in such an exposed place while the war was slack. The men parked very comfortably in a group of farmhouses sheltered from [Orsogna](#) by a shoulder of ground, where they could keep their tanks up to scratch, refuel and replenish supplies in comparative peace, ready for their next call.

That same day, 5 December, C Squadron (with Captain [Deans](#) ³ now in command) had been summoned across from its snug billets at [Ciommi](#) to come under [5 Brigade](#)'s command facing [Orsogna](#), on [6 Brigade](#)'s right. In contrast to A Squadron's daylight rush, this was a security move, done in the dark with no lights. C Squadron left at dusk with eleven tanks, and about 8 p.m. reached its destination with ten, the other having broken down on the way. The squadron came to quite a

good area, a mile ahead of [Castelfrentano](#), hidden from Jerry by a hilltop, nicely wooded and well equipped with houses. Tanks were run close to the walls and carefully camouflaged, blankets tossed on to the floor of the downstairs rooms, and C Squadron was all set. Hard on its heels Regimental Headquarters moved over to new billets near [Castelfrentano](#), and the whole fighting part of [18 Regiment](#) had now shifted across, except B Squadron, which was licking its wounds at [San Eusanio](#).

This switch signalled a big change in [2 NZ Division's](#) tactics. In the [Eighth Army's](#) overall plan the Kiwis were still to press Jerry hard and drive him back northwards; but the attack past [Guardiagrele](#), after three failures, was now being abandoned as hopeless, and the Division's full weight was to come on [Orsogna](#). Another full-scale divisional attack was in the air, [6 Brigade](#) along Brecciarola to [Orsogna](#), [5 Brigade](#) up the next spur (Pascuccio by name) to the [Orsogna](#) ridge, both with strong support from artillery and tanks.

The support for [5 Brigade](#) posed a nasty problem. Between C Squadron and the front line was the [Moro River](#), only a dirty little creek, but with steep soft hillsides leading down to vertical banks on both sides. The old Roman road, after being carved up by A Squadron, was now unusable. Farther down the [Moro](#) a nice new Bailey bridge led to Brecciarola, but between Brecciarola and Pascuccio was a gully so deep, rough and wet that not even a jeep could hope to get across. So what was to be done?

Here the planners began to look still farther to the right. The next spur past Brecciarola and Pascuccio was called Sfasciata; it ran right down to the [Moro](#), was flat-topped and steep-sided, and seemed likely to offer a reasonable way up to the [Orsogna](#) ridge if vehicles could get up on to it. But could they? On the evening of 5 December, while C Squadron was on its way over from [Ciommi](#), two of its officers, Lieutenants Don [Thomson](#)⁴ and Charlie [Passmore](#),⁵ went out on foot with patrols from the [Maori Battalion](#) to find the answer to this question.

Luck was against them. Before his patrol even set out Lieutenant Thomson was wounded by a stray shell. The other patrol went down a stretch of narrow road that later earned for itself the name of 'Shell Alley', through a tiny crossroads hamlet called [Spaccarelli](#), down a farm track to the [Moro](#) River, with Sfasciata looming up ahead in the dark. But there on top was Jerry, shooting at everything that made a

noise, and all they could see was a ford and a very steep place beyond. Tanks, said Passmore, could get down to the ford all right, but beyond that—no, not unless someone were to make a road up. So it looked as if the problem would have to be solved elsewhere.

Finally a plan was reluctantly decided on, an awkward sort of plan, but the only possible one as things stood. All the support vehicles for both 5 and 6 Brigades would advance along Brecciarola, headed by the Shermans of A Squadron, which would help to clear Orsogna. Then 5 Brigade's vehicles, with C Squadron in the lead, would move through Orsogna and along the ridge road to meet the Maori Battalion, which by then should have fought its way up Pascuccio to the main ridge. This threw everything on to Orsogna—unless it were taken, 5 Brigade would get no support, and the whole operation would probably be wrecked.

Zero hour was to be 2.30 p.m. on 7 December. A daylight attack was quite a novelty, and many people did not like it much, but it suited the circumstances here, because the rough steep country would make movement at night practically impossible even for the infantry, let alone vehicles. The tankies were just as pleased, especially C Squadron, which after one experience had had enough of Italian mountain roads at night.

Both A and C Squadrons had plenty of time to make ready. Cullinane's tanks were the only ones in the firing line, and Regimental Headquarters had very few worries, as for the time being it had no squadrons to look after. On 6 December Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants came back, enabling Major Ferguson to go out and have some minor wounds seen to.

Then came 7 December, damp and foggy and dreary, but pleasing for the attackers, who could use the fog as a smoke screen. At 5.30 a.m., two hours before dawn, C Squadron very unwillingly left its warm billets and took the cold road that wound down from Spaccarelli, crossed the Moro by the Bailey bridge, and zigzagged up the slope to Brecciarola, where it went in behind A Squadron, out of sight of Orsogna, carefully camouflaged away beside the road. At 1 p.m. the artillery spoke up, heralding the attack. At 1.30 fighter-bombers roared low over the lines, and the watchers on Brecciarola had ringside seats as the planes dived on Orsogna to plant their bombs in the middle of the shellbursts. About 2 p.m. 24 Battalion of 6 Brigade

began to form up on the slope where the tanks were hidden. At 2.30, dead on time, its leading companies moved off towards the low, rolling smoke which hid Orsogna from view. Half an hour later the reserve company followed, and hard after it came A Squadron, moving slowly along the road in single file, a party of engineers going ahead with mine detectors, a bulldozer following behind its first troop to deal with any obstructions.

By 4 p.m. the first tanks were at the entrance to Orsogna. As always, they had attracted a lot of shells on the way, and had consequently outstripped 24 Battalion's reserve company, which had to take to the ground from time to time. The leading infantry companies were now engaged in heavy fighting just inside Orsogna.

Now everything went 'haywire'. Eighteenth Regiment's battle report speaks of the trouble and confusion that arose when A Squadron tried to push its way into Orsogna:

The leading troop of tanks... reached the outskirts of the village but were held up by a road crater mined on the far side. A second troop followed the leading troop but as the last tank of the second troop reached a point about 300 yds short of the demolition a second demolition was exploded in front of it and it ran into it and got stuck. A route was found round this second demolition and another two tanks made the detour and joined the five tanks in front. The tanks remained in this position until dark when the sappers came up and cleared the mines and filled the crater with the bulldozer. The tanks then proceeded towards the village. A Recce was made on foot and it was found that a Mark IV [tank] was sitting in the middle of the road firing on fixed lines down the narrow road lined with houses.... There was a great deal of enemy MG fire. The enemy tank lit a hay stack at the corner of the road which illuminated the only approach the tanks could make.... Until the enemy tank could be moved it was impossible for us to advance. Had the Mark IV been knocked out it would have effectively blocked the road itself. Sounds of other tanks were heard in the village and it was estimated that there were at least five other enemy tanks....

The infantry in Orsogna had been having a tough time, mixed up in heavy house-to-house fighting, and had lost a lot of men. Now a stalemate arose: 24 Battalion could get no farther forward without help from the tanks, A Squadron could

not advance to help 24 Battalion because of the German tank in the fairway, the enemy could not counter-attack because of A Squadron's guns. There was no way round the flanks because the hillsides were far too open, and were probably mined anyway. And our infantry could not get at the German tank because it was well covered by Spandaus in the nearby houses. It was a messy situation, and there was no easy way out of it.

Twenty-fourth Battalion's reserve company now came into the story and tried to force its way into Orsogna while A Squadron put down a sort of minor barrage ahead of it. But this was only wasting good ammunition. Jerry's defensive fire was so thick that nobody could live in Orsogna's streets. There was nothing for it but to call the attempt off, pull in to form a close circle near the demolitions just outside Orsogna, and stay put for the night, the tanks side by side, their guns pointing at Orsogna, gunners with their fingers ready to 'let her go' at a moment's notice, what was left of the infantry in position round the tanks. Corporal Dick Aubin's ⁶ tank was still stuck in the demolition, Sergeant George Hoare's ⁷ had run off the road and broken a track, leaving eight good tanks in the squadron.

It was now hopeless to expect the attack to succeed. C Squadron, which was to have followed A through Orsogna, had not even moved from Brecciarola, and knew nothing of what was going on. The Maoris had made a magnificent advance uphill to the Orsogna ridge, but were heavily counter-attacked all evening, and soon after midnight were pulled back again to where they had started. An early morning conference between Lieutenant-General Freyberg and the commanders on the spot reluctantly agreed that 24 Battalion should do the same; so at 4 a.m., very quietly in the pitch dark, the remains of the infantry left Orsogna, followed by A Squadron, which returned to its quiet farm lane, leaving three tanks under Captain Jackson among the trees with the foremost infantry, half a mile from Orsogna. The two disabled tanks just had to be left where they were, out in no-man's land, empty and unguarded. Their crews came back on foot, carrying everything portable.

So all the sweat and blood expended at Orsogna seemed to have been wasted, and Jerry was blocking the way more firmly than ever. He did not try to counter-attack from the town, but that day the Luftwaffe was over in some strength, three lots of fighter-bombers dropping bombs apparently at random round Castelfrentano. During these raids the anti-aircraft machine guns on the turrets of the Shermans

were used for their official purpose for the first time—but this was not a great success, as the .50-inch Brownings most of the tanks possessed were apt to swing sharply round on their mountings, making themselves more of a danger to the men behind them than to their targets.

For every Jerry plane there were half a dozen of ours in the air. The Spitfire patrol was on the job, and there were some good dogfights overhead, some so high up that you could see only twisty vapour trails. Better still, the little Kittybombers came over in swarms as long as the light lasted to 'slather' Orsogna. No sooner had one flight left than the next lot would swoop, and the dusty crash of the bombs among the houses would merge with the rattle of machine guns as the planes dived again to strafe. It was by far the best spectacle of the Sangro campaign so far. The sky seemed permanently mottled with little black 'ack-ack' bursts, through which the planes flew with no apparent regard for danger.

Evidently the 'high-ups' still had some hopes of Orsogna. On 9 December our fighter-bombers kept up their work of pulverising it, and at 11.15 a.m. A Squadron, now rested and replenished, again moved forward towards the town and proceeded to 'give it the works', spraying the whole place with machine-gun fire, knocking down the houses on its eastern edge with 75-millimetre shells. Jerry was not slow to reply. An armour-piercing shell knocked out Captain Burns's ⁸ tank and killed Trooper Alex Hamilton, ⁹ the driver. Several more of the tanks were hit by high-explosive shells, none seriously. This slogging match lasted till 2.30 p.m., when A Squadron packed up and went home, hidden under a smoke screen but followed all the way by shells. Everyone was a bit puzzled by this show, which did not seem to achieve anything; but anyway it proved that Orsogna was as strongly held as ever, and that there was no easy road through there. An expensive way of proving it, thought the boys—A Squadron was now down to seven good tanks, and three were left outside Orsogna with no chance of being recovered in the meantime.

That was 18 Regiment's last excursion on Brecciarola, and nobody was sorry. Orsogna, standing up there smug and unbreakable, had become an object of bitter hatred. Smashing it up with shells was a little relief to the feelings, but that was about all the good it did. Now, on 9 December, A Squadron came back to the reverse slope of Brecciarola to find C Squadron packing up to leave. At 5 p.m., as dusk

darkened to night, the two squadrons filed back, nose to tail in the dark, down the hairpin bends to the Bailey bridge, up the other side to [Spaccarelli](#), and there was B Squadron, newly called across from [San Eusanio](#), waiting for them. It was good to have the whole unit together again, even though nobody had the faintest idea what its next job was to be. So far, though it had fought gallantly, it had not achieved much. At [Guardiagrele](#), a mile or two of mud gained, a few prisoners, a few poor articles of loot. At [Orsogna](#), not even that. Now the prayer of every man in the tanks was—let the third time be lucky.

One good thing had come out of the daylight attack. On 5 Brigade's right flank, in a sort of sideshow to the main attack, 23 Battalion had heaved Jerry off Sfasciata and was now firmly installed there. This became the centre of attention of [2 NZ Division](#). Vehicles could now get up on to Sfasciata's flat top except for the steep wet cliff up from the [Moro](#), and the engineers could fix that. Anti-tank guns would be sent up to Sfasciata, tanks would follow, and on the night of 10-11 December 23 Battalion and [18 Regiment](#) would attack up Sfasciata to the [Orsogna](#) ridge road, then push west along it towards [Orsogna](#)'s back door. That was the plan. It seemed feasible enough, but terribly rushed considering all that had to be done first.

On the evening of 9 December the reunited [18 Regiment](#), on its way up to Sfasciata, got the full impact of this feverish rush. In only one night bulldozers had widened the farm track from [Spaccarelli](#) to the [Moro](#), levelled a ford over the creek, and made a zigzag track up the cliff beyond; a mile of rough, gluey clay, for the tank drivers a mile of hell, sliding down the narrow track with eyes straining not to lose the tank in front, groping up the hill at a snail's pace in the blackness. The first tanks were lucky, for each one gouged the ruts a little deeper, so that the later ones (there were 28 in all) lurched from side to side, narrowly missed bogging again and again, and just beyond the ford had to hitch on to a tractor for the trip up the cliff. No wonder that the drivers on reaching the top found themselves bathed in sweat despite the chill of the night. Lieutenant Owen Burn, commander of the leading troop, recalls walking uphill ahead of his tank with a lighted cigarette in each hand to show his driver the way, 'because', he says, 'two feet out and the poor beggar would have gone down the hill'. One C Squadron tank capsized at a bad spot, another one shed a track, a third had to stop with engine trouble.

From the top of the hill C Squadron's seven remaining tanks went on for another

mile, flatter going but still tricky driving on the sodden ground, to 23 Battalion's forward troops. The new quarters were not bad. There was a good stout roomy house to live in, the tanks were parked in the yard behind the house and camouflaged with nets and olive branches. The rest of the regiment stayed at the top of the cliff, some of the tanks on the crest, some just below it—here there were not so many casas, and some crews had to dig slitties to live in, not much fun in this wet cold weather. During the whole move Jerry had shown no sign of hostility, and it seemed safe to believe that he did not yet know there were tanks on Sfasciata.

The tankies were not at all happy about attacking again the next night, as neither A nor C Squadron had had a chance lately to give the tanks all the little attentions they needed. So there was great relief when quite late on the afternoon of 10 December, the attack was postponed. It was still to be on eventually, but probably not for three or four days. In the meantime 23 Battalion was to spend its nights edging forward nearer to the [Orsogna](#) ridge road, while the tanks lay very low so as not to give their presence away. When the time came to attack, it was hoped, Jerry would not suspect they were there, and would be rocked off his feet when they suddenly materialised.

For four days things were held up. Rain deepened the mud and made it stickier, if possible. The engineers worked round the clock on the precipitous track up Sfasciata, with camouflage netting strung over it in places to hide it from inquisitive eyes in [Orsogna](#); but its condition was so appalling that even jeeps with chains had a job getting up, and supplies for the tanks had to be manhandled from the [Moro](#) ford or brought up on mules. Luckily Jerry was not very active. He was holding the [Orsogna](#) road just at the top of Sfasciata, but was not trying any tricks, though he kept up a desultory shellfire, some of it coming pretty close to C Squadron. Worse than any shelling was a storm of rain on the night of 11 December, when everyone sleeping in bivvies was soaked. At Regimental Headquarters, the war diary records, 'We had a lot of trouble with our line to [23 Bn](#) being cut by jeeps. Awoke next morning in very wet blankets to find phone lying about 50 yards away almost buried in the mud, having been dragged there by a jeep.' Life on Sfasciata had its trying moments.

If any of the experts who had planned the formation of 4 Armoured Brigade had

casually read this entry in the war diary, he would probably have thought, 'What on earth is the 18th doing with telephones?' They had not been in the scheme of things at all. As the Signals Officer, Lieutenant Jack Greenfield,¹⁰ explains:

When the 18th converted to Armour, tanks were pictured as mobile radio stations with perfect radio communications at all times, and.... we had no establishment for telephones, exchange, wire, or telephone operators, no cable laying vehicles or equipment.... However, from the moment we were bogged down at the Sangro the facts of the case were very different from the theory.... There was always a need for many miles of telephone line and there were always breakages resulting from shellfire and vehicle damage.

The theory might have been all right in Africa, or anywhere where the war was continually mobile; but it had not envisaged this stationary war in a perpetually damp atmosphere which played havoc with radio reception. Here telephones and wire, plenty of them, were a dire necessity. Luckily, Jerry's Sangro River line had provided some of these, but not enough. At the moment this was the worst gap in 18 Regiment's equipment, and there seemed to be no way of filling it adequately.

Then came the night of 14–15 December, a very memorable night indeed.

The final plan of attack was for 23 Battalion to advance from the top of Sfasciata, cut the Orsogna road and carry on down it to the Orsogna cemetery which crowned the ridge just above Pascuccio. Later it was to exploit past the cemetery, if all went well, and gatecrash Orsogna. On its right 21 Battalion would advance across the gully that bounded Sfasciata to the north, and join hands on the ridge beyond with British troops (2 Northamptonshires of 17 Brigade) who were to attack the same night. Immediately behind 23 Battalion were to come sappers with mine detectors, clearing a track for tanks right up Sfasciata to the Orsogna road, and hard on their heels would come 18 Regiment. First C Squadron, which on reaching the road would wheel to the right to support 21 Battalion; then A Squadron, which would go to the left with 23 Battalion; then B Squadron, which would stay in reserve at the top of Sfasciata.

This clearly would be no picnic. There was no road up Sfasciata, which meant that any track the engineers cleared would be rough and muddy; the tanks would

have to advance across totally strange country on a pitch-black night. Worst of all, 23 Battalion on its nightly forays had come into pretty close contact with Jerry, had had some skirmishing near the [Orsogna](#) road, and had brought back some mines that Jerry had been trying to lay. This was a bad sign—it seemed to indicate that Jerry might not be as ignorant of the tanks' presence as he was supposed to be.

It was a gloomy overcast night, not yet raining, but soaking wet underfoot. After dark, when the tankies had put the finishing touches to their tanks and were trying to snatch a little sleep, the men of 21 Battalion appeared up Sfasciata's side, moving forward past the tanks to their start line. Then, after what seemed an endless wait with everything ominously still, it was 1 a.m., and the barrage opened with a roar. It was as heavy a barrage as the Division had ever put over, and on Sfasciata, with the shells whipping overhead and bursting in a long line half a mile ahead, the noise of it was bewildering.

Jerry was swift to reply. His defensive fire came back violently on to the top end of Sfasciata. Flares, thick and continuous all along his line, turned the night into glaring, fitful day; here and there along the dull red of shellbursts ran the twinkle of tracer. Old hands who had seen all the desert actions could never remember such a fireworks display. Up at the top of the spur 23 Battalion forced its way into Jerry's positions, and friend and enemy tangled together in savage, confused fighting. Behind the infantry moved the sappers, working slowly forward picking up mines and marking the clear track with white tape. And next came the tanks.

At 1.15 a.m., a quarter of an hour after the balloon had gone up, A and B Squadrons and Regimental Headquarters set out along the track up Sfasciata, and the head of A Squadron reached C Squadron's house a mile farther up the spur to find C Squadron just leaving. The regiment then carried on in single file, C Squadron in the lead, Lieutenant Passmore's troop going first.

Right at the outset it became clear that the tanks were in for trouble. Conditions were as vile as they could well be, with a bitter wind, and now and again sweeping rain showers. The track was indescribable—narrow, deep in porridgy mire, twisting round trees and over bumps and hollows. The tank commanders had to wade ahead through the mud, signalling the way and pointing out particularly bad spots.

Then the first misfortunes struck C Squadron. Only 500 yards from the starting point, Lieutenant Owen Burn's tank toppled off the greasy track and came to rest against an oak tree, which alone saved it from plunging down the slope towards Pascuccio. Half a mile farther on, where the track had been cleared through Jerry's minefield, Passmore's three tanks all bogged down in the same mud-patch. Sergeant 'Snow' Johnston's ¹¹ tank, trying a track farther to the left, hit a mine; Captain Deans's tank slipped off the track and capsized. The engineers tried again and cleared a slightly better lane, but this took a long time, the tanks had to sit and wait, those at the rear of the column had no idea what was going on, and up to the front came Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants to see what the hold-up was. He and RSM Richards, going off to find out what lay ahead, stumbled on some untamed pockets of Germans left behind in the first assault, and got in the way of their machine-gun fire. 'Col. Pleasants,' relates Richards, 'was as mad as hell at having to bite the dust,' and forthwith called up C Squadron's three remaining tanks with the avowed intention of 'fixing these bastards'. It was now about 4 a.m., the shelling had slackened off, but the machine-gun fire was zipping about in all directions.

From this point on, continues Richards, mines were forgotten. Pleasants climbed aboard Lieutenant Ron Horton's ¹² tank, the only one to appear (the other two tanks of Horton's troop bogged down before they got through the minefield), and forward it went, its machine guns spraying trees and buildings and haystacks. The infantry seemed to have missed this little piece of ground, for there were Germans all over the place. With Pleasants still aboard, the tank reached the road, the only C Squadron tank still in the fight. Just across the road an anti-tank gun was firing; Horton's tank fired back in that general direction, and the gun was silent. 'In the morning,' says Colonel Pleasants, 'the gun was found deserted, so we must have got fairly close.' But the bad luck was not over, for only a few minutes later Pleasants, who had been hunting Germans and pumping his pistol down dugouts, was wounded by a pistol shot at short range. Horton and his crew, making the most of the nice smooth road, at once set off eastwards towards where 21 Battalion ought to be. The firing had stopped and everything was pretty quiet for the moment; after five or six hundred yards Horton found himself among 21 Battalion, and went gladly into position in an empty gun emplacement, covering the approach along the road from the east. Now dawn was beginning to lighten the sky. Twenty-first Battalion had just been counter-attacked by German tanks and was expecting the same again any

time, so even one Sherman was greeted with joy by the infantry.

C Squadron's ill luck was A Squadron's gain. The A Squadron tanks, following slowly and laboriously up the track, were able to dodge the worst places, and eventually Captain Burns's troop, which was in the lead, scrambled through to the road and set off westwards towards the cemetery, where it was to rendezvous with 23 Battalion's left company. As soon as these tanks were clear of the taped track Lieutenant Cullinane's troop followed, but was met on the road by Major Dickinson (who was temporarily in command of the regiment) and told to 'go like hell' to 21 Battalion, which was crying out for more tanks. Cullinane's tanks, plus one stray from the rear, came forward to 21 Battalion to find everything quiet, and went into position on the right of the [Orsogna](#) road, not far from Horton's tank. Just ahead of them was a handful of 21 Battalion men, and 300 yards farther on, where the road took a slight curve and disappeared from view, was the limit of our territory. It was full daylight now.

A Squadron's third troop, starting out with only two tanks, was right out of luck. In the narrow lane through the minefield Lieutenant McLean's tank slipped over a bank and threw a track. Second-Lieutenant Phil Edmonds's ¹³ tank, trying to dodge the first one, also went off the path, ran on to a mine and was a complete wreck. So daylight found A Squadron functioning as only two troops, a mile apart, facing in opposite directions, and out of touch with each other.

Captain Burns's troop from the time it reached the road was beset with worries. Everything was very quiet now, but there was not enough light yet to see much, and the tanks headed along the road towards the cemetery very cautiously, passing vague shapes of men flitting here and there in the murk, keeping on the alert for a tracer signal from 23 Battalion which never came. Actually 23 Battalion, weakened by the night's fighting and still engaged in a mixed-up battle all across the top of Sfasciata, had not been able to fan out far to the left, so Burns's tanks, without knowing it, went through a gap in our line, and when they reached the cemetery they were out in Jerry-infested country with none of our infantry anywhere within range. Perhaps they were only saved from destruction by the fact that it was not properly light. They went about a hundred yards past the cemetery before Burns, realising what must have happened, brought them back again to a large house just behind the cemetery, where at last they found a handful of 23 Battalion men. The

tanks parked behind the house ready for whatever might happen next.

What happened next was quite a surprise. As the light grew stronger Jerry began to shell the house, which was a prominent target easily picked out from [Orsogna](#); after a little of this shelling, out from the house issued a swarm of Germans, about a score of them, with hands raised. This was the sort of battle where the most unusual things were apt to take place.

Before long more trouble brewed up over at the other side on 21 Battalion's front. At 8.50 a.m., just as everyone was beginning to think the fight was over and to ponder the chances of breakfast and a sleep, the alarm was suddenly raised that two big German Mark IV tanks were coming along the road, not trying to conceal themselves, possibly not realising that the Shermans were on the premises. They soon found out. All the Shermans opened up with machine guns and armour-piercing shells; one Mark IV was set on fire by two shells, and the other, after vainly trying to take the Shermans on in return, beat a retreat back along the road. After the night's tribulations this was most encouraging for the tankies, who were beginning to think bitterly that they always seemed to come in after the fun was all over. The Mark IV, according to a C Squadron man, 'burnt for 4 hours when the thing blew up, there were bits everywhere'.

About 9 a.m. Major Ferguson arrived up from B Echelon and took over from Major Dickinson. Twenty-first Battalion's front was still lively, but all was pretty quiet in 23 Battalion's area; Jerry's fire was slack except for scattered shellbursts, and there was no sign of any more counter-attacks, so it did not seem that any major changes would be needed in [18 Regiment](#)'s layout. Major Ferguson ordered a troop of B Squadron up to the [Orsogna](#) road to be handy in case of need. B Squadron had so far kept clear of the brawl on the [Orsogna](#) road, had spent the last few hours of darkness in some houses two-thirds of the way up Sfasciata, and then in the half light of dawn had moved on to the shelter of some olive trees just short of the minefield, still waiting for orders. Now, just after 9 a.m., Lieutenant Hawkins's three tanks took the suicide path through the minefield, not so perilous in daylight, but still soft and difficult. Hawkins, knowing nothing of the position on the road, led his troop past the house where Burns's tanks were waiting, and almost to the cemetery, where two Germans unexpectedly came up and surrendered. Hawkins seemed to

have a genius for picking up stray prisoners. Not knowing what on earth to do with them, he took them back when his tanks retired—the last seen of them, he reports, they were with a stretcher-bearing party and not enjoying themselves at all.

Coming back from the cemetery, Hawkins's troop stopped in the best shelter it could find not far from Burns's tanks, and later in the morning the rest of B Squadron followed through the minefield on to the [Orsogna](#) road. The regiment now had twelve tanks on the road, and Regimental Headquarters' two tanks beside 23 Battalion Headquarters some way back down Sfasciata. These were all that were left in fighting order of the twenty-eight that had set out on the attack eight hours before.

It was time now to think of exploiting past the cemetery and bashing open [Orsogna's](#) back door. Eighteenth Regiment had left so many tanks in the Sfasciata mud that it certainly could not bear this burden itself. The fresh 20 Regiment was already on the way up to Sfasciata, but it would be well after midday before its first tanks could reach the ridge. About 11 a.m., with order restored on [5 Brigade's](#) left flank, the time seemed ripe to press forward, so [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) ordered [18 Regiment](#) to set the ball rolling with a 'recce in force' past the cemetery. The tanks were to avoid heavy fighting and to stop before reaching [Orsogna](#)—the idea was mainly to provide a flying start for 20 Regiment, which would follow through and push right round behind [Orsogna](#), and still farther if everything panned out well.

At 1 p.m. Hawkins's and Burns's troops, under Major Dickinson's command, set off along the road towards the cemetery, to the accompaniment of the inevitable shellfire, which began to fall round the tanks as soon as they moved out into the open. The foremost infantry posts, short of the cemetery, were left behind, and the tanks were out alone and unsupported, heading for enemy territory. Had they known what lay just ahead, the crews would not have felt at all happy as they approached the cemetery and prepared to push on.

For just down the road tragedy was waiting, the grimmest tragedy yet to strike [18 Regiment](#). Out from the protecting cemetery walls the tanks were in flat country, thinly covered with trees, where, all unknown, German anti-tank guns were waiting. Hawkins's tank, coming across the sights of the first gun less than a hundred yards past the cemetery, was a sitting shot. An armour-piercing shell hit it fair and square

and it burst into flames; Hawkins himself got out, but all his efforts to rescue his crew failed, and all four were killed. Hawkins, shocked and burned, had to be evacuated.

This stopped [18 Regiment's](#) 'recce in force' before it had well begun. The tanks went in behind the cemetery walls and from there tried in vain to locate the anti-tank gun, which now, having done all the damage it could in the meantime, lay very low. Hidden machine guns were pouring bullets all around, and the tanks, though they fired back with everything they had, could not do anything constructive against this invisible foe. The exploitation was at a standstill until 20 Regiment's first tanks came up and passed through. Dickinson's three tanks then withdrew from the cemetery to their starting point above Sfasciata and took up position facing down the road towards the cemetery, ready for whatever might happen. Dickinson, who had been wounded earlier in the afternoon, was now evacuated, and Captain Brown took over the tanks in 23 Battalion's area.

What happened to 20 Regiment, how its leading tanks were knocked out one by one, perfect targets for the same anti-tank gun as they followed each other down the road, does not belong to [18 Regiment's](#) story; but its effect on [18 Regiment](#) was great. For the first time the helplessness of tanks in this close country was really brought home, not to [18 Regiment](#) only, but to all of [2 NZ Division](#). On this 15 December the desert-bred conception of tanks dashing forward at the head of the advance, which had been tottering ever since the beginning of the [Sangro](#) fighting, finally died, and more realistic ideas began to dawn, less grandiose ideas, but far more useful. The lesson of 15 December was bitter, but it had to come.

¹ Lt [T. M. R. Maskew](#); [Amberley](#); born [Christchurch](#), 27 Mar 1920; farmer; wounded 5 Dec 1943.

² Tpr [T. G. Somerville](#); born NZ 19 Jun 1913; truck driver; died of wounds 5 Dec 1943.

³ Maj [H. H. Deans](#); [Darfield](#); born [Christchurch](#), 26 Jan 1917; shepherd.

⁴ Maj [D. G. Thomson](#); [Blenheim](#); born [Blenheim](#), 21 May 1912; stud farmer;

wounded 5 Dec 1943.

⁵ Maj C. S. Passmore, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 21 Jul 1917; bank clerk; four times wounded.

⁶ L-Sgt R. S. Aubin; born Pirongia, 1 Sep 1906; labourer, PWD; died of wounds 9 Apr 1944.

⁷ Sgt G. T. Hoare; Tua Marina, Marlborough; born Blenheim, 24 Oct 1912; farmer.

⁸ Maj P. J. C. Burns; Auckland; born Auckland, 26 Mar 1914; journalist; wounded May 1941.

⁹ Tpr A. J. Hamilton; born Ireland, 7 Nov 1916; killed in action 9 Dec 1943.

¹⁰ Maj J. R. Greenfield, MC; Wellington; born Napier, 29 Apr 1918; accountant; wounded 1 Aug 1944.

¹¹ 2 Lt M. G. Johnston, m.i.d.; Waiuku; born Ashburton, 6 Nov 1919; welder; wounded 2 Dec 1944.

¹² Capt R. D. Horton; Auckland; born Auckland, 8 Jun 1908; company manager.

¹³ 2 Lt P. H. Edmonds; Auckland; born NZ 28 Jul 1918; civil servant.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 28 – ON THE ORSOGNA ROAD

CHAPTER 28

On the Orsogna Road

Now that 20 Regiment was in the battle, 18 Regiment's attention swung away from the cemetery towards 21 Battalion's front, where the Orsogna road, taking a slight bend as it passed through the forward infantry, lost itself among vines and bare willow trees beyond the villages of Poggiofiorito and Arielli. A forbidding stretch of country, a place where you could imagine all sorts of mischief invisibly brewing among the twisted willow trunks.

In the early hours of 16 December mischief, and very ugly mischief, was indeed brewing there. At 3.30 a.m., quite suddenly, fast shells and long machine-gun bursts began to whistle down the road, jerking the boys rudely awake; the crews had hardly manned their tanks when round the road bend in front came German tanks, firing as they advanced. Their leaders, coming on in single file, pushed right through 21 Battalion's foremost troops and nearly up to our tanks; then the guns on the Shermans opened up with a clatter, the 25-pounders joined in, and for a little while the place seemed on fire with shellbursts. It was a bizarre kind of battle, both sides firing blind. You couldn't see the German tanks except occasionally as grey smears belching out shafts of orange flame, but our gunners swept the whole area with 'co-ax' machine-gun tracer, watching for ricochets and following them up with 75-millimetre shells in the same direction. This mixture of luck and skill paid dividends, for the first two enemy tanks were hit by armour-piercing shells and knocked out, effectively blocking the road.

The German tanks farther back had not been idle all this time. They turned off to the right of the road among the farmyards, and from them, as they cruised slowly round in the dark, suddenly shot long tongues of curling red fire. It took the spectators a few seconds to realise what this was—then to everyone's lips came the involuntary, horrified words, 'My God, flame-throwers!'

Had luck not been on their side, the men of 21 Battalion could have suffered fearful casualties. Houses they had occupied during the day were smoked and charred, haystacks they had raided for straw were set alight. The air was full of a choking pungent smell. The German commander later wrote a vainglorious report of

how his gallant flame-throwers had 'smoked out enemy MG and rifle pits', 'crept skilfully up close to an enemy tank and set it ablaze', 'hunted out more enemy riflemen, killed them or driven them out with MG fire and bursts of flame'; but all this was imagination. By great good fortune, the spouts of flame singed not one single Kiwi hair. But it was a close thing.

It was some time before the Shermans could get into action against the flame-throwers, for they were occupied with their own battle two or three hundred yards down the road. But shortly after 4 a.m. their immediate front was clear enough for them to tackle the flame-throwers. The crews fought savagely, angry and at the same time shocked with horror, conscious that ahead of them, where Jerry was squandering his obscene bursts of flame, was the 21 Battalion it was their duty to protect. The flame-throwers, scuttling round among the haystacks and farm buildings, were difficult targets, and the best the tankies could do was to shoot at every jet of flame, praying that their shots would not harm any of 21 Battalion. Once again luck was on our side. Two flame-throwers were knocked out, and shortly after 4.30 a.m. the enemy gave up the fight and pulled back. His infantry kept up useless attacks on 21 Battalion for another two hours, but the [18 Regiment](#) tanks, after seeing Jerry's armour off the premises, took no more active part in proceedings. Their help, while it had lasted, had been decisive. Two big Mark IV tanks and two flame-throwers was a good bag. Now 21 Battalion and the 25-pounders finished off the job.

It was 6.30 a.m., just getting light enough to see, when the German infantry finally departed. Then began what many Kiwis would regard as the main part of the whole proceedings. The Sherman crews, grabbing their chance with both hands, invaded the derelict tanks and removed everything of value before 21 Battalion could arrive. It was [18 Regiment's](#) best haul to date. 'The German tanks,' says its battle report, 'were well stocked with gum boots which were quickly transferred to our own tanks.' with weather conditions as they were, no better loot could have been thought of.

The tankies once more settled down, their tanks camouflaged among the vines and hedges, their guns pointing forward along the road in case Jerry tried again. But he had neither the spare troops nor the inclination to do so. Apart from a few bouts of shelling the rest of 16 December was quiet, a real anti-climax after the early noise

and excitement. The regiment now had eight tanks with 21 Battalion, for when the fighting was at its height about 4.30 a.m. Captain Burns's troop had moved over from 23 Battalion and gone into position about 150 yards behind the others, covering both sides of the road, ready and eager to help if needed, which fortunately it was not.

Throughout 15 and 16 December parties from **18 Regiment** were working hard and honourably at an unfamiliar job on Sfasciata. The infantry units, especially 23 Battalion, had taken casualties that their own stretcher bearers simply could not cope with; so dozens of men from the regiment's bogged tanks joined a swarm of volunteers from the rear to relieve the swamped RAPs on Sfasciata and take the wounded back. On the 16th they were reinforced by thirty volunteers from B Echelon, who had come up during the night in response to calls for still more bearers. Besides the heavy carry over the clinging mud of Sfasciata, they had to take their patients down the cliff to the valley just above the **Moro** ford—a dreadful trip this part of it, the wounded sometimes jolted from side to side in spite of all care being taken. It was a harrowing job. Down by the ford, not far from the dressing station where most of the wounded went, 'Doc' Thompson ran a blood transfusion centre, surely as near to the fighting line as such a centre had ever been.

There was time on 16 December to think of replenishing the tanks and feeding their crews, who had gone pretty hungry on the 15th. Before the big attack 22 Battalion had lent the regiment a section of carriers to take supplies forward, and these did heroic work on the 16th. The **18 Regiment** battle report goes out of its way to mention the struggle to keep up supplies:

Our main concern now was replenishment; we got over the difficulty temporarily by unloading all ammo from the bogged tanks and establishing a dump [just beside the road above Sfasciata]; each troop then sent one tank to the dump and loaded it to capacity, redistributing its load amongst the other two tanks of the troop. Lt HART¹ did excellent work with his carriers in carting ammo from dump [at foot of Sfasciata] and establishing a forward dump [in front of 23 Battalion HQ]; the track along the top of the ridge still being passable to tracked vehicles and jeeps only.

On 16 December, while transferring ammunition from one of C Squadron's bogged tanks, Troopers G. E. Stanley² and Doug Berryman³ were killed by a shell;

the tanks in the Sfasciata minefield were under pretty constant fire, and in fact the whole of Sfasciata was an unhealthy place.

With all the coming and going the Sfasciata track became quite impassable, even for carriers, later on 16 December, but by this time there was enough ammunition dumped at the top of the ridge to keep the tanks going for a while.

The war seemed to have settled down again now. Jerry and the mud had together 'put the lid on' any idea of exploitation, and [5 Brigade](#) had consolidated its few hundred hard-won yards of sodden ground, content meantime with its narrow footing across the [Orsogna](#) road. The regiment's recovery section sloshed its way up to Sfasciata and made its first moves towards salvaging the many tanks on the upper reaches of the spur—with the help of the crews, who tied logs to the tank tracks to give a better grip, three tanks were dragged loose on 16 December, but there were still a dozen left, and a long, complicated job looming up ahead.

Though 21 Battalion's front seemed firm when 17 December dawned, the position on its right flank, farther along the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road, was not too clear. There were vague reports that 2 Northamptonshires had taken the village of [Poggiofiorito](#) ('Podgy' for short) and was up to the road, but nobody knew for sure just where its foremost troops were. Patrols from 21 Battalion had gone ahead of their positions in the early morning hours but had found the countryside apparently empty. So [18 Regiment](#) was ordered to make a strong reconnaissance along the road towards [Arielli](#) to find out what was what, with the thought behind it that [5 Brigade](#)'s line would move forward if necessary. During the morning all the regiment's mobile tanks, thirteen of them, assembled behind 21 Battalion's front line, with Captain Brown in command, and at 11.30 a.m. the leading troop, under Lieutenant Burn, headed out along the road, with a platoon of 21 Battalion moving through the trees to the right of the road.

Lieutenant Burn describes this short advance as 'a classic example of infantry-tank cooperation'. The two commanders were in touch all the time with their little 'walkie-talkie' radio sets. The tanks kept their guns trained to the left, towards [Arielli](#); the infantry kept an eye on the right flank and reported progress to the tanks as they went along.

But, however good the co-operation at that low level, it seemed to be lacking higher up. A mile ahead of 21 Battalion's position was a crossroads, a good road leading off to the right to [Poggiofiorito](#) and to the left across a railway line to [Arielli](#). Here Burn's men more than half expected to find Jerry, but instead found themselves looking down the barrel of a British anti-tank gun, whose crew told Burn grimly that he was 'bloody lucky not to have got shot'. Their battalion commander, not very pleased to have New Zealand tanks charging across his front without warning, said that they had better get out of his way, as he had a battle on, and had just ordered an artillery 'stonk' on to the railway crossing 500 yards beyond the crossroads. His warning came too late. The 'stonk' arrived almost at once, and about the same time Jerry began to land shells here and there, damaging Burn's tank. Captain Brown with the head of the tank column had now reached the crossroads, and three or four tanks were already on their way up the side road towards [Arielli](#), firing at everything in sight. Tommy infantry patrols could be seen among the trees on either side of the road, but the 21 Battalion platoon had disappeared.

Startling events began to happen very soon. The head of the column was about 200 yards past the railway line, with the first houses in [Arielli](#) staring at it straight ahead, and Sergeant Laird's ⁴ tank had just taken the lead, when suddenly a gun opened up from the village. Second-Lieutenant Phil Edmonds tells of the action that followed:

We opened up on the houses with HE and Co-ax. The leading tank was then hit by an anti-tank weapon, which tore off the cupola ring, killing Sgt LAIRD. The rest of the crew bailed out successfully. The tanks that were on the road then retired and took up a hull-down position and shot up the houses and the road. A wounded man was reported a hundred yards short of the railway crossing. Lt. Cullinane took his tank to rescue this man. His tank was bogged. He called me up to tow him out and... the towing bogged me.

Luckily, nothing more was heard from the gun that had done this damage, which was well hidden away among the jumble of buildings in [Arielli](#) and would have been almost impossible to dig out. But mortar bombs were still falling along the road, and more tanks were sticking fast as they tried to manoeuvre across the fields. So about 4 p.m. the advance was called off and the tanks were ordered back to 21 Battalion's

lines. Laird's tank was recovered by Trooper Eric Brennan,⁵ its driver, who ran back to it and drove it off down the road, covered by fire from Sergeant Ron Sweet's⁶ tank. Cullinane's and Edmonds's tanks had to be left behind, locked down, with all portable gear removed. Others were dug free or hauled back on to the road, and the whole force filed back along the Orsogna road, still alert for trouble, which, happily, did not occur.

The remark in 18 Regiment's war diary that the operation 'did not appear to have been very well coordinated with other Div operations at the time' is quite an understatement. The show seemed pointless and clumsy. The tanks had not been able to achieve anything at all, one good man had been killed and six wounded, the regiment was down to ten fighting tanks. Nobody had even had any lunch that day. After the good work on 15 and 16 December this Arielli show seemed a pitiful anticlimax.

The 18th generally was at a pretty low ebb now. Three-quarters of its tanks were scattered between Melone and Arielli, sitting at all angles in the mud. Since the shambles on Sfasciata there had been no attempt to keep the squadrons separate—the whole regiment had got well mixed up in an hour or two's fighting, and after that there had been, all told, only one good-sized squadron left in action. Running maintenance was badly in arrears. Since 5 Brigade's line had become more or less stable, Major Ferguson had hammered away at the infantry commanders to get their own anti-tank guns up into position so that the regiment could pull back and husband its few remaining tanks. Instead, they had had the useless, expensive excursion to Arielli. And now, as a crowning blow, word came through from Divisional Headquarters that the tanks were to leave 21 Battalion and go to Poggiofiorito under command of 17 Brigade.

This move had been organised on a high level—General Freyberg had promised to lend 17 Brigade tanks for support, and 18 Regiment was the nearest unit. Brigadier Stewart did his best to soften the blow by explaining what condition the unit was in, and extracting a promise from 17 Brigade that the tanks would be used only in defence, not in attack. They were also to be released as soon as 17 Brigade could get enough anti-tank guns up to the Orsogna road. Armed with this comfort, Major Ferguson went to 17 Brigade Headquarters and arranged that the tanks would

move across after dark, most of them to 2 Northamptonshires, one troop farther east to 2 Royal Scots Fusiliers on the Northampton's right. This troop was to pick up a guide a quarter of a mile past the [Arielli](#) crossroads that evening.

By 5 p.m., when dusk was falling, all the tanks were back from [Arielli](#) and had replenished their fuel and ammunition from a dump set up by the stout-hearted carriers close behind 21 Battalion's line. At the news of this fresh move, now generally known for the first time, everyone was thunderstruck and blasphemous. There was bitter cursing as they made ready and as the first troop, under Captain Burns, went forward again along the [Orsogna](#) road. Past the [Arielli](#) crossroads it went, the drivers straining their eyes to keep sight of the road. Then, as a fitting end to this infuriating day, the guide from the Royal Scots Fusiliers could not be found. Burns and his tanks vanished away ahead in the gloom, right out (though they did not know it) into no-man's land, until later in the evening Major Ferguson sent out after them to bring them back. Meantime the rest of the tanks had followed along the road, turned down past [Poggiofiorito](#), and were now snugly tucked away on the reverse slope of a ridge just across a steep ravine from the north side of Sfasciata, with plenty of vines and trees to hide them, and good warm houses for the crews. Perhaps, the men decided, this move to [17 Brigade](#) was not so bad after all. At any rate you did not have to sleep under your tank or in the ruins of a shattered casa.

Next morning the mix-up was straightened out. Captain Burns located his guide later on that night, went out again at daybreak and joined the Fusiliers some half a mile to the right of [Poggiofiorito](#). Here there were no houses; you had to dig a trench behind your tank and string a tarpaulin over it to keep it dry. The two Regimental Headquarters tanks joined the others in 2 Northamptonshires' area, the tank crews sat round with nothing to do and really quite enjoying it, and on the upper level the struggle to get the tanks relieved began again. The battle report says:

Major Ferguson was doing everything in his power to assist the infantry to get their A/TK guns in position. Eventually we had to recce the route from the ford and arrange to have the guns towed up the hill. The infantry appeared to be quite content with the tanks' support and were very lackadaisical about getting their guns up.

The lane back from [Poggiofiorito](#), following another of those old Roman roads

that seemed to abound all over the country, was a morass, impassable except to men and mules. The first night strings of patient mules came plodding up the hill with ammunition and food—the Italian and Cypriot muleteers were full of yarns about how long it took to load them, but it was very noticeable that up near the front line they were able to unload, load up again with gear to be taken back, and disappear in double-quick time.

But the mules could not bring up anti-tank guns, and it would be hopeless to try to bring them up by this lane, so on 18



In the gun line at Trocchio

In the gun line at Trocchio

Cassino railway station



Cassino railway station



A tank bivvy

A tank bivvy

A Squadron's 'well-diver'. See p. 465



A Squadron's 'well-diver'. See p. 465



18 Regiment halts on the way north from Veroli

18 Regiment halts on the way north from Veroli

A Sherman tank boards its transporter



A Sherman tank boards its transporter



The regiment's first Tiger, 23 July 1944

The regiment's first Tiger, 23 July 1944

From inside a Sherman—anti-tank gun on the road ahead



From inside a Sherman—anti-tank gun on the road ahead

December, with permission from the New Zealand engineers, some guns came up the New Zealand track to Sfasciata, dragged by tractors, and forward through 21 Battalion, the same way as the tanks had come. By the morning of the 19th there were three guns near the [Arielli](#) crossroads, with more expected to arrive that afternoon; and the same evening Brigadier Stewart at last sent word that [18 Regiment's](#) relief could begin at once. This delighted everyone—that day there had been several nasty patches of shelling round the tanks behind [Poggiofiorito](#), and life with [17 Brigade](#) had lost much of its appeal very suddenly.

On 20 December, as soon as it was light enough to see, eight tanks went back along the [Orsogna](#) road and down Sfasciata (still littered with the debris of the big battle), and by midday they were collected on the crest overlooking the [Moro](#) ford, plus two or three more that had been hauled out of the Sfasciata mud in the meantime. Early in the afternoon, with the blessing of the engineers who were still toiling on the ford and the steep track, they crossed the [Moro](#) for the last time. Back at [Castelfrentano](#) A Echelon had managed to discover good billets, A and B Squadrons in an old Fascist headquarters, C in a group of houses just below the town on the north side. As the tanks came in they parked in the lee of the buildings and the crews gratefully threw their blanket rolls on the dry floors inside the houses.

A condition of the relief had been that two troops must stay with [17 Brigade](#) for a day or two longer until its anti-tank defence was further improved. So six tanks were left up in the forward line to come back in their own time, three under Lieutenant Burn with the Northhamptons, three under Lieutenant [Grennell](#)⁷ with the Fusiliers. Grennell's tanks left at dawn on 21 December and followed the regiment back to [Castelfrentano](#); two days later Burn's troop was relieved by British tanks and took the same road back, moving out as their relief moved in. Then, except for the few men who had to stay with the bogged tanks in the battle area, the whole of [18 Regiment](#) was at last out of action, back in peaceful billets, with cookhouses and hot showers and the [YMCA](#) canteen, just in nice time for a Christmas celebration before setting to work again with spit and polish on its ill-used tanks.

So far the story of [18 Regiment](#) has been the story mainly of the 'sharp-enders', the tank crews, and how they were learning their trade the hard way. But in an armoured regiment they are outnumbered two to one by their supporting teams,

whom the boys in the tanks are apt to classify sweepingly as loafers, but who in fact are kept pretty much on their toes keeping the tanks in the fight and their crews fed and supplied. The administrative set-up according to the book had been thoroughly organised and rehearsed in [Egypt](#); but at the [Sangro](#) the regiment had to experiment and find its feet under active conditions, and 'the book' did not take into account the perpetual struggle with mud and overcrowding, which made life so difficult behind the line as well as forward.

There was, first, the small party called A Echelon, immediately behind the fighting squadrons, made up of people whose services were likely to be called on at short notice—the 'flying fitters', 'Doc' Thompson and the RAP, a few signallers, whose jobs regularly took them up forward if anything went wrong. Also Padre Gourdie, who seemed to be everywhere, touring the squadrons with gifts of tinned milk or chocolate or cigarettes.

Then there was B Echelon, a large body with many jobs, divided from 29 November into two parts.

The first of these, B₁ Echelon, commanded by Major [Allen](#),⁸ the second-in-command, crossed the [Sangro](#) early to be within reasonable reach of the front, its job being to keep all supplies up to the fighting squadrons. Every night a convoy of jeeps or light trucks went forward from B₁, always with ammunition and water and tank fuel, every second or third night with food. Mud, crowded roads and shells gave these convoys some exciting trips, but unless conditions were quite impossible (as on the night of the advance to [Salarola](#) and during the fighting for the [Orsogna](#) road) you could bet on the supplies arriving safely.

That was at night. Of course there was daytime traffic for all sorts of purposes between B₁ Echelon and the forward troops, but before you set out you always paused and asked yourself whether it was really necessary, for the trip involved running the gauntlet of the 'Mad Mile', where Route 84 curled back on itself to climb the hill to [Castelfrentano](#). Jerry had a fine view of this stretch of road and shelled it heavily and constantly, aided by a brickworks beside the road which made a perfect aiming mark. At each end of the dangerous stretch provosts held traffic until everything seemed clear, then released it a few vehicles at a time. And when you got the word 'go' you did not linger.

Several miles behind B₁ was B₂, the administrative echelon, with the orderly rooms, heavy baggage, and the Quartermaster, who drew stores from the bulk depots and sent them forward in smaller lots to B₁. The first half of December B₂ spent in an assortment of mud-holes south of the [Sangro](#), and not till 21 December did it go over the river and rejoin B₁.

This set-up sounds complicated, and it was complicated, and in practice not always easy to keep under control. At the outset it was realised that no hard-and-fast arrangement for B Echelon could be laid down; throughout the Italian campaign its organisation was in a state of flux, continually changed to suit circumstances. Often, even in action, it was convenient to concentrate B Echelon in one place. When it was split up B₁.

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Independent of B Echelon, but often living with it or nearby, was the LAD, the hospital for sick tanks that the 'flying fitters' could not fix. How much the regiment relied on the LAD can be very well judged by this extract from the daily 'tank state' for 5 December:

Tk No 151322 damaged 1 Dec taken to LAD and repaired same day

Tk No 146167 Repaired by LAD—OK & on road again.

Tk No 149622 Repaired by LAD—OK & on road again.

Tk No 145976 Drive Sprocket repaired LAD—out same day.

Tk No 146069 New bogeys fitted by LAD & motors synchronised. Out same day.

Tk No 149339. Hit 2 Dec. Repaired by LAD now on road. Later in the month, and after the New Year as well, the LAD dealt with most of the tanks fished out of the front-line mud by the 'tank recovery' section.

On the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road and elsewhere [18 Regiment](#) left behind a lot of work for its recovery section. The fitters, who were usually on the spot almost as soon as a tank bogged down, could replace broken tracks and make engines go again, but that was no use unless the tanks could be disentangled from the mud. So it was usually all hands to the shovels, followed by a pull from a tractor or another tank until the derelict was back on firmer ground. A lot of the repair and recovery had to be done at night and as quietly as possible, for some of the tanks were still far too close to Jerry, who was jumpy and suspicious and reacted violently to strange nocturnal noises in our lines. Tank engines starting up also drew shellfire as a matter of course, so the fitters, even after they had repaired any of the farthest forward tanks, dared not start the engines unless they were certain that the tank could be pulled clear and driven away without a hitch at the first attempt. This called for accurate, careful work in the dark, in bitter cold, under nerve-racking conditions, and the team did splendidly to recover eight tanks by Christmas, with stalwart help for several days from Captain Andres and his tractor.

After Christmas the hardest part of the work still remained. Some tanks were out in no-man's land and simply had to be abandoned, but in January, even with soft snow lying thick on the ground, nearly all the others were successfully repaired and salvaged. Captain James, the Technical Adjutant, went to live at the [Moro](#) ford and worked tirelessly to supervise the recovery, travelling every night, on foot mostly, up and down Sfasciata, over to [Orsogna](#), to the Roman road below Brecciarola. In the end, when the regiment left the [Sangro](#) district, only four tanks had to be written off, which was a very good end to a month of efficient, conscientious work by everyone concerned. Happily, never again in [18 Regiment's](#) lifetime did its fitters and recovery section have to clean up such a mess.

¹ Lt A. W. Hart; Masterton; born NZ 17 Jan 1918; garage proprietor.

² Tpr G. E. D. Stanley; born [Amberley](#), 9 May 1918; tractor driver; killed in action 16 Dec 1943.

³ Tpr D. Berryman; born [Waihi](#), 10 Oct 1919; blacksmith's striker; died of wounds 17 Dec 1943.

⁴ Sgt D. G. Laird; born [Oamaru](#), 25 May 1919; freezing-worker; killed in action 17 Dec 1943.

⁵ Capt E. J. Brennan, MM; [Kaitaia](#); born [Kakahi](#), 22 Jun 1911; clerk, P & T Dept; twice wounded.

⁶ Lt R. A. Sweet, MM; [Auckland](#); born NZ 31 Aug 1918; labourer.

⁷ 2 Lt J. E. Grennell, m.i.d.; born [Chatham Islands](#), 19 Feb 1918; carpenter; four times wounded.

⁸ Maj P. B. Allen; [Rotorua](#); born [Auckland](#), 30 Jun 1913; plasterer; wounded 2 Aug 1942.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 29 – WINTER AND SPRING

CHAPTER 29

Winter and Spring

Christmas at the battlefield is regarded much the same as Christmas anywhere. Even there the sternness of war is relaxed and everyone, as far as possible, keeps holiday. If you could see over the other side of the hill into the enemy's lines you would no doubt find the same there.

So it was with [18 Regiment](#) at [Castelfrentano](#). Its festivities had been well organised. The YMCA canteen was decorated with whatever could be scrounged. The official Christmas rations were supplemented by local pigs and poultry—A Squadron had found a nice yearling calf that it would have been a shame to let go—there were parcels from home, there was no lack of red 'plonk' and a double issue of beer. The party went with a bang. There was a record attendance at Padre Gourdie's services, the boys singing the well-known Christmas hymns at the pitch of their lungs and rushing off back to their billets to moisten their throats again. It was a miserable, damp, raw day, but nobody cared.

Only C Squadron could not celebrate with the rest. At dusk on 23 December, after three days of lovely idleness at Castelfrentano, it had been reluctantly dragged from its billets at short notice and sent off to the [Guardiagrele](#) road to support the British paratroops who now held the line there. Remembering the plastering B Squadron had had at [Salarola](#), C Squadron was a bit unhappy about going there; but its new homes turned out to be well behind the front line, in a series of farmhouses badly knocked about and not at all weatherproof, but still stout and shell-resistant. It was pretty quiet here, only the odd shell falling, no shooting to be done, and C Squadron's Christmas celebration suffered very little. Every house except those occupied by the tankies was full of paratroops with their red berets, and they were good drinking companions and interesting people, a cut above the average Tommy and very conscious of it, rather disgruntled at being used in such a quiet, static part of the front, which they considered a waste of their trained talent.

Winter was gripping the country tighter and tighter as the days went on. Earlier in December there had been odd sunny days when the oak trees on the hills had shone with red and copper tints never seen in New Zealand. Now that had all

vanished and given place to a drab, sulky landscape and heavy grey skies. The mud was mixed with half-frozen slush. The civilians shook their heads and prophesied snow any day. It was biting cold, and even with fires going on the open hearths in every farm kitchen, you could not keep your feet warm.

Fuel was a major problem, and supplies were not easy to keep up. You were lucky if you could find a little pile of railway sleepers or telegraph poles-most of them had been found by someone else long ago. The boys had none of the civilians' scruples against cutting down olive trees, but they did not burn well. Foraging parties went out to collect timber from shell-shattered houses, which led to arguments with the owners, and also with the provosts if they happened to be around. But nobody minded the arguments as long as the wood ended up in the right hands. The Italian idea of a fire, a couple of twigs and a few wisps of straw, did not appeal to the Kiwis.

For a lazy week after Christmas the unit stayed where it was, letting the effects of its revelry wear off slowly, the tank crews spending a very short time each day greasing the guns and freshening up the tanks generally. Then, to the accompaniment of scattered gunfire from the front and parties all up and down the [Sangro](#) hills, the year died a noisy death.

No new year could have had a more dramatic entry than 1944. On 31 December the Division went to bed in a grey, rainy world. On 1 January it opened bleary eyes to a world of dazzling white. Snow, snow more than a foot deep even in the sheltered spots, three or four feet against houses and walls on the weather side. Snow loading down telephone wires till they touched the ground, snow burying bivvies, occupants and all, hiding the tanks from view more effectively than any camouflage, blocking the roads so that the whole war was at a standstill. For most of the regiment this was something quite new. Its hardier members shook off the effects of their New Year excesses by getting outside and indulging in snow fights. Teams were pressed into service to shovel paths and roads clear, at first unwillingly, but quite gladly when they found that vigorous movement kept them reasonably warm. Everywhere you could hear the scrape of shovels and see black figures toiling against the white background. The whole Division buzzed with an activity previously unknown to it on a New Year's Day.

Next day (a magnificent day, cloudless and very clear with the sun sparkling on the snow), [Divisional Headquarters](#), now apparently convinced that attacks were 'out' till the winter let up, issued new orders for the holding of the line. These were not well received in the regiment, for it was to leave its good quarters at [Castelfrentano](#) and follow C Squadron over to its old stamping ground near [San Eusanio](#) to bolster up the western part of the sector. This news, circulating round the regiment after lunch, caused something of a stir. 'Bloody Army,' was the comment, 'can't leave us alone for a minute.' Having got this off its chest, the regiment turned to and made leisurely preparations to move.

Arranging new accommodation took two whole days. San Eusanio and the country round it were full of troops, and every unit seemed to be on the hunt for billets, the snow having put an effective end to bivvy life for a while. The 'recce' party had not only to find vacant casas, but also to instal temporary garrisons there to repel claim-jumpers. Before dawn on 4 January the tanks moved in, squadron by squadron, Regimental Headquarters into [San Eusanio](#) itself, A Squadron a mile farther along the [Bianco](#) track, B Squadron to scattered houses just ahead of C Squadron on the [Salarola](#) road. All along Route 84 the tanks travelled through lines of men, both Kiwis and civilians, even at that early hour, shovelling away to keep the road as clear as possible of slush and water. Luckily there had been no more snow, and the roads, though slippery, were navigable. The LAD also managed to scrape up enough shelter for itself in [San Eusanio](#), and shifted house the same day; it was glad to do so, for its old home on Route 84 had recently become too much of a target for Jerry's artillery, since some British medium guns had moved in next door.

Here [18 Regiment](#) sat for a cold week, officially holding the fort against counter-attacks from the west, actually doing very little but forage for fuel, make fires and sit in front of them. Jerry tried no counter-attacks, and he landed very few shells round the regiment, but our guns were everywhere, some of them so close that when they fired the nearest houses shook as in an earthquake. Apart from a blizzard on 6 January there was no more snow, but a succession of sunny days began to thaw the big fall, making the ground wetter than ever. The snow was apt to develop a hard crust on top, hiding wet slush into which you sank above your boot-tops. In front of every fire hung a permanent line of steaming socks.

The Kiwis' stay in the [Sangro](#) valley was drawing near its end now. The six weeks of action had been very exhausting, and the Division was due for a spell. For some time the usual crop of rumours had been floating in the air—there were murmurs from the wishful thinkers about going to [England](#) to train for the Second Front, but the current 'dinkum oil' did not go this far, stating that the Division would dig in for a month and then pull out to re-equip. This last yarn turned out to be unduly pessimistic. When the relief began it came suddenly, much sooner than anyone really expected. On 10 January the official news circulated that the Division was going back to [San Severo](#) to train. The regiment would be the first of the armour to move, going back the next day beyond the [Sangro River](#), and heading south again in a few days' time. This was very good news indeed. A 'recce' party went off to secure accommodation south of the river, and the tankies set to work to tidy up and pack ready for the road. The soft-skinned vehicles were to travel back in convoy, the tanks by train from [Vasto](#), on the coast a few miles south of the [Sangro](#).

B and C Squadrons left the [Salarola](#) road after dark on 11 January as 19 Regiment tanks drove in to replace them, and later the same night A Squadron and Regimental Headquarters pulled out from the [San Eusanio](#) road and followed down Route 84. It was a typical [Sangro](#) move, greasy roads, all lights strictly prohibited, tanks crawling along in the blackness. By dawn they were all safely back over the [Sangro](#), scattered and camouflaged in the thickly cultivated riverbed, just south of the Bailey bridge and not far from its approach road, down which a constant stream of New Zealand traffic was moving south. This was the first time since 30 November that the tanks had been back behind our own artillery, and though they were not yet out of range of Jerry's biggest guns—he was known to drop the occasional heavy shell near the bridge—the front-line tension had suddenly eased and there was quite a spirit of holiday among the squadrons.

The next time tank squadrons and B Echelon met was on the other side of [Italy](#).

The secrecy of this move, the last-minute disclosure that 2 NZ Division was leaving the [Eighth Army](#) to join the American [Fifth Army](#) beyond the [Apennines](#), all this is notable in the Division's history. There certainly seemed to be more fuss than usual over a move back from the line—wireless silence, all New Zealand badges and shoulder titles taken off, fern leaves on tanks and trucks painted out, seven days'

supplies carried on the tanks—but when the boys left the [Sangro](#) they had no idea where they were really going.

At 3 a.m. on 16 January, in high spirits that not even the bitter early morning cold could curb, the tank crews said goodbye to the [Sangro](#) for the last time and headed over the twisting Adriatic roads towards [Vasto](#). Here they found that less than half the tanks could be railed away that day, which damped things down slightly for those who had to wait, and gave rise to a lot of remarks about Typical Army Muck-ups, for [Vasto](#) was a deadly place, a real behind-the-lines town, too full of administrative troops and provosts to have anything left to offer. Only three trains a day were available, each one holding about ten tanks, and they had to be shared by [18](#) and [20](#) Regiments and a lot of odds and ends from Divisional Headquarters and [4](#) [Brigade](#) Headquarters. Loading up was quite a spectacle, the tanks crawling up a ramp at one end of the train and driving right along the flat-topped trucks with very little width to spare. One tank slipped off the side of a truck and knocked off the next one too, both with full crews aboard, but luckily the injuries were limited to bruises and scratches.

The last of the tanks got away on 18 January. Once on the move everyone enjoyed the trip, a long run down the coast, then inland past [San Severo](#) and [Foggia](#). There were vans on the trains in which the men lived, cooked and slept, except for a few who lived in tents on the trucks and stood picket in case any unfriendly planes came round or any civilians tried to get aboard.

By the time [San Severo](#) was reached everyone knew where they were really going, so there was no surprise when they left [Foggia](#) behind and headed west, grinding their way up and over the [Apennines](#) and down to the plains beyond. Off the trains at [Caserta](#), then away north again in little groups of five tanks, a 30-mile run which ended in flat fields outside the small town of [Piedimonte d'Alife](#), nestling up against the foot of a steep mountain wall.

Conditions here were about as different from the [Sangro](#) as they could be. In one stroke the Kiwis moved from winter to spring. To everyone's delight the ground was almost free from mud, the roads firm and not gouged with ruts and watercourses, the snow confined to the mountain tops where it should be. Steep hills, ravines and winding lanes had given place to plains and good straight roads.

The land was more fertile, the peasants better off; [Caserta](#) was a big prosperous-looking town with fine buildings, very different from the modest stone villages of the [Sangro](#). [Piedimonte d'Alife](#), pretty well untouched by the war, had an air of well-being about it. Through the town flowed a sparkling clear stream, in vast contrast to the muddy yellow Adriatic creeks. Behind the town you could stroll up a mountain cleft with vertical rock walls to where this stream made a sudden appearance from under a cliff. It was all very picturesque. There were even lemon trees growing up against the sunny sides of the houses.

There had to be some drawback, of course, and here it was prices. The ruling rates for such things as fruit, eggs and washing everyone considered outrageously high, and everyone blamed the Americans.

This was American territory, and for the first time the regiment was face to face with the almost legendary 'Yanks'. From Caserta the tanks had driven past American headquarters, American camps, American check posts. The roads were crowded with American vehicles and suicidal Negro drivers. [Piedimonte d'Alife](#) was full of Americans. They were certainly easy to get on with, well supplied with this world's goods and very willing to share them. Not far from the regiment was an American shower where you could wallow in unaccustomed luxury, with towel and soap 'on the house', and clean underclothes when you came out. After a session there you could forgive the Yanks for making you pay 20 lire for an egg. Later, when supplies of clothes ran short, the Kiwis were barred from this shower, but they did well while it lasted.

The American tinned meat, 'Spam', also went over well with the Kiwis, who found it a tasty change from the eternal M & V, bully beef and 'soya links'. The Americans themselves, probably tired of Spam on their daily menu, were always willing to swap it for bully, which, strangely, they seemed to like.

The last of the tanks reached [Piedimonte](#) on 20 January, and the same morning the B Echelon convoy arrived, to be greeted by a sharp earthquake which made them wonder for a while just what sort of place they had come to. The convoy's three-day trip had taken it through the mountains by river gorges and passes very imposing to look at, but a great strain on the drivers. Luckily there had been little military traffic on the way, but plenty of peasants' carts, and swarms of yelling

children running out under the truck wheels at every village. The steep Apennine roads had wrecked three trucks, and there could well have been more. However, here they were, and here was the whole regiment, nicely established, its squadrons fairly close together, most of the men living in bivvies among the vines, which on this drier ground was no hardship.

The current rumour was that the regiment was going into action again almost at once to reinforce the Americans, whose offensive towards [Rome](#) had bogged down. For the first time the name of [Cassino](#) was heard round the camp. Here, so the story ran, Jerry was holding on like grim death; but once past this obstacle the broad [Liri](#) valley would be open for our armour to burst through to [Rome](#). This was a good yarn, and [18 Regiment](#) was quite ready to believe it, for it seemed likely to provide the tanks with the opportunities they had not had at the [Sangro](#). So the first chore was to bring all the tanks up to fighting pitch in a hurry. The regiment was on short notice to move, and there was no time to lose.

Three days of hard work saw this job as nearly finished as it could be. Spare parts for the Shermans had suddenly become short—this was the first of many shortages that were to dog the Italian campaign for a year—but on the whole the tanks were in fair shape. They were stocked up with battle supplies. You could not hear the guns back here at [Piedimonte](#), but judging by the swarms of big bombers that passed overhead daily, there seemed to be plenty of work up at the front, and it stood to reason that the Kiwis would be in the middle of it before long. This theory was confirmed by the news of the [Anzio](#) landing on 22 January. Everything, according to the radio news and the rumours, was due to break loose on the [Fifth Army's](#) front any time. And yet the days passed and no summons came, and everyone began to feel a bit flat and restless, despite the good time they were having at [Piedimonte](#).

It was very pleasant there, fine mild days after frosty nights, plenty of leisure to kick footballs about and sample the local brews, fraternise with the Yanks or go hitch-hiking along the [Volturno](#) valley to visit cobblers in other units. The voice of the 'ringie' began to be heard round the camp. Some of the men went out on the hills above [Piedimonte](#) and shot grouse. There were films in the opera house at [Piedimonte](#), a real opera house in the traditional style with red plush seats and gilt ceiling. Daily leave trucks were organised to [Pompeii](#).

For most of the boys this was a real highlight. It was their first official leave in [Italy](#), except for one or two who had been lucky enough to score a week in [Bari](#). Everyone had heard of [Pompeii](#) at school, but few had ever expected to see it. Now they went there in truckloads, fought off hungry mobs of beggars at the entrance, wandered round the ruins, inspected the indelicate murals (rather disappointing despite the guides' rapturous build-up), watched [Vesuvius](#) putting up plumes of smoke. All you saw of [Naples](#) in passing was the ruined railway yards, but some people got into the city and did not think much of it—filthy alleys off the main street, hungry people, buildings bombed by the Air Forces and blown up by Jerry.

Life at [Piedimonte](#) was not all play, of course, but the work was no great burden. The tanks had an occasional shoot at a home-made range against the hills, mainly to 'T & A' their guns, which had not been done since before the [Sangro](#) battle. [General Freyberg](#) inspected a ceremonial parade of 4 Armoured Brigade, then addressed officers and senior NCOs, speaking with confidence of the breakthrough to [Rome](#) that was going to take place. Early in February the tank squadrons had a night out on manoeuvres by the [Volturno River](#), after which Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants said that, though it was a simple affair, it proved that everyone in the regiment knew his job and could carry it out.

The Colonel had come back from hospital a week earlier, and Lieutenant-Colonel Ferguson had gone to take over 20 Regiment. The news that both of them had been awarded the DSO for the [Sangro](#) and [Orsogna](#) fighting, bringing the 18th's grand total to three, was very well received all through the unit. The boys were as a rule apt to snort a little at decorations, but two DSOs were something special.

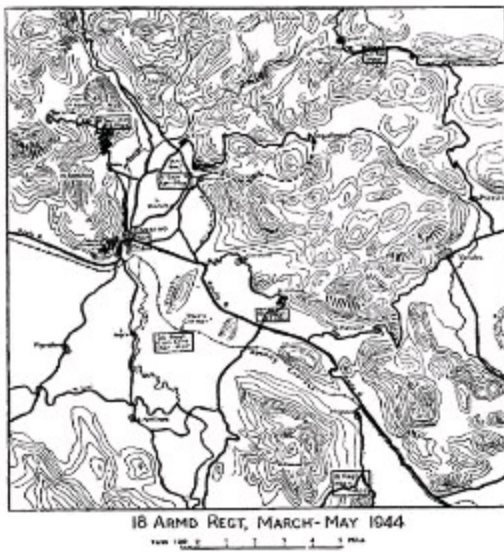
Then, with February just getting into its stride, the news from the front became disappointing and contradictory; the weather turned sour, with rain and sleet and hail, and the snow well down on the hills; and in the middle of this came the long-expected call to the front.

News of the move arrived on 4 February, and next day an advance party left to lay out the regiment's new home and sweep it for mines. The place they were going to had been well fought over, and there were liable to be mines planted almost anywhere, horrible little wooden box mines that would blow your foot off, or deadly S-mines that would jump in the air, explode about head height, and almost certainly

kill you. Roads and lanes were apt to have these horrors hidden under the surface, gaps in hedges would be sown with them, vines would conceal trip-wires hitched to mines a few feet away. Up to now the Kiwis had not struck this kind of warfare on such a scale—mines in the desert had been laid in a straightforward sort of way, and at the [Sangro](#) they had been sparingly used. So the stories of widespread mining that filtered down from the [Cassino](#) front were very badly received. A dirty, sneaking kind of war, said everyone, not the sort of thing we're used to.

On the evening of 6 February, a clear moonlight night, the squadrons, A and B1 Echelons packed up and all headed west, in groups of twenty-five vehicles, leaving twenty minutes apart. After the low-gear night moves at the [Sangro](#) this was an easy one, a two-and-a-half-hour run across the [Volturno](#) and up Route 6, that famous highway that was to become all too familiar to the Division over the next two months. But not even in the snow had they struck anything quite so cold. The drivers closed down their hatches, something very unusual, and the tank commanders, with their heads poked out of the turrets, were the only ones to face the freezing air—and then only because they had to. Though the feeble moonlight did not show up many details it was light enough to see that Route 6 was densely populated all the way, camps, dumps, hospitals one after the other with hardly a gap between. Then off the highway by a lane to the left, and into the new area, two miles from Route 6, in gently undulating fields nicely covered with trees. After the ride everyone was chilled to the bone. A hot cup of tea helped matters a little, but damp blankets on the frosty ground soon undid most of the good again.

Here the regiment was to spend only a few days, until the Americans had forced their way across the Rapido River by



18 Armd Regt, March-May 1944

Cassino, and then it was to follow through and exploit along the flat **Liri** valley. Actually it did not move again for eleven weeks.

The first thing that struck you about this place was the cold. It was as if the calendar had swung back again from spring to winter. The steep bulk of **Monte Camino**, the Americans' 'Million Dollar Hill', which sheltered **18 Regiment** from the battlefield, robbed it at the same time of most of the sun's warmth. The morning frost often took half the day to disappear, and then left the ground wet and sloppy. Rain showers caused ponds all over the place. There were one or two houses round the area, but almost everyone was in bivvies or tents, and the nights were bitter.

In the first few days the regiment was saved from freezing by a truckload of charcoal brought in from somewhere. A new form of heater, the jam-tin brazier, with a wire handle and with holes punched in sides and bottom, suddenly appeared in large numbers, and at dusk any day you could see fiery catherine wheels all round the camp as these braziers were swung in circles to set them glowing. They warmed up a bivvy or the back of a truck very well, but you had to watch your ventilation, for carbon monoxide poisoning was a real danger with them. Then someone conceived a diesel drip burner made from a 75-millimetre shell case, easier to deal with than the brazier, and very effective provided you did not mind the fumes and the grey dust that went with it.

At first nobody bothered to make long-term plans for passing the time. There was little to be done on the tanks. To keep the boys warm and out of mischief there

were impromptu route marches, most of them ending up at the local showers. These were another improvisation—showers connected to the radiators of the water trucks, through which the water circulated to warm up. Not very good for the truck engines, perhaps, but a great boon for everybody.

In spare hours footballs were booted about rather aimlessly, or the boys could wander down the road to the village of [Mignano](#) two miles away and inspect its ruins, for it had been smashed almost out of existence during the fighting round there. They could not go farther afield, for the unit was on short notice to move forward. It was quite pleasant to wander up the nearby hills, provided you kept off the little hill just behind the camp, which was heavily sown with S-mines and was out of bounds. A party of engineers, attached to the regiment waiting for the great advance to begin, was in great demand now to lecture the squadrons and give demonstrations on mines and booby traps.

This valley was a noisy place. Most of the American artillery was miles ahead, but its firing reverberated round the hills and seemed at times to shake the countryside. Down on the railway line by [Mignano](#) were some heavy guns which went off at long intervals with terrifying thumps. Sometimes Jerry's return fire could be heard falling a long way ahead, with an occasional big shell down by the main road near [Mignano](#). British and American fighters were snarling overhead continually, and often there was the heavier, slower roar of big bombers sailing past. There was nothing quiet or dull or peaceful about this place.

On 10 February nearly all of B2 Echelon came up and parked a few miles behind the regiment. It had at first joined the B2 Echelons of 19 and 20 Regiments at [Raviscanina](#), on an uninviting mountainside overlooking the [Volturno River](#), but this was too far back for convenience, particularly if the Division was heading for [Rome](#) soon. So from 10 February the whole regiment, except for a very few trucks, was close together again waiting for the advance.

The great day, so the story ran, was to be 19 February. The [Maori Battalion](#) was to make a bridgehead over the Rapido on the 18th, and everyone was confident that the advance would be on. The regiment was all set, tanks and scout cars checked over and fully stocked up, the supply organisation all in gear, the sapper party ready with its mine equipment, a bridging tank on loan from [4 Brigade](#) Headquarters to

deal with small demolitions. It had its own mobile artillery, a battery of British self-propelled guns with the improbable name of 'Priests', whose senior officers lived at Regimental Headquarters with a direct wireless link to their guns. Up the road, also ready to push forward, was a host of American tanks, scattered and hidden away under the trees; official parties from [18 Regiment](#) had been up to settle details of the exploitation with them. The general feeling was: 'Once we get going, nothing can stop us'—until the evening of 19 February, when word flashed round that the Maoris had been knocked back and that the party was off for just now. It would be on again as soon as possible, but it would be at least five days more before the regiment moved. Five days! It was a mercy that nobody could see into the future.

Now began the most disheartening time [2 NZ Division](#) was ever to spend. The new plans were all laid—[Cassino](#) to be flattened by bombers, the infantry to go in straight afterwards, the New Zealand and American tanks to follow through, up the [Liri](#) valley towards [Anzio](#) and [Rome](#). All that was needed was the right spell of weather, airfields dry enough for heavy bombers, the promise of a few fine days to get well under way. The whole Division stood ready and waiting, and the right day did not come for three weeks. The story of that cruel run of luck, of the bombing on 15 March and its unhappy sequel, all the world knows.

Of all the Kiwis [18 Regiment](#) was among the least affected, for it was well back out of sight of [Cassino](#), neither shooting nor being shot at. Of course the universal fret at the delay reached back to it, and as day followed day, damp and dismal, with never a sight of the sun, with the camp getting muddier instead of drier, it had its own remarks to make about a country that could turn on this sort of thing after the crisp frosty spring of late January. But at the same time the regiment was well aware of its good luck compared with the units parked up on the [Cassino](#) plain under the shadow of Jerry's guns.

There was still very little to do, and nobody even suggested organised training. The RSM held a succession of short courses for junior NCOs. Parties went out with picks and shovels repairing roads. The boys 'T & A'd' their tank guns over and over again, they furbished up the tanks till they shone, and still they had lots of spare time. The tanks could not be taken all round the country for driving practice, for they were supposed to be camouflaged away from prying aerial eyes. Signal procedure

could not be rehearsed, for there was a strict ban on wireless. Lieutenant Greenfield and his boys went out into the highways and byways and salvaged miles of abandoned telephone wire, British and American.

Such things as early rising were quite unknown—it was common for one member of a tank crew to appear at the cookhouse at breakfast time with five sets of dixies to collect the meal for his whole team, while the rest still slumbered. The main business seemed to be football, which became more organised and official, with inter-squadron and inter-unit matches, or rather mud scrambles. A few individualists grew very keen on baseball, and the Regimental Headquarters team had the temerity to challenge a team of Yanks, with the result that might have been expected.

There were a few notable incidents, but not many. One day a B Squadron ammunition truck caught fire and blew up just outside the area, spraying the place with little bits of metal. Trooper Jack Kent ¹ was killed when a tank out on a test run slipped off the road and capsized. Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants, to everyone's sorrow, left the unit to become second-in-command of [4 Brigade](#), and Lieutenant-Colonel Robinson ² from Divisional Cavalry took over. Major Playle ('Uncle Joe' to the old hands) arrived back from furlough in New Zealand and became second-in-command.

It seemed during those few weeks that the war was never going to get anywhere. The great spectacle of 15 March, when our air armada passed overhead on the way to [Cassino](#), roused a spurt of enthusiasm, and for a week afterwards the regiment waited ready to move, at first eagerly, then with flagging confidence, then with bitter disillusioned jokes about 'our highly bloody mobile division'. Very little news from the front filtered back, but it seemed that things were not going as they should, and that the armoured sweep up the [Liri](#) valley might be an optimistic flight of fancy. 'It was not easy,' says Padre Gourdie, 'sitting back near [Mignano](#) while the rest of the Div was doing battle, and many of us felt very much like bludgers. We were on 2 days' notice, on one day's notice, 12 hours', 4 hours', 2 hours' and I believe on half an hour's notice at one stage, but there we stopped.' On 22 March the regiment was released from its short notice with orders to stay at [Mignano](#) indefinitely and do as much training as it could.

Six weeks of almost complete idleness had ruined the unit's appetite for work, so this idea did not go down well. At first there was some effort to knuckle down—the NCOs' courses carried on for another week or two, C Squadron sallied out and did a small manoeuvre along with a company of 22 Battalion and its anti-tank guns. But before long the training seemed to slide gently into the background, and the camp at [Mignano](#) was largely given over again to football, vino and lethargy.

¹ Tpr J. R. [Kent](#); born [London](#), 6 Nov 1907; tractor driver; died on active service 11 Mar 1944.

² Lt-Col H. A. Robinson, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; [Waipukurau](#); born [New Plymouth](#), 29 Sep 1912; farmhand; Div Cav 1939-44; CO [18 Armd Regt](#) Mar-Jul 1944; [20 Armd Regt](#) Mar-Oct 1945; twice wounded.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 30 – EAST OF CASSINO

CHAPTER 30

East of Cassino

Forward from [Mignano](#) was a road called the 'Speedy Express' highway. It had been a railway before Jerry sabotaged it. Now it was an alternative track for front-line traffic, quite a good road except for its habit of running along embankments with nasty steep drops on both sides. From [Mignano](#) it swung into a steep-walled valley, then emerged on to a wide undulating plain, covered with leafless grey willows, with two strange, abrupt rock outcrops (Porchio and Trocchio) sticking up in the middle. Once past Porchio you felt naked and exposed going along 'Speedy Express'; past Trocchio you were under Jerry's nose, and nobody went up there unless he had to.

Along this road, at dusk on 26 March, lumbered Major Stanford's B Squadron. At a spot called 'Cox's corner', just short of Trocchio, the tanks nosed down off the embankment by a bulldozed track, took a country lane leading off to the left, then spread out into a line side by side, with a few yards between tanks, in a cleared field with trees all round it. The crews had a busy night digging the tanks two feet into the ground, digging slitties under and behind them, rigging up camouflage nets. By dawn the tanks were all ready for action, guns trained westwards toward enemy country across the Rapido River.

With nearly a quarter of 1944 gone, a second spring on the way, and the war still deadlocked along the pile of rubble that had been [Cassino](#), it had looked as if the New Zealand armour was out of a job for the duration. But here at Trocchio there was work for it, straight-out artillery work just like A Squadron's first job at [Torretta](#) in November. Humdrum, unexciting work, certainly, but better than hanging round [Mignano](#) pretending to train.

In Egypt, a year before, 4 Armoured Brigade had practised this sort of thing, shooting up indirect targets with observation posts calling the fire. Artillerymen had been sceptical. This work, they said, needs a lot of skill and practice, and nobody but the artillery will have the training to do it properly. At [Torretta](#) A Squadron had not done enough shooting to prove otherwise. But now was the chance, for the 25-pounders were grumbling under an ammunition shortage that limited them to a few rounds a day, while the 75-millimetre tank guns had plenty. And the lofty, almost

vertical peak of Trocchio, towering above the Rapido valley, provided a perfect observation post.

Except for the senior officers and a few adventurers who had made illegal sightseeing trips up here, this was the boys' first glimpse of the notorious [Cassino](#) front. Their first comment, when day broke on 27 March, was how flat and bleak it was. There was not a rise in the ground between the tanks and the Rapido, only a vast expanse of willow branches. The river was not visible, but from a rise behind the tanks you could see the confusion of trees and scattered farms on the west bank, and up to the right, in horribly plain view, glowered the ruin of [Montecassino Abbey](#), with the hills behind leading up to the snowy cone of [Monte Cairo](#). Below it hung a continuous pall of smoke that was all you could see of [Cassino](#) town.

Here for three weeks the tanks of [18 Regiment](#) lived, a squadron at a time, turn about. Every fourth night a fresh squadron came up 'Speedy Express' to take over, and the retiring squadron went out by a muddy lane across the back of Trocchio, past rows of camouflaged, silent 25-pounders, then down Route 6 to [Mignano](#). Every night a train of trucks and jeeps came up with ammunition and supplies. And every day, on orders phoned down from the crow's nest on Trocchio to a scout car below and thence wirelessly to the tanks, the gunners busily slammed shells into Jerry's territory, some wet or foggy days only a few, on other days hundreds.

It was great fun up on Trocchio except when Jerry lobbed airburst shells just overhead. The 'OP' was a rock sangar on the crest, roofed over with corrugated iron and camouflaged on top with sods. It was equipped with a powerful telescope with which the guns could be directed very accurately on any given spot—a house, for instance, or even one particular window in a house. The Kiwis had every inch of Jerry's ground mapped out, all his infantry and guns, the exact location of his horrid Nebelwerfers or 'Moaning Minnies' which scared the life out of everyone as their big clumsy bombs whined through the air. Any suspicious movement or flash of a hostile gun was open to the alert eyes on Trocchio, and bad luck for the German who did not get back under cover smartly. The tanks (though their crews never saw it) completed the ruin of several houses near the river, and helped to spoil the look of Jerry's front-line villages, Sant' Angelo on the opposite riverbank and [Pignataro](#) a little farther back; though it was found later that Jerry, in his dugouts under the house floors, was almost immune from any shelling. Farther to the left, in the hills to

the south of the [Liri](#) valley, the tanks sometimes shot up the village of Sant' Apollinare to oblige the Free French, who were responsible for that part of the front. Some of the 'stonks' consisted of as many as 400 shells. Against the solid stone houses armour-piercing high-explosive shells (APHE for short) were the best, for ordinary high explosive just left slight dents on the walls. But if you wanted to demoralise a gun crew, then high explosive was the thing, preferably airburst.

Though Jerry sent back only a fraction of what he got, the game was not all one-sided. He knew perfectly well where the tanks were. Some days he left them alone; on others he was stung to retaliation and landed shells and 'Minnies' all round. Captain Allan Pyatt recalls:

It was noticeable that as long as we kept shooting at [Cassino](#) or Sant' Angelo, we didn't get much back at us. But always, every time, we traversed left... we got it back hard. We assumed ... that we must have been tickling up his main gunline.

As a rule the nights were pretty quiet, but one night while C Squadron was up in the gun line he let fly with everything he had and kept it up most of the night, nobody could guess why. Roy Hancox says:

One hit our camouflage net pole & burst over us, loads of duds went over & when they whizzed past they rocked the tank. When the 21os hit they made the tank shake as though it were jelly. There were three of us in the tanks & ... we were shaking like leaves in the wind.

Whenever shells began to land the boys closed down their turrets and waited for the storm to blow over, to the fury of other troops near by, who did not see why the tankies, who caused all the trouble, should be able to sit safe inside their iron horses and laugh at it.

It was not always a laughing matter. One day C Squadron was caught by a sudden bout of shelling, one tank was hit, Troopers Hedley Kelman ¹ and Owen Chambers ² were killed and three others wounded. On another day Sergeant Dick Aubin and Trooper Bill Walker ³ of A Squadron were killed by a very unlucky chance when a shell landed in their slittie right behind a tank. In the course of the three weeks two tanks were damaged and had to go back to the workshops. Once while B

Squadron was there a stack of shells behind the tanks was hit and set alight, to the agitation of the crews, who set to work feverishly to tear the stack apart before it began exploding. And sometimes camouflage nets were set on fire and had to be put out in a hurry.

Keeping up the ammunition supply at Trocchio was no simple matter. The only time trucks came up in daylight they were shelled, and Trooper [Parsons](#)⁴ was killed and one man wounded. After that they went back to the safer but more difficult night delivery, trucks unloading food and stores at Cox's corner, carriers or Honey tanks taking the heavy shells right up to the tanks.

Away back in the early days of the war, before air power swung our way, a line of tanks out in the open country like this would have very soon been mangled by the [Luftwaffe](#). Now not one plane in twenty was German. Occasionally he sent a few fighter-bombers over on hit-and-run raids about dusk, but nothing heavier. The tanks just sat quietly under their nets, which the crews propped up or pulled back while shooting, then replaced.

In between shoots the crews at Trocchio had plenty of leisure to sit in the sun, for the days had warmed up quite a lot, and apart from a few spasms of misty rain most of them were clear and pleasant. There would not have been much leisure if Jerry had counter-attacked, for the tanks were at a moment's notice to bring down a belt of defensive fire right along the front to help the Guards brigade that now held this sector. Trocchio would no doubt have been a warm place then—as Captain Pyatt says, 'We didn't really realise how close we were to the front.' Luckily, Jerry did nothing so rash.

The story of Trocchio would not be complete without mention of Padre Gourdie's Easter Communion, held towards dusk in a top-storey room looking out towards [Montecassino](#). Everyone was there. The padre has called it 'one of the most inspiring services of my life', and as such it will be remembered by many men who as a rule would not think twice about such things. On the subject of front-line services in general, Padre Gourdie says: 'Normally it is an unwise thing to take a service where a chance shell can do much damage, and I tried to get on the safe side of the casa always No one was ever hurt during any of the services I held, in any of the battle areas.'

On the evening of 15 April C Squadron, finishing its four-day spell at Trocchio, was relieved by tanks of 19 Regiment and went back to Mignano to find the 18th talking about a move away from the Cassino front. After such a long time everyone seemed quite pleased with the prospect of a change of scenery, particularly as the Mignano camp had been getting less and less peaceful as time went on.

Three weeks earlier life had been pretty quiet at Mignano. There had been a few other units and ammunition dumps not far away, no guns nearer than two miles, and the most notable uproar had been when B Squadron's ammunition truck went up in flames. But since then the place had deteriorated most unpleasantly. The 18th was now hemmed in by dumps and supply troops. One night three big French 155-millimetre guns had come lumbering in and planted themselves right next door, 'creating a disturbance of some magnitude,' says one man, 'knocking tents down & uprooting trees'. With these monsters in the vicinity there was little peace left, for the whole place shook when they fired, and Jerry could be expected to locate them any day and begin shelling. Already his shellfire was coming nearer than it ever had before, and it was only a matter of time.

These were the first real Frenchmen the boys had met face to face. Since coming over to the Fifth Army they had from time to time seen lines of French colonial soldiers, the 'Goums', riding past on horses, and had remarked how little they would like to come up against such wild, piratical characters. But these gunners were very different, hearty drinkers, full of fun, who obviously got a kick out of life. Some of the tankies spent their spare time over at the guns, and in off hours the Frenchmen came wandering round 18 Regiment's camp. There were impromptu parties at which international friendships were sealed and re-sealed; there were organised evenings of boxing, at which the French were surprisingly expert.

But however cheerful and companionable the gunners were, their guns were uncomfortable neighbours, and nobody was sorry when the word went round that the regiment was due to move away somewhere quieter.

For the last fortnight there had been some coming and going of furlough men. The first to come back from New Zealand had arrived early in April, and for a time had been public figures, everyone flocking round eager to hear how things were at home. Now, on 15 April, the unit was just recovering from a farewell party to twelve

senior NCOs (the last of the old [18 Battalion](#) originals except for one or two officers) who had left that morning in a blaze of alcoholic glory on the first leg of their homeward trip. Two days later there was another party, lasting twenty-four hours, for eight officers who were going the same way. The [18th](#) did not believe in taking its farewells sadly.

While this celebration was at its height on 17 April the first definite orders came for a move from [Mignano](#). Once more the regiment was to split up. A Squadron was to go into the line in the Rapido valley north of [Cassino](#), the rest to head back away from the front for some training. Training, so the story ran, in co-operation with infantry. Not before time, thought the better informed. Whenever tanks and infantry had tried to co-operate at the [Sangro](#), the result had been indifferent.

Now that fighting inside [Cassino](#) had quietened down the Rapido valley front was coming into the limelight, names like [Terelle](#) and [Colle Abate](#) cropping up in the daily news, truck drivers from other units talking about mysterious places like the Dust Bowl and the [Inferno Track](#), which did not sound desirable spots. The front line was evidently pretty tough, perched high on rough peaks on the west side of the Rapido, the roads down on the valley floor all overlooked by Jerry and shelled regularly. To reach this part of the front from [Mignano](#) you went forward to the north end of Trocchio, then turned off along the 'ambulance route', a series of narrow one-way lanes winding between hedges, rough and dusty as if they had just been hacked out of the clay, to [Portella](#), a straggly village in the foothills which was a sort of general assembly point for all troops moving round in that sector. In this unattractive place A Squadron was to relieve Canadian tank men, taking over seven of their Shermans away up in an inaccessible spot near the front line. Here was a small complication—the Canadian tanks had petrol-driven Chrysler engines, something new for [18 Regiment](#). Luckily, there was time for the drivers to pay a short visit to the 'Canucks' at [Portella](#) for a sketchy lesson on the differences between these and their own diesel Shermans.

On the evening of 19 April A Squadron, with Major Dickinson back in command, left [Mignano](#) in two groups, one with nine Shermans bound for [Portella](#), the other in trucks to take over the Canadian tanks up on the mountain. Even though some of the tank commanders had had a preview of the 'ambulance route' the Shermans had a terrible job negotiating the narrow track in the dark, and had to take it at a crawl,

but they got through to [Portella](#) safely and went into position downhill from the village, just where the hills sloped down to the valley floor, nicely hidden in an olive grove but with flat, open fields in front.

The vehicle party, under Captain Passmore, changed to jeeps at the 'Dust Bowl', which turned out to be a little sunken place, part of a dry stream bed below [Portella](#). It earned its descriptive name after being used for a while as a rendezvous for convoys crossing the valley. Its other dubious claim to fame was that Jerry had the habit of shelling it whenever he thought fit; but luckily no shells fell while Passmore's party was there. The jeeps, piled high with gear, the tankies perched insecurely on top, lost no time in getting away from such an unhealthy locality, went right across the flat of the valley, over the river, into a dark cleft in the forbidding hills beyond, and then up a road that, even in [Italy](#), was incredible, curling up an almost vertical rocky face in a series of tight zigzags. This was the [Terelle](#) road, spoken of with awe by all New Zealand jeep drivers, a notorious hot spot, constantly spattered with shells and mortar bombs, travelled only by jeeps which went up at night with trailer loads of supplies.

At the top bend of this nightmare road, at a place where the jeeps could turn round with a little manoeuvring, the boys dismounted and walked on about a hundred yards up the road to where the tanks were parked in the lee of a bank below a steep rounded hilltop. The Canadians could not leave the place fast enough. They had had a bellyful of it—shelling, night patrols, short rations. Above all, they said, you must not be seen in daylight round the corner just ahead of the leading tank, as Jerry has a machine gun covering it. All this happy story they poured into the newcomers' ears before setting off purposefully down the hill.

Actually the place was not as bad as it was painted. The 'corner just ahead' lost some of its terror the first morning, when [General Freyberg](#) came up to view the place and walked calmly out round it, red hat and all. Not that many of the tankies felt inspired to follow his example. The tanks themselves were nicely out of sight, but from the corner you could see right into Jerry's territory, [Monte Cairo](#) glaring at you from less than three miles away, the village of [Terelle](#) clinging to the slope as if it had been glued on, [Montecassino](#) away down to the south, small and insignificant from this high viewpoint. There were no casas here, but the boys lived in the tanks

or under tarpaulins up against them, and were just as well off, for the few houses on these heights were the poorest of peasants' huts, filthy and smelly after months of occupation by assorted soldiers, offering no home comforts whatever.

The heights were manned by British infantry, the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, which was relieved by the Maoris while A Squadron was there. The battalion headquarters and a company were very close to the tanks, but very little was seen of them. Major Dickinson says:

The locality was not good for social visits. It was very rocky & shells created their own shrapnel & ricochets were no help at all to one's nerves. Logically enough the infantry did not desire tank movement up there & the tanks stayed pretty quiet. They were there only if required & had very restricted movement anyway.

Only once, in fact, did a tank move. Captain [Oliphant](#),⁵ commander of one of the forward troops, recalls the incident:

For some time the Germans had been reported digging a cave or tunnel on the hillside across the valley from [Terelle](#) and shortly after the [Maori Battalion](#) arrived they decided that they would take an anti tank gun in daylight round the corner and shoot up the cave. In view of the unhealthy reports about this corner it was agreed that three tanks would ... do the job instead.... When it came to starting up the tanks, although four were tried only one would start.... The one tank duly rounded the corner and shot off a lot of high explosive and smoke into the Germans' diggings. There was no retaliation of any kind.

This story puts the finger on the worst feature of this job—the tanks. The boys never felt happy about them. They were not so very different from the diesel Shermans to handle, but they were in poor condition; there had been no chance on these inhospitable mountains to keep up their maintenance or to 'T & A' the guns, and both were badly needed. And at the best of times the engines of these petrol Shermans made a fearful racket when you started them up. Luckily, up here on the hills it was not often necessary.

The food was not as bad as the Canadians had led the Kiwis to believe. There was none too much of it, which was natural considering the difficulty of carting it up, but the tankies were quite used to 'doing' for themselves and making it taste

reasonable, so they had nothing much to growl at, except the nightly walks down to the 'jeep head' to manhandle the supplies up. This was a nasty trip and you went down and back treading delicately, ears straining to catch the slightest sound, for Jerry was quite liable to land a salvo round there at any time. Excursions to refill the water cans were as bad; Jerry had all the wells taped, and tossed a few round them from time to time for luck.

A Squadron's stay in these parts was very short, so short that the boys were left wondering why they had been sent up there at all. On the evening of 22 April, after three idle days at [Portella](#), Dickinson's half squadron was relieved by 19 Regiment and came out again along the ambulance route and down Route 6 in time to rejoin the regiment before it left [Mignano](#). The next night Passmore's crews were relieved and went back down the dizzy [Terelle](#) road.

While A Squadron was away the rest of the regiment had set about packing to leave [Mignano](#), quite a major job after such a long time in one place. Then for a day or two it did not know where it was. Orders and rumours seemed to change almost hourly. 'Recce' parties spent hours travelling round [Italy](#), then found their work wasted. On 18 April the unit was directed to one place, two days later to another, and on the 21st to a different place again. It was now to go back to the edge of the [Volturno](#) valley, not far from its old haunt at [Piedimonte d'Alife](#), to train with the British infantry of 78 Division. Here it would be separated for a while from 4 Brigade, which would be some miles away over the hills.

On 22 April, with all details of the move settled at last, the [18th](#) sent off much of its transport, stores and spare men to cut down the congestion on the move and to have the new area as well prepared as possible before the main body arrived. Cookhouses went too, so the [Mignano](#) camp had to do its own cooking for a day.

Just before midday on 23 April the convoy got away, leaving the damp, crowded [Mignano](#) valley behind with no regrets. First the soft-skinned vehicles, then the tanks at a slightly slower pace, with fitters and LAD in the rear. Down Route 6, the way the regiment had come up eleven weeks earlier so full of expectations; past the same miles of dumps and rear-line troops. The road was full of traffic in both directions, with Negro and Indian and Polish drivers whose sole idea seemed to be to get somewhere as fast as possible with a maximum of dust, and to hell with everyone

else on the road. However, the convoy kept up to time, and about 3 p.m. arrived at its destination, a very attractive spot on a gentle eastward slope falling to the [Volturno River](#) two and a half miles away, hills sprinkled with trees rising on the west side. There were few trees in the camp site, but plenty of fresh grass, which looked very good after [Mignano](#), where any grass there might once have been had long vanished under the tramping of many feet. Here, too, there was lots of room, and the squadrons were well spread out, though still within easy reach. The people in charge of this area were very fussy about camouflage; the tanks all had nice new camouflage paint, dark green and brown, but in this area of few trees they were still easily spotted. The boys did their best with nets, heather and branches, with the usual undercurrent of grumbling at the extra work.

The war had hardly touched this part of the country, a refreshing change after [Cassino](#) and [Mignano](#). Not much more than a mile away was a big town called [Alvignano](#), and several promising villages adorned the hill slopes. There was a vexing decree that all towns were out of bounds; but there were farmhouses to visit, and little boys came to the camp, collected dirty washing, and had it back dry and pressed in an incredibly short time. Lately, with plenty of peasant women round to do the washing for a small reward, the tankies had been getting lazier and lazier about doing their own.

Here the summer round of malaria drill began again, the delousing squads going round the ditches and ponds with their petrol sprays, the insect repellent, the horrible yellow pills, long sleeves and trousers at dusk. Everyone was back in shorts and light shirts in the daytime, and it was getting warm enough to sunbathe and swim when you got the chance. The Volturno, fed by snow water, took your breath away when you went into it, and few people swam in it for more than a minute or two at a time, but it left you refreshed and tingling all over.

The manoeuvres with 78 Division lasted two days, 30 April and 1 May, and were very successful on the whole. They took place up in the hills about ten miles from camp, in beautiful country, terraced and thickly cultivated, the farm roads all lined with cherry blossom, but tough country to fight over. Each squadron did an exercise in turn, each with a different battalion, the infantry moving to the attack with its tanks in support, firing on targets pointed out by the infantry over the little 'walkie-

'talkie' wireless with which the squadron and troop commanders' tanks were now fitted. Before each exercise the Tommies spent some time having a good look at the tanks—they did not seem to have had them at close quarters before. One or two points about the manoeuvre could have been improved. The radio co-operation did not always function too well, many of the target references were far too vague, and the tankies could barely understand the various accents hurled at them, especially the broad Scots of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. There were also one or two small accidents to houses and tanks in the narrow, twisting streets of the mountain villages on the way to the exercise ground.

The 18th was to have stayed with 78 Division till at least the second week in May, but on 1 May, unexpectedly, fresh orders came in. Once more the regiment was to be on its travels, and once more it was to split up, most of it going to join 4 Brigade in its training area; but one squadron was to go forward, come under command of 201 Guards Brigade, and take over tanks in Cassino town. The very thought of this gave you a funny feeling inside. Cassino, with its face-to-face fighting, its continual shell and mortar fire, its permanent smoke screen, had become a town of evil repute among the Kiwis.

On the nights of 2 and 3 May the B Squadron tanks, riding in state on transporters, their crews nearly asphyxiated with dust, went up to Mignano on the first stage of their move into Cassino. At daybreak on the 3rd, after being hauled out of its blankets in the middle of the night, the rest of the regiment set off on its ten-mile move to rejoin 4 Brigade near Pietramelara, just over the other side of the small range of hills behind Alvignano. Its new home was flat and almost treeless, but quite pleasant, heavily cultivated, grain and bean crops all over the place. A Squadron had a bad introduction to it when two tanks stuck in the mud just as they were turning off the road into their field, where recent rain had left a small morass.

It seemed as if, once dispossessed of its semi-permanent home at Mignano, the regiment was doomed to wander round Italy in small groups for ever. The day after its return to 4 Brigade a new order came, A Squadron to take over from 19 Regiment again at Terelle and Portella. On the night of 5 May the squadron followed B Squadron away up Route 6 on transporters, leaving a very depleted unit at Pietramelara.

It was to be still more depleted before long. On 7 May word arrived that half of C Squadron was to go up into the line in mountains east of the Rapido valley, a nice quiet sector, so the story ran, but nearly vertical. British paratroops, the same brigade that had held the [Guardiagrele](#) road in January, were holding the line there, but what tanks could do in such country had everybody mystified. Once more the long clumsy transporters appeared on the road outside the [18th's](#) area, and once more, at 6 p.m. on 8 May, they disappeared into the dusk with the C Squadron tanks.

With only a handful of tanks left in camp, [Pietramelara](#) was reduced almost to a B Echelon area, and there was very little to do except some shooting on a small home-made range. The [18th](#) took advantage of its flat area to lay out cricket and baseball pitches. The Volturno was much farther away than it had been at [Alvignano](#), but truckloads of enthusiasts still went there to swim. For a couple of days the boys, with mutinous mutterings, were dragged round the parade ground to polish up their rusty drill, and after that there was a ceremonial parade for [General Freyberg](#), who pinned 'gongs' on to several members of the [18th](#).

Then came the great hour, 11 p.m. on 11 May, when the British, American, French and Polish artillery all along the front opened up with a crash, and the Allied armies once again went forward to the attack to open the gate to [Rome](#) and beyond. Even back at [Pietramelara](#) it was noisy, and the distant sky danced with gun flashes all night. After that, for a whole week, news from the front was scarce. Rumour had it that the Second Front in [France](#) was due to open at the same time, and everyone was restive and impatient, waiting for the big news that was so long delayed.

The boys were still practically unemployed, but the few remaining tanks had a day's manoeuvre, with a company of 22 Battalion, over well-known ground near [Piedimonte d'Alife](#). This certainly seemed an improvement on the last one, although the signal and wireless set-up between infantry and tanks still was not quite right, and there was still some misunderstanding over the indication of targets. Plainly more practice was needed.

Then, on 18 May, with Jerry at last on the run in front of the Allies, the [Pietramelara](#) camp was jerked awake by a call to go forward, pick up the squadrons, and help him on his way a little. Some days earlier 19 Regiment had vanished, and

the story ran that it was already fighting away up in the [Liri](#) valley. After so many messy weeks with [18 Regiment](#) scattered far and wide, a squadron here and a few tanks there, this was very good news. Better still, the [18th](#) would be operating as a unit again, not as a lot of bits and pieces. Perhaps, even, the whole brigade might be going in together for the first time since [Guardiagrele](#). Such a prospect was like a shot in the arm to a unit badly in need of one.

But it would not have been [Italy](#) if there had been no hitch in the arrangements. On 20 and 21 May the move was 'off' and 'on' again no fewer than four times, mostly at very short notice, until everyone was thoroughly confused and 'browned off'. Finally, at 4 a.m. on the 22nd, the camp was struck and the convoy moved off, the soft-skinned vehicles in one group, the tanks separately on transporters, including the eight C Squadron tanks from the paratroopers' sector, which had come back to [Pietramelara](#) two nights before.

The move out was a bit straggly, for only about half a dozen trucks had got away when a three-tonner capsized and blocked the one-way track, and it was some time before another way out could be organised. But once on its way the convoy had no more hitches along Route 6, and by 7 a.m. it had arrived at a temporary camp near [San Vittore](#), halfway between [Mignano](#) and [Cassino](#), under olive trees up on the hillside above Route 6, where A and B Squadrons and breakfast were waiting.

The regiment was now on an hour's notice to move again. It seemed pretty clear that it would be going up to the 'sharp end' almost at once, and the prospect of a chase was quite exhilarating. The regiment was in good fettle and eager to go, fully equipped with fifty-three Shermans, with eight new Honey tanks replacing most of the scout cars in the reconnaissance troop, and with a new confidence in its ability to work along with infantry.

In the meantime, while the senior officers disappeared into the blue to get the next move 'jacked up', the boys had a lot of news to exchange, and a lot of tall yarns to hear from the tank crews.

¹ Tpr W. H. Kelman; born [Timaru](#), 3 Jun 1912; school-teacher; killed in action 14 Apr 1944.

² Tpr O. H. R. Chambers; born [Auckland](#), 12 Jul 1920; printer; killed in action 14 Apr 1944.

³ Tpr W. Walker; born NZ 5 Sep 1916; freight driver; killed in action 7 Apr 1944.

⁴ Tpr E. D. Parsons; born NZ 26 Jul 1920; butcher; killed in action 13 Apr 1944.

⁵ Capt J. B. Oliphant; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 12 Dec 1917; law clerk.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 31 – CASSINO AND THE MOUNTAINS

CHAPTER 31

Cassino and the Mountains

While the Eighth Army was busy making history and most of 4 Brigade was away back out of the centre of the canvas at Pietramelara, the squadrons of 18 Regiment, spread out over 16 miles of the front, were having very varied adventures. For those few weeks pride of place must go to B Squadron, which in the wreck of Cassino found a kind of war unlike any other that it had ever struck or ever wanted to strike: a war of tremendous nervous tension, with Jerry so close that you were sure he could hear you breathing; a war of cave-dwellers, both sides lurking by day in dark cellars, holes and crevices, and coming out at night to stretch their legs, patrol, bring in supplies. Before the war Cassino had been one of Italy's show places, and visitors had flocked there. Now it was everyone's ambition to keep away from the place, or, once there, to get out again as fast as possible.

In March, while the fighting was at its most savage, New Zealand tanks had somehow forced their way into that desolate, ugly ruin. Some had been shot up or bogged on the outskirts of the town; others, their crews hardly knew how, had pushed right through the mess and on to the railway station half a mile beyond, only to find their way blocked by flooded ground. At the beginning of May there were three little groups of Shermans, one at the station, two in the town itself, all manned by Canadians—three widely separated groups, out of direct touch with each other, reached by three different routes. They were not there to be aggressive or to shoot up Jerry's positions—in fact, this was forbidden. They were there only in case Jerry counter-attacked, and to step up the morale of the unfortunate infantry doomed to live in such a hell-hole.

On the night of 4 May B Squadron moved up from Mignano to relieve the Canadians in Cassino.

B Squadron headquarters set up house very comfortably in a tiny village called San Michele, nestling inconspicuously

among the trees on a lane north of Route 6, within reach of all three roads into Cassino. From there Second-Lieutenant 'Chook' Fowler's ¹ troop carried on towards the north end of Cassino—all three tanks filled with ammunition and enough food

and supplies for a stay of several days—going forward by



18 Regt Tanks In Cassino

tree-lined lanes, clay tracks across the fields, a wide gravelly riverbed, and finally along a road leading across the waterlogged flat towards the town. Across the river by a rough stone causeway, lurching over rubble and into holes, then along what had once been a wide road but was now a stretch of stinking mud only one degree drier than the sodden meadows beside it. Here and there by the roadside were the flattened remains of a building. Above towered the silhouetted cone of [Castle Hill](#), all around the frogs croaked shrilly from the bomb craters, ahead an occasional shell crunched down.

This was a most tricky relief, for Fowler's tanks had to occupy exactly the same spots as the Canadian tanks so that Jerry would not see the difference. This meant a preliminary 'recce' on foot, always a tense, hazardous job in [Cassino](#). Then, when all was ready, Fowler says:

The OK was given to the Canucks who started up & commenced to move out.... One came past us, then a second, no sign of the third, then a frantic clattering of boots & five maple leaves came flying out of the darkness. When trying to stop them making so much din I was promptly told 'their—tank had gone over a bank & they were not going to be left behind in this hole' & vanished into the night after their companions. We then moved into positions vacated by Canadians, switched off & waited for repercussions, however, apart from a few mortar bombs things were very

quiet.

The usual routine in a new place is to sleep till daylight, then find out all about it. But here that did not apply. From dawn to dusk the boys were stuck, for better or worse, inside their tanks, and dared not leave them for any reason. The three Shermans were scattered among other wrecked, derelict tanks, stuck at drunken angles across and round the intersection of two streets, under Jerry's direct gaze, and the first and most essential rule of life was—don't ever let Jerry see that there is anyone here. Major Brown says of these tanks:

The positions of the tanks were never changed, nor anything on them or in them. If a periscope was pointed in a certain direction, it remained in the same position all the time; the same with the guns etc. The crews opened up the hatches at night time and got their exercise in the dark. Before dawn they battened down again.

Cooking was done in the cramped, stuffy front compartments, or on the flat turret floors, and all rubbish went out into holes dug under the escape hatches in the bottoms of the tanks. With such a set-up, hygiene did not exist, and the mixture of smells inside the tanks was appalling.

Even at night it was risky to leave the tanks, for every few minutes a mortar bomb would drop somewhere handy, or a burst of Spandau fire come crackling round. A big gun away up north, christened 'Terelle Bill', had a habit of landing dud shells with shook the whole place, tanks and all, as they bored into the ground. Every night the troop commander made his perilous way 200 yards back from the tanks to the town jail, where a [Welsh Guards](#) battalion holding the north end of [Cassino](#) had its headquarters. The Guardsmen were more than pleased to have the tanks there—Second-Lieutenant John Gray, ² whose troop alternated with Fowler's, remarks, 'The way the C.O. and his Staff... "rolled out the carpet" for one very Smelly Dirty Kiwi had to be seen to be believed.' Every third or fourth night the crews changed over, the fresh men coming forward from [San Michele](#) in jeeps, then walking the last stretch into the town, carrying their three days' rations on their backs.

On that first night, 4 May, two tank crews came up by jeep from [San Michele](#) to

the [Cassino](#) end of Route 6. They were decanted from the jeeps beside a rusty bridging tank, another relic of the March battle, that stood smashed and useless on the roadside. From there they took all their belongings on their backs and went up, across the sagging Rapido bridge and by a winding narrow path between the bomb craters along what had once been a wide straight road. At a huge, gaunt, roofless convent on the left of the path they thankfully dropped part of their load, then went on another hundred yards to where their two Shermans were tucked away in a small building, or rather heap of rubble. In better times it had been a furniture factory. The tanks had originally gone in there for protection, but then many shell hits had partly collapsed the roof and walls, so that now the tanks were half entombed in rubble. Here the boys were a little better off than the crews at the jail, for they were not so strictly confined to the tanks, but their freedom was limited to the shelter of their own little pile of ruins, and they dared not poke their noses outside.

Down in the crypt under the convent, crowded with soldiers of all descriptions, including the headquarters of the Coldstream Guards, who held the centre of [Cassino](#), Second-Lieutenant Harry [Hodge](#)³ inherited a No. 22 radio set, by which reports went back at fixed times daily to B Squadron headquarters. To get into this crypt you dived down a glorified rabbit hole at the base of the convent wall, and along a tangle of murky passages. Nobody ever liked using this entrance by daylight, for it was in full view of the snipers on the high ground, but still the crypt was the busiest place in [Cassino](#), with people perpetually passing in and out, though it was a mystery where they came from or where they went.

Here, too, the original idea was to change over every third night. But after two changes the boys in the furniture factory suggested that they stay there longer, for lurking in their little corner of the town was less trying on the nerves than swapping over. The dangerous times in [Cassino](#), the times when casualties occurred, were the night hours when supply parties came up and reliefs took place. Reliefs were never run to any set pattern, and the timings were made as irregular as possible, but there were always shells along the track, and periodical interference from 'Spandau Joe', a nasty-minded Jerry who roosted up on the hillside ahead, and let go a burst of fire straight down Route 6 whenever he felt like it, which was pretty often.

At the jail and the convent the crews had very little to do; they longed, in fact, for something to while away the time. But the orders were strict. No shooting

whatever, no movement, no sign of life. They did what they could to keep the engines in running order; when [18 Regiment](#) took over at the furniture factory the batteries of both tanks were flat and useless, and as changing batteries was out of the question—it was an awkward four-man job—they were forced to use the special 'Homelite' battery-charging engine, which was seldom used in action, as it had what one man calls 'a hellish & most distinctive noise'. Engines were always run under cover of 'stonks' arranged beforehand with the artillery, to avoid calling undue attention to the tanks. Jerry's normal fire was bad enough. One day Corporal Harry Barrance's ⁴ tank at the jail, which had already taken one or two hits on the turret, was hit direct on the engine cover, ruining the tank and giving the crew a bad shake-up. This meant quick, quiet work that night, winching the damaged tank out, driving a fresh one into position, and making it look exactly like the first one before daylight. To everyone's relief, Jerry did not seem to realise what had happened.

The other two troops of B Squadron were independent of these comings and goings from [San Michele](#). When B Squadron came forward to [Cassino](#) they sheered off to the left of Route 6 to take up a post of grave danger at [Cassino](#) railway station, half a mile south of the town.

This railway station was an evil place. It had been captured in one of the bloodiest assaults in 2 NZ Division's history. There the attack had bogged down in the face of German paratroopers on the rising ground and impassable waterlogged meadows ahead. All the gain there was to show for it was a bare little island surrounded by marsh, fearfully exposed, under direct observation, so that it was impossible to move round by day without being shot at. A viler place to live could hardly be imagined. And yet, somehow, we clung to it for two months, losing more good men than the place was worth, but sticking grimly to it as an outpost that threatened Jerry's route into [Cassino](#) and kept him worried. Troops were relieved after about three days there—that was all that most men could stand.

There were three Shermans parked closely side by side in what had once been the station building, but was now reduced to one flimsy wall which barely hid the turrets from Jerry. Crews, tanks and all changed over every second or third night. A noisy process, this, and calculated to attract all the fire Jerry could put over, but it was about the only way to bring up food and ammunition, which had to come up to

the station somehow.

Second-Lieutenant Bill Reynolds's ⁵ troop, the first one to inherit this unwholesome job, went straight ahead to the station as soon as it arrived from [Mignano](#). The other troop, under Second-Lieutenant Jack [Oxbrow](#), ⁶ and a small temporary headquarters under Captain Laurie, went to a group of farm buildings well back across the Rapido, in the middle (as far as could be seen in the dark) of a blasted heath, and made themselves as invisible as possible behind the buildings.

The road forward to the station was terrible. The only way up was along the narrow railway embankment and across the Rapido by a shrapnel-riddled bridge, an impossible trip in daylight and next to impossible even at night, the tanks pitching blindly nose down and then nose up through shell-holes, every spare inch of inside room crammed full of ammunition. The men had been prepared for a few fireworks when they drove up in their great noisy Shermans, and they certainly got what they expected. Spandaus from straight ahead, their tracer streaking through the dark like a swarm of falling stars, mortars bursting thick round the tanks as they drove up and edged in behind their wall.

This performance was turned on every time the tanks changed over. As soon as Jerry heard them moving, down came the fire. As long as the engines kept running the metal kept flying. But, as Captain Stan [Edmonds](#) ⁷ says, 'it usually quietened down when tanks ceased to move and there was no offensive action on our part'. Even then there were still mortars landing every few minutes, and almost continuous Spandau fire which zipped across the tanks' front and past the end of their wall, and rifle grenades fired from the waste land ahead.

Life at [Cassino](#) station was about as bad as it could be. The whole place stank of death. The bomb-holes were full of brackish water covered with green slime. During the daytime, even when no mortars were falling, our own smoke canisters were constantly whistling down all around. Everybody was filthy, unshaven, perpetually on edge for whatever might happen the next second. Almost underneath the tanks, in holes under the sheltering wall, lived the British infantry. The tankies had a dugout only a few feet away and trenches under the tanks. Everyone had a rifle or a Tommy gun, and all the Browning machine guns were taken out of the tanks and mounted on the ground, some of them pointing out through little holes in the wall, which also

served as peepholes through which you peered out into Jerry's territory as far as the foot of [Montecassino](#). Not that you could see anything, for Jerry was as careful as we were not to show himself in daylight.

'This was the only time,' says Reynolds, 'when I felt sure I wouldn't see my home again.' Everyone was certain that Jerry knew just where the tanks were, and nobody could forget that some night he might take it into his head to knock the wall down and leave them exposed. But he didn't do this. The worst damage was one night when a mortar salvo fell right on the spot during a changeover, killing Sergeant Bill McKinlay ⁸ and wounding three others.

The reserve troop's farmhouses, in contrast to all this, were comparatively intact, pretty comfortable as houses went in that part of [Italy](#), and fairly peaceful. The men back there could move round by day in the shelter of trees, though this was not encouraged, as too much of it could have attracted Jerry's vicious attention. Vehicles were debarred from coming and going in daylight, as the approach was quite open, but there was no difficulty bringing jeeps in at night with supplies, which were then loaded on to the tanks before each relief. Food and ammunition for the infantry went up in this way.

The night of 11 May was almost as bright as day in [Cassino](#), the noise and concussion bewildering, shells splashing red on the slope of [Montecassino](#), the sky alight with gun flashes. Then came a few days of impatient suspense, Jerry's fire much slacker, but his snipers still present and alert, and the boys still confined to the tanks or their small, smelly buildings. Then a couple of days of uproar when Jerry (presumably getting rid of all the ammunition he could not take away) plastered [Cassino](#) as never before, while at the same time the [Eighth Army](#) was closing the ring tighter and tighter round the town, and the writing was appearing on the wall for the Germans. Then, on the morning of 18 May, the boys at the station, peering out to the west, saw Shermans and British infantry coming into [Cassino](#) from the south; a little later, up went white flags on the rubble of [Montecassino](#); then B Squadron emerged from its holes, at first gingerly, as if still in fear of Spandau Joe and his friends, then gladly, though hardly believing the full extent of the devastation which they now saw for the first time. They felt they ought to celebrate, but there was nothing to celebrate with, and nowhere to do it; the floods and the piles of ruins and the fear of mines kept them from wandering far afield. And the

awful desolation all around dampened the spirits and made you feel like whispering rather than shouting.

That evening B Squadron bade [Cassino](#) a farewell that had no sadness in it, and went back to the muddy slope below San Vittore to wait for the rest of the regiment. With them went the tanks from the station and the jail, but not from the furniture factory—the recovery section hauled them out two or three days later and handed them over to 20 Regiment, their surprised owners.

A Squadron in its second spell at [Terelle](#) and [Portella](#) could not boast of anything like B Squadron's [Cassino](#) adventures, and was just as glad, for they were not the kind of adventures to arouse envy.

On the night of 5 May A Squadron, with Major Playle now in command, arrived up at [Mignano](#) on its transporters, sat under the trees there on the 6th, and that night went forward again along the ambulance route—arrangements as before, nine tanks to the forward slope below [Portella](#), crews for the seven tanks on the [Terelle](#) hill crowded on jeeps.

Very little had changed up there in the last fortnight. There was the same old shellfire, random and sporadic, not heavy enough to really worry anyone, though one evening just before dark a thick concentration of mortars came down and did a lot of damage among the infantry only fifty yards away. There were the same old nocturnal jaunts down to the jeep-head for supplies, cursing as you stumbled over loose stones. There was still no excitement, nothing to talk about, lots of time to kill.

It was pretty hot up the hill now; but at [Portella](#), under olive trees which broke the force of the early summer sun, life was quite idyllic. After giving the tanks their daily attention the boys had nothing to do but drink tea and acquire suntan, or at night watch the fireflies whirling round in the sultry still air. The fields had now burst out of their spring green and were ablaze with wild flowers. The boys wandered almost at will round the lanes; Jerry paid them very little attention, except on the famous day when he shelled the Division's big supply depot out of existence.

This depot, the [Hove Dump](#), was tucked away in a mountain gorge two miles behind A Squadron, and the shelling did not affect the tankies directly, though they

could hear it all and see the huge smoke column as the dump burnt. But it affected their supply team, who had previously brought the daily loads straight from the [Hove Dump](#) down the amazing, almost vertical [Inferno Track](#), but now had to make a 20-mile night trip back without lights over a zigzag mountain road lined with 25-pounders and horribly exposed to shelling. In this place the front line was much easier on the nerves than the roads that led to it.

The night of the attack was one to remember all your life. For a few nights there had been constant movement along the lanes as vast numbers of Poles, infantry and artillery, came into the areas all round A Squadron. Some 25-pounder batteries dug in just behind the tanks. Major Playle remembers the big night:

When night fell on the 11th May it sounded like an axemen's carnival as these gunners felled trees to clear their lines of fire. When the barrage opened at 11 p.m. the noise was indescribable, the air seemed to strike our eardrums in solid waves. These batteries fired without ceasing for 17 hours; many of the A Sqn boys went over to give the Polish gunners a hand. We had a respite from the noise for about a day, & then the guns opened up again, this time for 23 hours.

Jerry, luckily, was too busy elsewhere to spare any ammunition for the [Portella](#) area.

The tanks up on the [Terelle](#) hill did nothing during the attack, but were alert to fire if necessary over to their left, where the Poles attacked towards [Montecassino](#) from their precarious starting point on [Monte Castellone](#). But their help was not needed. The tank crews, from their lofty perch, had a most spectacular view of the barrage, and of some fine tracer displays over the next few nights, when odd German planes prowling over the Rapido valley got the full weight of our 'ack-ack'. The criss-cross lines of red and gold tracer, rising thick from the black gulf of the valley, was a majestic sight; in peacetime thousands of people would have gone miles to see such a display. By day you could not see much down [Cassino](#) way, for the valley was full of rolling grey smoke.

Only once was the routine of life up the hills disturbed, when two tanks sallied out round the corner, advanced some half a mile along the road, and flattened two houses where Jerry was thought to have a headquarters. It was a very satisfying piece of work, though a nasty trip out and back along that winding road where a

false move would have had the tank rolling down the mountain. Jerry, evidently astonished by such cheek, sent nothing back except a little badly aimed rifle and Spandau fire.

When, after a week of suspense, the Poles swarmed ahead and [Cassino](#) and [Montecassino](#) fell, the tanks had outlived their usefulness at [Terelle](#). Even though [Monte Cairo](#) was still in Jerry's hands, he was not fighting back with any vigour, and it looked as if he was just to be left till he decided of his own accord to get out. Reports of successes farther south seemed to indicate that there would not be long to wait.

But A Squadron did not see the end. On 18 May, when [18 Regiment](#) got its marching orders, the squadron was summoned back to the fold. On the night of 19 May the crews up on the hill were relieved by a collection of assorted Kiwis and took their last trip by jeep down the nightmare [Terelle](#) road. They left the tanks behind with no regrets—not only had they been a little out of their element with the petrol Shermans, but their life up there had been most unexciting, with a lot of discomfort, a lot of boredom, and a standard of living much lower than they were used to. The same night the rest of A Squadron pulled out from [Portella](#), and the whole squadron went back to join B Squadron in its hillside bivouac at San Vittore, waiting for the rest of the regiment to come up.

The eight C Squadron tanks that jolted away from Pietramelara on their transporters after dark on 8 May soon swung to the right off Route 6 to follow the [Volturno](#) valley north through [Venafro](#), which, even in the dark, looked more like a real town than anything the crews had seen for months. A few miles farther on they camped for the night in a field outside the village of [Pozzilli](#), in a little basin almost surrounded by steep terraced hills. Their night was not undisturbed, for a handful of German planes came over and raided the [Venafro](#) airfield, far too close for the boys, who had got out of the habit of this sort of thing lately. Next day they moved on up into the mountains by a road whose twists and steep hairpin bends all too vividly recalled [Sangro](#) days. It seemed incredible that such rugged hills could exist so close to the fertile plains and open uplands that the regiment had known for the past four months. In less than six miles the scene changed from vine to olive country, and farther ahead, as the road climbed higher, to stony pastures, with picturesquely poor hamlets clinging to the roadside beneath overhanging rocky peaks.

So far nobody had known what lay behind the move of the tanks to such an unpromising spot, but now the news circulated that they were to go up farther, probably in a day or two, and give Jerry a good plastering to make him think an attack was coming. The attack would really be going in farther to the left, between [Cassino](#) and the sea, but Jerry was to be kept guessing. The boys were rather sceptical about how much he would be deceived, for the hills ahead did not look the sort of place anyone in his senses would choose for an attack. Some Tommies bivouacked not far from C Squadron were pessimistic about the chances of the tanks even getting up to where they were supposed to go.

Except for 'recces' by the tank commanders, nothing happened until the night of 11 May. Here, just as elsewhere, the barrage opened up at 11 p.m. with a roar, made even intenser and more impressive by the echoes that ran round the hills. At midnight, in the middle of the uproar, the tanks set off again along the winding road, up a series of little valleys tucked away among the peaks, then through a high-walled gorge. In daylight and under normal conditions it would have been a magnificent trip, but now the only thought in anyone's mind was whether, in the blackness, any of the tanks would run off the road.

But there were no accidents, and it was hard to believe that this was the front line or anywhere near it. The tanks came up to their appointed place, fired shells away into the darkness ahead just as planned, then turned round and moved away back down the road; and not a shot was fired against them, only a shower of flares from somewhere ahead. Trooper Hancox's only comment was the laconic 'Stink of dead mules was terrific'. By 4 a.m. the tanks were two miles back, parked off the road, camouflaged away, and the crews had slitties dug and bivvies up and were comfortably rolled in their blankets.

Daylight showed that they had come to a very attractive place, on a gentle slope between the road and a little river, with grass underfoot, and trees to break the sun's heat. There was not a sound of war anywhere, except what the tanks themselves created when they put over a few ranging shots during the morning. British artillerymen living nearby said that only one shell had landed anywhere near in the last fortnight. Between the tanks and Jerry was a cluster of hills, high and difficult enough to prevent him from doing anything reckless.

Here the crews spent a delightful week with very little to do. Early one morning, for half an hour, tanks and artillery 'did over' Jerry's positions on the other side of the hills, still with the idea of keeping him on his toes and discouraging him from pulling troops out of this quiet part of the line. There was another short shoot from the road ahead of the tank park, mainly to oblige the British paratroop colonel, who, delighted at having tanks to play with, asked them to have a go at Jerry's infantry positions and observation posts which overlooked part of the British lines. But apart from this, and a little maintenance on tanks and guns, the boys spent a leisurely week, bathing in the stream, lying in the sun, occasionally strolling a mile down the road to explore the ruined, derelict village of [Cerasuolo](#), bombed and shelled beyond repair, a gruesome reminder of the war's cruelty. In these secluded hills, which the fighting had mostly passed by untouched, and where you could not even see the effect of your own shooting, you were apt to forget what a hideous thing war is.

On the evening of 19 May the tanks with some reluctance moved out from their quiet meadow to find an unusual bustle and activity at [Pietramelara](#) as the regiment prepared to break camp. There was a general air of cheerful expectancy that had been absent from [18 Regiment](#) for too long, and though the stream of orders and counter-orders on 21 May took the edge off this a little, it was still there on the morning of the 22nd, when the unit moved out to take the westward road.

So the whole of [18 Regiment](#) came together again at San Vittore.

Here it sat for three whole days, enjoying the lovely early summer weather but, as one man says, 'on edge for move'. The tank crews polished up their steeds and put them in first-class order. Lieutenant-Colonel Robinson and various 'recce' parties spent many hours away, and came back full of business. And the whole unit waited, happy in the hope that at last, after so many months of disappointment, they would get after Jerry and hunt him northwards.

¹ [Maj W. H. Fowler](#), m.i.d.; [Wanganui](#); born [Wanganui](#), 2 Jan 1917; farmer.

² Lt [J. W. R. Gray](#); [Lower Hutt](#); born [Te Kuiti](#), 16 Apr 1910; cashier; wounded 27 May 1944.

³ Lt J. H. Hodge, MC; Auckland; born Wellington, 28 Dec 1909; school-teacher.

⁴ Capt H. McI. Barrance; Auckland; born Wellington, 30 Mar 1921; clerk; wounded 23 Sep 1944.

⁵ Capt W. H. Reynolds; Whangarei; born Whangarei, 10 Feb 1913; motor salesman and engineer.

⁶ Maj A. J. Oxbrow, m.i.d.; Manutuke; born Blenheim, 19 Sep 1913; grocer.

⁷ Capt S. B. Edmonds; Auckland; born Auckland, 4 May 1913; bank officer.

⁸ Sgt W. D. McKinlay; born Dunedin, 24 Jan 1914; clerk; killed in action 8 May 1944.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 32 – THE IMPASSABLE HILLS

CHAPTER 32

The Impassable Hills

The Liri valley, which for so long had dangled tantalisingly just out of reach, was a five-mile-wide flat between two lots of wild mountains. The Liri River ran along its southern side. At the foot of the northern hills Route 6 and the railway line led westwards towards Rome. Eleven miles up the valley another smaller river, the Melfa, after carving a sheer gorge in the mountains, crossed the valley to join the Liri. Seven miles farther on the Liri itself appeared from the north and took a right-angle turn. The valley ended here, and beyond it was a jumble of lower, gentler hills.

The enormous weight of the attack on 11 May carried the Eighth Army forward through Jerry's line and into the Liri valley. But it was no walk-over. For a week, while Cassino and Montecassino still held out, progress up the valley could be measured in yards, Jerry fighting back with all his might and giving nothing away cheaply. Even after being pushed out of Cassino he still clung to the northern mountains, where he could see everything that went on in the valley. The next defence line, the famous 'Hitler Switch' line across the valley some seven miles beyond Cassino, was not broken till 24 May; then the Canadians surged forward up the south side of the valley to the Melfa River, while British and Indian divisions of 13 Corps, on the north side, were held up by stout-hearted little rearguards on the heights above them and in the thick trees and high crops that lined Route 6.

The attack had hardly opened before plans were afoot to bring the New Zealand armour into action. The first optimistic idea, that 4 Brigade would charge forward in a body and romp through towards Rome, had to be very smartly forgotten. Nineteenth Regiment crossed the Rapido River, had some hard fighting, and its tanks were the first into Cassino after Jerry left. For several days after that nobody seemed able to make up his mind how or where to use the armour. Then it was 18 Regiment's turn.

On 21 May the regiment, under orders to cross the Rapido and join the Canadians in their assault on the Hitler Switch line, had already begun to collect up its scattered squadrons. Colonel Robinson went up to the Canadians to arrange all

the details. But by 22 May, when the regiment assembled at San Vittore, these orders had been cancelled, and its future now lay on [13 Corps](#)' right flank, where [8 Indian Division](#), moving as a sort of flank guard along the narrow strip of land between Route 6 and the northern mountains, was digging Jerry out of the lower hill slopes and watching for any counter-attacks from above. A tricky job, for the hillsides were rocky and rugged and the lower slopes heavily cultivated, with lots of trees, dozens of farms and an occasional village, just the place for rearguards to lurk and make nuisances of themselves.

By nightfall on 23 May the [18th](#) was all ready to move forward, and then for thirty-six hours it sat and waited, everyone like a cat on hot bricks, asking everyone else, 'What the hell is the hold-up?' The official explanation was: 'The Battle of the Hitler Switch is progressing very well—so well in fact that we are afraid that we may not be required.' But the delay was quite useful, for it gave squadron and troop commanders time (which they rarely had) to 'tie up' details with the Indian brigades and battalions. The regiment was all set to go. A stretch of ground west of the Rapido had been reserved for A Echelon; a platoon of ASC lorries was attached to help with supply, which would become quite a problem if movement became as fast as was expected; a party of engineers had arrived with mine-clearing gear, and so had a bridge-laying tank on a transporter. The [18th](#) now had its own Grant recovery tank, specially equipped to haul tanks out of the mud or to right capsized ones.

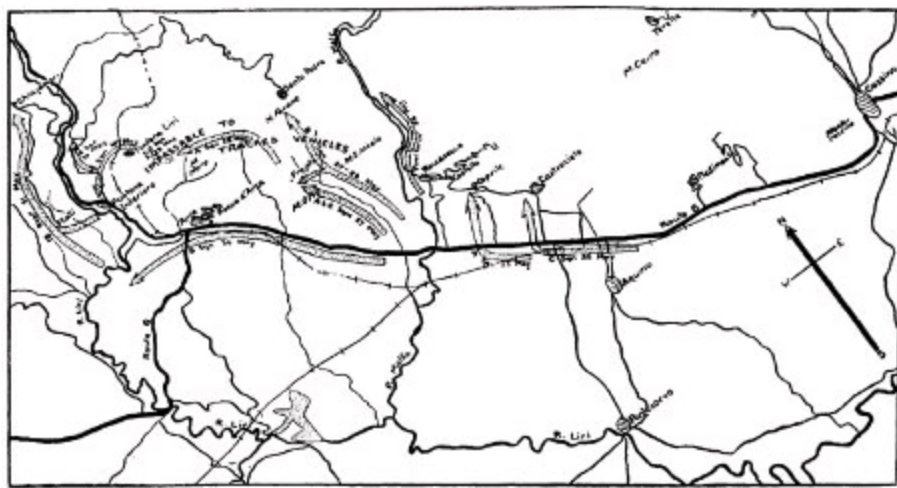
At breakfast time on 25 May the word suddenly came: one squadron to go up to [8 Indian Division](#) at once, the rest later in the day. The Indians were to attack [Castrocielo](#) and Roccasecca, twin towns nestling under the northern hills, and were expecting trouble. The tanks would move into the fray on the infantry's heels to clean up any pockets of Germans that might prove deaf to reason.

At 8 a.m. Major Deans's C Squadron was ordered to pack up and move at once. Some of the boys were still asleep in their bivvies and so missed their breakfast, for all hands had to jump to it. The 'drill' for getting on the move was pretty good by now. By 8.30 C Squadron was on its way, a self-contained little fighting force, with half of the regiment's Honey 'recce' tanks, its own fitters, a wireless car, an RAP carrier—all that might be needed for the kind of short sharp action expected among the [Liri](#) valley trees. Through the fantastic wreckage of [Cassino](#) by the newly bulldozed Route 6; then round the corner of the hills and out at last into the valley.

The first port of call in the [Liri](#) valley was little more than a mile past [Cassino](#). Here C Squadron stopped for a couple of hours, just long enough to get straightened out after its hurried move. Then before midday it was off again to meet its Indian infantry for the attack on [Castrocielo](#), two Honey tanks leading, then the Shermans, some moving up Route 6, others over rough ground under the hills to the right. Second-Lieutenant Bill [Morgan](#) ¹ recalls: 'Jerry had chopped branches from an avenue of trees ... and placed them across the highway no doubt to create the impression that mines were laid, the honey tanks didn't hesitate, they pushed on and there were no mines.'

The scenes up Route 6 came as something of a shock. There had obviously been some heavy fighting here. For miles the ground was all torn up by shells. The Hitler Switch line, what could be seen of it, looked really wicked—belts of barbed wire and mines, concrete and steel pillboxes dug deep into the ground with only their camouflaged tops sticking up, guns poking out through the foliage at ground level. The boys had never seen anything quite like it, except photos of the [Maginot](#) Line away back in the very early days of the war. Even now that those large, cunningly hidden anti-tank guns were tame, the thought of advancing into their muzzles made you feel sick inside.

From Route 6 the Indians (Royal Frontier Force Rifles— tallish, cheerful fellows most of them) advanced north-east towards the hills, moving steadily through the trees, the tanks



18 REGT IN THE LIRI VALLEY, 25-31 MAY 1944

18 Regt In The Liri Valley, 25–31 May 1944

ambling behind along leafy lanes. The country was so close that the tankies could not see far ahead, and some of the time the Indians were not even in sight, but the silence ahead indicated that they were not striking much opposition. By the time the tanks got near [Castrocielo](#) the Indians were already in the town. Jerry had at last put in an appearance, and was firing Spandaus into the town from the steep face above; but [Castrocielo](#) itself was a dead town, not a soul in residence to welcome the liberators. The civilians had all retired to caves outside the town, whence they were flushed by parties of Indians while some of C Squadron's guns covered the cave mouths just in case. Other parties of Indians worked their way along the hillsides; in the judgment of Major Deans, who went up with the Frontier Force colonel to watch proceedings, they were having little trouble to shift the Germans, and in any case it was getting dusk by now, too dark for the tanks to use their guns without risk of hitting the Indians. So the squadron stayed quietly below the town, and a little later, with the Indians solidly established for the night, it pulled back and laagered in an olive grove a mile away. Here it was high enough to see right across the [Liri](#) valley, a very fine sight, a sea of green with the brown hills beyond. Away towards the setting sun you could see dust and smoke rising, with once or twice a big column of black smoke which looked like an ammunition or petrol dump going up, presumably Jerry's own handiwork as he retreated before the Canadians. The distant view was, for the moment, more interesting than the one at hand.

The hills west of [Castrocielo](#) were covered with a nest of villages all

concentrated in a small area, dominated by [Roccasecca](#), which sprawled over several hundred yards of hillside and overlooked the place where the Melfa River wandered out of its gorge on to the plain. Just after lunch on 25 May, about three hours behind C Squadron, Major Playle's A Squadron went forward along Route 6 past the [Castrocielo](#) turnoff, and a little farther ahead found the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders already on the move north-east from Route 6 towards this group of towns. This left no time for 'netting in' wireless sets, which had to be done later as opportunity offered; but the tanks successfully linked up with the infantry, one troop with each company, Squadron Headquarters with Battalion Headquarters. Just as C Squadron had done, the tanks trundled along behind their companies, some going across country, others along hedge-lined country lanes. Here, too, Jerry did not seem prepared to put up a fight, and the afternoon's advance would have been flat and uninteresting but for two highly unusual incidents.

The first of these, the celebrated episode of the 'well-diver', became known far beyond [18 Regiment](#). Captain Bruce Oliphant, commander of the troop concerned, describes it:

The incident occurred immediately after we crossed the start line.... There was a stone house which the Hun had partly demolished to cause an obstruction in the road. Instead of crossing the partly demolished house ... I decided to go through some high hedges at the back of the house and get into the open country beyond. After going through the hedge my tank passed very close to a normal enough looking well and my Sergeant's tank, which was following ... suddenly reared up and slipped backwards into a cavity beside the well... where ... a large hole approximately 20 feet deep had been roofed over and then covered with earth.... Fortunately there was very little water in the well, as when the tank came to rest it was completely below ground level with the exception of about a foot of the end of the gun barrel. The tank was neatly wedged with the top of the turret resting on one side and the tracks in contact with the other.

Oliphant goes on to describe how the crew, badly shaken, crawled out of the tank, the men in the turret having wormed their way through a small hole into the driver's compartment, which was the only way out. He then adds:

One of the crew ... was a little fatter than the others and for some time was

unable to get through.... While he was still endeavouring to get out of the turret the petrol engine attached to the battery charging equipment started to burn, and although there was a hand extinguisher in the turret he did not know how to work it. However, he learned remarkably quickly as ... he was standing on top of a heap of ammunition above a thin grill mesh with the fire starting underneath.... He got through the hole somehow very rapidly afterwards.

The regiment's new recovery vehicle was quite inadequate to deal with this its first patient, which had to be hauled out by 4 Brigade's Heavy Recovery Section after the side of the well had been bulldozed out.

The other incident occurred not far below [Roccasecca](#) as it was getting dark, when a lone A Squadron Sherman, coming round the corner of a narrow lane, suddenly came face to face with an unfamiliar tank. The commander, going forward to find out who this was, met his opposite number doing the same thing, and peering at him in the gloom realised with a shock that he was a German. The astonishment was evidently mutual, for the tank commander continues the story:

He kindly put up his hands in surrender as did one other man who got out of the other tank. My catch was armed with a Luger which was fairly smartly removed. Meanwhile two other bodies got out of the tank and ran to bush, a few revolver shots failed to flush them. We then marched our two captives up the road and turned our tank round as quickly as possible and soon met up with our own infantry.

The prize turned out to be a recovery or maintenance tank without a turret; it was later tipped over the bank, as no use could be made of it. But it was the regiment's first blood in the [Liri](#) valley, and, while there was very little loot in it, it was a promising beginning.

By nightfall infantry and A Squadron tanks were at the foot of the hills, just below a scruffy little huddle of houses named [Caprile](#). The Highlanders, who had had practically no fighting all afternoon, took up position for the night, and the tanks laagered among the trees with the infantry companies, ready to move again at short notice. Major Playle remembers that the infantry 'seemed to have trouble with their communications, so the tanks took over everything by wireless'.

That night a handful of persistent German planes prowled up and down the

valley, dropping parachute flares and bombs, provoking a fireworks display from the 'ack-ack' guns, and robbing everyone of hard-earned sleep. The disturbance spread down to the valley mouth, where most of the regiment had now moved and was installed beside Route 6. 'Most of us,' says Major Dickinson, 'were bedded down beside the tanks, but lost no time getting underneath them.' Others forsook their blankets for the hard comfort of the turrets. A convoy of [18 Regiment](#) supply lorries, caught in the open on Route 6, had a nerve-racking trip with bombs falling close. It was the noisiest night for some time. If the enemy was trying to slow down the advance he did not really succeed, for 6 Armoured Division of [13 Corps](#) crossed the [Melfa](#) during the night, meeting no Germans near the river, and next morning everyone prepared to push on westwards.

But next morning there were still a few Germans holding out in the hillside caves east of the [Melfa](#). The Frontier Force men, making their cautious way up and along the bare slopes, struck a determined group with mortars and Spandaus, whose determination melted suddenly in face of a lively little bombardment from C Squadron. The Highlanders on the left entered [Caprile](#) and [Castello](#) and [Roccasecca](#) with no fighting, but met a little opposition in a valley behind, and a troop of A Squadron went up through [Caprile](#) and spent some time banging away at spots pointed out by the infantry—though the tankies could see nothing there, and Jerry lay very low. Late that afternoon two troops were called up to help sweep the last Germans from this valley. They had a perfect view of the Highlanders, all strung out in line 'like a collection of beaters on a grouse shooting expedition' (as one man put it), sweeping downhill from the opposite crest; but the few Germans still present escaped into the hills, and the tankies, watching them go, had to hold their fire for fear of hitting their own infantry. It was very vexing.

That day B Squadron came into the picture too. Soon after dawn Second-Lieutenant Fowler's troop linked up with a squadron of [6 Lancers'](#) armoured cars carrying a few infantrymen, and set out past [Roccasecca](#) to penetrate the narrow [Melfa](#) gorge and, if possible, cut off any Germans still east of the river. The one road ran along the river's edge or on cliff faces above it, crossing mountain streams by stone bridges, with one big bridge over the [Melfa](#) itself two miles up the gorge. Most unpromising country for an armoured thrust. But the day was full of excitement. Fowler relates:

Three Jerrys were seen approaching a small bridge ahead & were killed by crew of Staghound. A little further on considerable enemy movement was seen in the scrub by the river.... The Indian Inf. smartly got to work winking them out ... and soon quietened all opposition.

While this was going on, a loud explosion and a mushroom of smoke ahead marked the end of the [Melfa](#) bridge. The column arrived to find a smoking gap, a 40-foot drop to the river, and no other way across; also the tail end of the Germans vanishing farther up the gorge, and hundreds of Italian refugees venturing down from the hills towards their homes in and round [Roccasecca](#). There was nothing useful the tanks and Staghounds could do now, except go back to [Roccasecca](#), taking fifteen prisoners with them.

Jerry had put up next to no fight in the gorge. A more determined effort to spoil the show had been made by one of our own planes, which after strafing the length of the column twice had come back again and bombed some of the Indian infantry patrols, the pilot happily ignoring the recognition signals and the invective hurled up at him from below.

That evening all the squadrons of [18 Regiment](#) came together in the trees below [Caprile](#), ready to cross the [Melfa](#). The plan was for the [18th](#) to advance along Route 6 behind the British infantry of 78 Division, to cross the [Liri](#) at the head of the valley, then on over the rolling hills to [Rome](#). This prospect was in high favour with everyone.

However, it appeared that Jerry had not retreated far, but was still prepared to stay and fight for a while. Two miles west of the Melfa Route 6 moved in to the very foot of a steep height called [Monte Orio](#); here Jerry, roosting up in a strong rearguard position above the road, halted the advance dead and forced [13 Corps](#) to size up the situation and think up a new way of dealing with it. Now, to help 6 Armoured Division press its attack along Route 6, [8 Indian Division](#) was to detour through the mountains, capture [Orio](#) and outflank Jerry, coming in behind him about two miles farther west, where the town of [Arce](#), straddling the road, commanded the approach to the Liri River crossing. Then, as [18 Regiment](#) reported to [4 Brigade](#), 'when arce falls move ... on to rome.'

Details of this mountaineering trip took so long to arrange that the orders did not penetrate down to the regiment till the afternoon of 27 May, not long before it was due to move. Two infantry battalions, 1 Frontier Force Regiment and 1 Royal Fusiliers, with B and A Squadrons following behind, were to set the ball rolling by taking [Orio](#) and the hill north-east of it, then C Squadron with $\frac{1}{2}$ Gurkha Rifles was to move through and capture the tiny mountain village of [Frajoli](#), chief centre of Jerry's resistance on [Orio](#). Then a three-hour pause to allow the 25-pounders to move up in support, then a push by infantry and tanks to the hilltops overlooking [Arce](#). Everything sounded like plain sailing, until a glance at the map jolted you back on your heels, for the hills were tumbled and steep, cut in all directions by clefts and watercourses, and marked in large capital letters 'Impassable to Tracked Vehicles'. The tankies' pleasurable anticipation was quite ruined.

But there was no time to sit and brood over it, for it was time to go. The squadrons forded the [Melfa](#), marvelling how such an insignificant little creek, almost dried up by the summer heat, could cause so much trouble. At the river the tanks came face to face with another stream of refugees moving east, going back with their few poor belongings to the homes from which they had been driven months before. These unfortunates always moved all good Kiwis to mingled exasperation and pity. Here at the [Melfa](#) you saw the tankies, with rough words on their lips ('Come on, Pop, you silly old bastard, you're wasting my time'), helping the old and the very young across the stream with surprising patience, then sending them on their way with a parting growl ('Go on now, get out of my bloody way') accompanied by a genial pat on the back.

But the tanks could not dally by the [Melfa](#), for the infantry was already on the way forward towards the hills. So on they went, up the slopes, leaving Route 6 behind them, and the long road over the mountain tops had begun.

The lower slopes were not easy, but far from impassable. They were terraced and cultivated, with crops and vines everywhere. But from there the direct way to the objectives rose up in two steep parallel ridges separated by a shallow valley; the infantry pushed on uphill, while the tanks, having nothing of the mountain goat about them, were forced to keep lower down in the valley, moving in single file along rocky farm tracks, past scattered stone cottages and through small straggly

woods. The Frontiersmen on the right gained the peak of Monte San Nicola with never a sign of Jerry. On the left he was still holding the crest of [Orio](#), but this rearguard, steadfast enough at long range, did not wait to face an assault. By 4 p.m., barely half an hour after A Squadron had crossed the river, the Royal Fusiliers were on the hilltop, looking down on [Frajoli](#), with the tanks coming round the right-hand shoulder of the mountain. Here the valley ended abruptly in cliffs and steep hillsides, with [Frajoli](#) perched up to the left, accessible only by steep rough tracks. It seemed now as if the tanks, whether they liked it or not, would have to become mountain goats.

Now the [Gurkhas](#) began to come through, closely followed by Lieutenant Harold Barber's ² troop of C Squadron, with the rest of the squadron coming up behind. And forward of [Frajoli](#) trouble began to brew up. Jerry, confidently entrenched in the houses and on the slopes in front, opened up with Spandaus and mortars; Barber's tanks came into action with 75-millimetre and Brownings which took the edge off Jerry's enthusiasm, but he was still going to be hard to dislodge.

About 6 p.m., with dusk not far away, B Squadron took a hand in the game. Just below the Frontiersmen's objective, where B Squadron's track split into two, the leading tanks met some Indians and heard of the trouble at [Frajoli](#). The squadron divided, two troops heading west for [Frajoli](#), the rest pushing on northwards to keep up with the Frontiersmen.

The troops going to [Frajoli](#) struck really tough country, down a ravine and steeply up again, along a track hardly worthy of the name. Not only that, but they were out on their own with no infantry in reach; even C Squadron was not to be seen, as the two tracks approached [Frajoli](#) from different directions. So it came as quite a shock when, some distance short of the village, they ran full tilt into a little force of German infantry.

Jerry was startled, too, by these fresh enemies coming at him from the flank. A few shots were fired at the B Squadron tanks, but he quickly threw in his hand. By nightfall [Gurkhas](#) and tanks were in the village, with a haul of over forty prisoners, several German dead, and all their weapons and ammunition. On our side, Second-Lieutenant John Gray was wounded and his tank damaged, and that was all. The tanks handed over their prisoners to the infantry, and then, having seen the [Gurkhas](#)

firmly installed, they pulled back, Barber's troop rejoining C Squadron in the valley below [Orio](#), the two B Squadron troops heading on up the mountain in the direction their squadron had taken.

In the meantime the rest of B Squadron had been climbing higher and higher. The track, according to Major Brown, 'petered out into a field and from then on it was hard going over rough steep country. One or two tank tracks were thrown ... but were quickly mended'. The tank commanders had to go ahead on foot to find passable places. After dark it was impossible to carry on, and the tanks laagered for the night. The infantry had not been seen for some time, but was eventually located not far away.

So far the mountains, though difficult, could hardly be called impassable. But for the next three days the tankies were to find out just what that meant. They were days of continual struggle, not so much against Jerry as against steep banks and stone terraces, crops and scrub, big rocks alternating with soft soil. The terraces were the worst. The only way to deal with them was to break them down with hand and shovel and pile earth and stones up into ramps, a maddeningly slow business. The whole place was a tankies' nightmare. Everywhere you had to explore on foot before taking the tanks forward. Often you were travelling blind, just blundering on in what you thought was the right direction, with no infantry or anyone else in sight. Occasionally there would be a lane to follow for a while, but it always either ended at an isolated farm or curved the wrong way, and then you had to take to the hills again. There were a couple of bulldozers somewhere, but they were too busy making supply tracks farther down the hills to be any help to the forward squadrons.

The supply set-up in these hills was interesting. For the first time since the [Sangro](#) it was organised as in the book of rules, B2 Echelon—B1 Echelon—squadrons, the trucks moving from their own echelon to the next one forward. But when it came to taking supplies up the hills to the squadrons, it was not as easy as that. Captain Pyatt tells of his trips up to A Squadron:

I used to leave about 5 p.m. with three-tonners (3, 4 or 5), & go up Route Six & then as far as possible inland. We'd then off load into Jeeps & follow the tank tracks up the hills—& then supply tanks as we found them. Map refs weren't an awful lot of good there—& there were no tracks except what the tanks made.

The tanks demanded vast quantities of fuel in such rough going; but fortunately little ammunition was used. It was always the heaviest and most unpopular load to bring forward. The ammunition was taken up by carriers or by the Reconnaissance Troop's turretless Honey tanks, which turned out to be the only vehicles that could haul supplies up the worst of the hills. Never had their crews worked so hard: back from a trip up forward, snatch a bite to eat, then off again with another load. Sleep was something that they just did not get.

Sergeant Norman [Shillito](#)³ of the Recce Troop recalls the trials of those days:

To pack a load we used to spread a tarpaulin on the deck, load up with ammo & fuel & then fold up the sides & tie them at the top. This method was perfectly satisfactory on level going, but on this job we seemed to be standing on end most of the time.... I can remember coming across one luckless crew who had just jettisoned their entire load which landed with the tied ends underneath. The language as they tried to get at the ropes was terrific.

And the signals officer, Lieutenant Greenfield, has his memories of the problem of keeping in touch with the forward tanks by jeep:

I received a call from the squadron ... to say that one of their tank wireless sets was not operating so I set off in the early hours of the morning to take up a spare set.... I had a map reference but after leaving the roads I just followed the tank tracks for there was nothing else to follow. Certainly no other vehicles had ever gone that way.... I had picked up the padre ... who wanted to get to the squadron, and it was a hair-raising ride for him. The highlight ... was a steep bank.... It was more like a cliff than a slope, and I carefully engaged low gear and tried to drive up it, but without success. About this time the padre decided he would rather walk the rest. I backed off and took a run at the bank ... with the longest possible run, the engine revving madly, the wheels spinning and the jeep bucking wildly. We made it but it was a crazy drive.

Apropos of the [18th's](#) chronic shortage of signal gear, Greenfield adds that from about this time, thanks to [8 Indian Division's](#) generosity and to the belated realisation that armour could not live by wireless alone, the position was vastly improved.

To return now to the forward squadrons. Up on the hilltops British and Indian infantry battalions succeeded one another so frequently that you could not keep tabs on them at all. One brigade seemed to leapfrog through another at least once a day; sometimes a squadron would set off in support of one unit, and find later that somewhere along the way it had mysteriously changed to another. It was most confusing, and at the end of the three days, thinking back, most men could remember only a blurred succession of hills and terraces, and Indians, large and small. Points that stuck in the memory were the polite smiling [Gurkhas](#), as polished up and clean as if they had been a hundred miles behind the line; the British officers, cool and precise, who ruled their Indian troops with a sternness quite foreign to the democratic Kiwis; the strong, sickly-sweet, half-cold tea brewed by the Indians, which, according to one man, you ate rather than drank. And then the sturdy independent peasants who stuck to their poor homes even while the advance rolled over them; the loud lamentation of the women over one of their men killed by a stray bullet; the tasty ham and blood sausage provided by 'Poppa' in some lonely hovel when the rations had not arrived and you were hungry. And the sullen little groups of German prisoners, many of them not much more than children.

Only once during those three days did any of the squadrons get mixed up in a real fight. This was B Squadron the morning after the [Frajoli](#) episode.

At daybreak that morning the squadron was off again, struggling upwards, with occasional glimpses of the infantry forging ahead. In front towered [Monte Favone](#), the highest peak of the whole region, its bald knob dominating everything. Just over the other side of it, so said the map, was [Santo Padre](#), the only town of any size in this mass of hills, an obvious headquarters for a rearguard.

Second-Lieutenant Fowler's troop, which was in the lead, skirted the south side of [Favone](#) and circled round to the west till it pulled up short at the top of a steep impassable bank, looking across a ravine at [Santo Padre](#). The town was swarming with Germans, evidently hurrying to evacuate the place, for trucks and cars were pulling out as fast as they could along a road that wound away to the north. Our infantry was nowhere in sight, but down from [Favone](#) towards [Santo Padre](#) streamed figures in khaki, unrecognisable at that distance. The tanks left them alone and concentrated on the German transport as it came into view at a road bend a mile

away. The shooting was good. Several vehicles were knocked out, and the rest seemed to be doing their best to break all records as they vanished down that twisting road.

Second-Lieutenant Bill Reynolds's troop, which had now come up, turned away westwards to keep an eye on the left flank, while Fowler took his tanks back to the southern slope of [Favone](#) to look for the infantry. At an isolated house near the crest he met the foremost company commander, who pointed out his own men fifty yards up the slope, and just above them, in a belt of scattered trees, the Germans. Every now and then a German head would pop up and then disappear again.

This was quite a jolt to the tankies, who had been strolling round in the open just before this as they discussed the situation. Why the Germans had not fired at them nobody knew— probably the ugly snouts of the 75-millimetre guns on the Shermans had made them hold their hands.

Now a quick plan was made on the spot to deal with this stalemate. Second-Lieutenant Harry Hodge's troop, which had now arrived, went round to the left of [Favone](#) to deal with Jerry as he withdrew. The Indians carefully pulled back from their suicide position under Jerry's nose. And Fowler's tanks opened up with everything they had, firing 75-millimetre shells to burst in the trees above the Germans.

This treatment was most effective, and the surviving Germans fled over the top of [Favone](#). But it was now too late in the day for the Indians to follow up, so the tanks could do nothing more.

While this was going on, Hodge's tanks had shot up a hillside cave that seemed to contain Germans, and had also had a crack at some more vehicles on the road out of [Santo Padre](#). They were fooled, just as Fowler had been earlier, by khaki-clad figures running down the hill, but by the time Hodge learned that they were certainly Germans it was too late to do anything about them.

So the day closed quietly, with tanks and infantry together below the crest of [Favone](#). Hodge says:

We placed our six tanks in position and placed the Brownings ... with an arc of

fire which gave absolute coverage of all our front. We arranged with the infantry that should they hear anything that night to let us know and we would open fire. They promised to do so but we had an undisturbed night. However we found that the Huns had come back at night to collect their guns and wounded, the Indians had heard them but said nothing, and so another opportunity for more damage was lost.

Next morning the only evidence of the fight was a little scattered gear, a few dead Germans, two light 'ack-ack' guns on top of Favone, and cases of mines and anti-tank grenades not even opened, which made the tankies draw long breaths as they thought what Jerry could have done with them. But it was all poor consolation for the loss of all the prisoners they felt they should have had.

The same night as Jerry abandoned Santo Padre the opposition down on Route 6 melted away, and 13 Corps was able to move on again. There now seemed no point in swinging 8 Indian Division down off the hills at Arce, so it was ordered to carry on farther through the hills and down to the Liri River where it flowed south before coming out into the open valley. This meant a longer struggle over this horrible country for the 18th, or rather for A and C Squadrons, for B Squadron was ordered back from Favone to Orio to link up with fresh Indian units and advance along Route 6 to the Liri.

It seemed that the worst of the struggle might be over for the regiment now, for it had reached the highest peaks between the Melfa and the Liri, and from there forward the heights dropped away. But the 'impassable' hills still had more jokes to play. On 28 May, while B Squadron was chasing Jerry off Favone, A Squadron had been inching its way forward over incredible country farther west, occupying the almost vertical rampart of Monte Nero which looked down on the hills above Arce, and pushing on westwards to the next peaks beyond. Now, on the morning of the 29th, it could see civilisation straight down below, a town, thickly clustered farms, and a road winding down towards the Liri. But the way down, less than a mile in a straight line, took twenty-four hours, innumerable 'recces' on foot over the hillsides, hill-hopping trips by a little Auster artillery observation plane, and finally help from a bulldozer, which came up from behind early on the morning of 30 May and gouged out a track downhill for the tanks. After all those preliminaries, the actual bulldozing took less than a quarter of an hour.

So the tanks were idle on the 29th, but nobody minded a bit. The sun was hot, the countryside looked and smelled beautiful, the fruit was beginning to ripen on the trees, Jerry was nowhere within reach. 'It's a good war just now,' wrote one man to his family on that day.

But when the bulldozer had finished it was time to be up and moving again. In turn C Squadron, Regimental Headquarters (which had spent the last few days gently moving along a mile or two behind the squadrons, with Colonel Robinson tearing round from squadron to squadron in a jeep) and A Squadron plunged down the mountainside, clanked down the winding road, out of the hills at last, and down to the river.

This was the end of the regiment's spectacular three-day performance, in which the tanks had appeared unexpectedly in places where tanks had no right to go, had put panic into Jerry's rearguards, and had helped the infantry to push ahead faster and with fewer casualties than it could have done otherwise. There had been moments when the tankies had impartially cursed the hills and the terraces, the infantry and their own commanders; but now that it was over they could look back on the feat with pride.

Not that they had any time just then to sit down and pat themselves on the back, for [13 Corps](#) was pouring across the [Liri](#) hard on Jerry's heels, and [18 Regiment](#), still with its friends the Indians, was to join the chase as soon as it could get across the river.

¹ [Maj W. A. Morgan](#), MBE, ED; [New Plymouth](#); born [Wellington](#), 16 Jul 1911; master joiner; served in J Force, 1946-48; Regular Force 1948-60.

² [Lt H. A. Barber](#); born [Canada](#), 8 Aug 1916; stock auctioneer; wounded 22 Sep 1944.

³ [Lt N. L. Shillito](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 3 Nov 1914; agricultural student.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 33 – BEYOND THE LIRI

CHAPTER 33

Beyond the Liri

The roads down by the [Liri](#) were all confusion and bustle, jeeps dashing about in all directions, big heavy lorries moving up with loads of Bailey bridging, traffic jams and queues, and now the tanks lumbering along to add to the congestion. The infantry of [13 Corps](#) was well across the river and there was no sound of fighting except an occasional shell that screamed in from the west to slow things up. During the day one C Squadron man was wounded by shrapnel, but on the whole the shelling worried the tankies very little. Much worse was the accident to Trooper [Gilder](#),¹ who was wounded by a booby trap in the village of [Fontana Liri](#). This was [18 Regiment's](#) first booby-trap casualty, and it shook everyone, for the boys had got into the habit of popping into empty buildings and giving them a quick look over for portable goods. But here by the [Liri](#) it would clearly be most unwise, for Jerry had done a first-class job of booby-trapping. Already the choicest buildings were adorned with 'out of bounds' notices, roughly painted on doors or walls, with daubed skulls and crossbones to drive home the warning.

Until the [Liri](#) was bridged the tanks could only wait. On the way downhill the squadrons separated; C Squadron finished up in [Fontana Inferiore](#) near a heavily demolished hydroelectric works, while the engineers worked at full speed to make a bridge across the destroyed dam. A Squadron, two miles to the north, took up a 'gun line' overlooking the river and stayed on the alert to support some infantry who were supposed to be crossing there, but there was so little activity in front that the squadron began to wonder what it was there for. Regimental Headquarters followed C Squadron to [Fontana Inferiore](#), then turned south and went back along Route 6 to join 19 Indian Brigade at [Arce](#).

Some hours before this B Squadron had moved up Route 6 through [Arce](#) to the [Liri](#), and was now among the trees near the river two miles downstream from [Fontana Inferiore](#), waiting for the engineers, who were toiling, badly hampered by shellfire, to get a second Bailey bridge up and functioning. It was evening before it was ready for traffic; B Squadron was the first to cross, and the tanks set off uphill, moving in single file along a narrow country road. In the dark without lights this was no fun. Tank commanders had to ride outside or walk in front to keep the drivers on

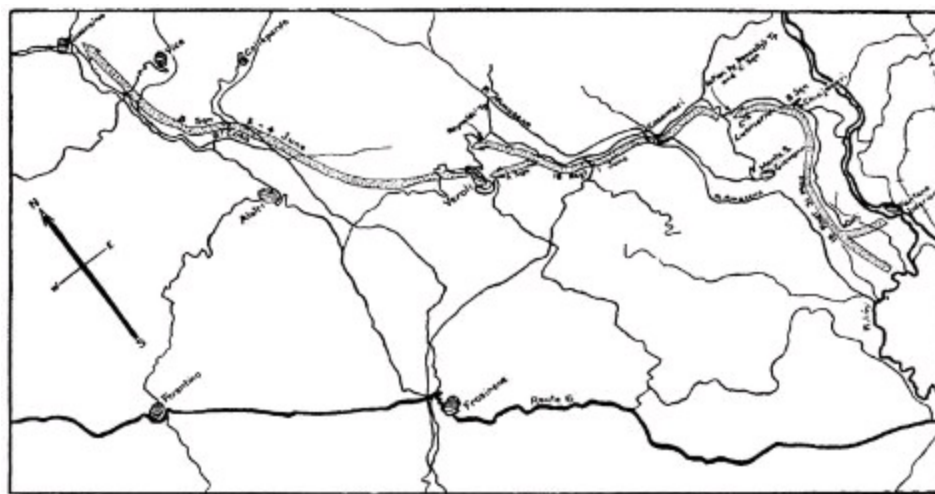
the track. Major Brown says:

I recall getting the tank onto a little stone bridge only to find it crumbling underneath us. We backed off just in time and then had to recce a by-pass—all taking time.

About 3 a.m. the squadron reached a little town called [Colli](#), perched up on a prominent hill overlooking [Fontana Inferiore](#), and stopped to have a couple of hours' rest and wait for dawn. Everyone was more than ready to stop, for it had been a very weary night.

West of the [Liri](#) the country was quite different from the scrubby, forbidding uplands to the east. It was richer land, thick with olive trees, the houses bigger, a series of little towns perched on steep knobs. By the map it seemed to be a maze of roads and lanes, branching and curling in all directions like pine roots, but most of them more or less following the grain of the ridges running north-west. It was in this direction that [8 Indian Division](#) was shaping up to run Jerry out of the hills and see him off towards [Rome](#).

At daybreak on 31 May B Squadron (still the only [18 Regiment](#) squadron over the [Liri](#)) set out again northwards, the tanks moving with their companies of Indian infantry along the narrow road, now churned up into fine dust by the mass of jeeps and trucks and carriers that crowded it. Sometimes the road followed ridge-tops, sometimes it wound round the shoulders of hills. Out to the left a big town, Monte San Giovanni, crowned yet another sugar-loaf peak; just past it was a shallow green valley, then a bulky hill rose steeply, with the road curving round behind it. Along this road, spying out the land for any signs of Jerry, advanced a scouting troop of



18 REGT FROM THE LIRI RIVER PAST VEROLI, 31 MAY-4 JUNE 1944

18 Regt From The Liri River Past Veroli, 31 May–4 June 1944

tanks under Lieutenant Pat [Donnelly](#),² along with some Humber armoured cars of 6 [Lancers](#).

Donnelly tells of this advance:

We went on behind the ... armoured cars, and met various small pockets of resistance. I always felt these people had been left behind and did not know what was going on for they put up a very poor show. No prisoners were taken but to our certain knowledge a lot of Germans escaped through the trees and into the hills, but we had no way of rounding them up.

The rest of B Squadron, following up some way behind, also saw these groups moving off northwards, but did not engage them because it was impossible to tell who they were—this was becoming quite a habit in B Squadron. So the Germans moved out unhindered, over [Colle Lucinetta](#) (the big hill in front) and to safety beyond.

Then, having circled Lucinetta and come up close to a crossroads beyond it, the scouting party ran into bad trouble, which Donnelly describes:

I was leading my three tanks with the Indians behind when on a sharp turn with a house immediately in front an anti-tank gun fired at my tank.... My gunner had his seventy five ... actually pointing at this little house as we had been suspecting trouble at all obvious places. He was able to fire through the window.... before Gerry

could fire again. Three or four H.E.s. into the small house and that finished that.

Another tank then advanced, but about fifty yards round the corner was hit with an anti-tank shell. Donnelly's story goes on:

We opened up with everything we had while the crew got out... and we got them all into our tank then back around the corner. The Indians did not seem to like being held up so one of them went ahead in an armoured car. He was blown up in about 3 seconds.

The Shermans kept up their fire and held Jerry's head down while the Indians brought a wounded man back round the corner; but after that the excitement simmered down until more troops arrived. With no infantry handy, the tanks and Humbers had no prospect of dislodging Jerry, who was firing Spandaus down the road, and obviously had quite a good-sized rearguard at work. It was not a very happy situation to be in, and the loss of a perfectly good Sherman rankled badly.

The rest of B Squadron was nowhere near this skirmish. A mile or so from Lucinetta the Indians left the road and plunged across country straight at the mountain, the tanks following, or trying to, along paths which, according to Second-Lieutenant Hodge, were 'built up and just wide enough to take a tank but not strong enough to take its weight'. Some of the tanks had a crack at scattered parties of Germans escaping over the top of Lucinetta, but the result was not too happy, as Jerry began to land shells round the slopes, and the Indians had some casualties. There was no close-range opposition. By the afternoon the Indians were up on the hill and in Monte [San Giovanni](#), still with the tanks close up in support. Reynolds's troop, sent over to the left to support a company of Tommies at [Monte San Giovanni](#), passed close under the town walls and took up position just west of it, but there seemed little point in this excursion, for Jerry gave no sign of life all night, apart from a few lone mortar bombs.

C Squadron was up early on 31 May, and was all ready to get on the road at 6 a.m., but had to kill time for three hours before the [Fontana Inferiore](#) bridge was ready. Then it crossed the river and climbed the hill to [Colli](#), and at 11 a.m. headed north with the infantry of 8 Punjab, Lieutenant Tim Cullinane's 9 Troop in the lead, next Lieutenant P. L. Collins's ³ 10 Troop, twisting and turning along the road

towards Lucinetta. By mid-afternoon C Squadron was passing through B Squadron headquarters at the hamlet of [Chiajamari](#), just where the road curved round behind Lucinetta. Then the Indians, who had been riding on the tanks, jumped down and advanced on foot, the tanks following, towards the bend where Donnelly's troop was still held up. Here the Punjabis came under heavy Spandau and mortar fire, the advance stopped, the Indians took cover, and the tanks went into action, Cullinane's troop on the road, Second-Lieutenant Morgan's troop up a hill to the right. Collins's tanks from a little farther back also engaged the slopes where Jerry seemed to be.

The leading tanks were far too close to the enemy and things went badly at first. Corporal Mick Calnan's ⁴ tank was hit, probably by a bazooka bomb, and 'brewed up' very quickly. As the crew piled out a Spandau shot them up, killing Trooper Bert Hill ⁵ and wounding all the rest. Cullinane was killed by the same Spandau. The tanks could not give any effective reply for the moment, for the hills ahead were covered with trees, and they were working blind.

Then, Major Deans says:

I went forward ... with 11 Tp and the tanks were placed ... where there was some observation possible. Heavy HE and MG fire was directed into the thick cover where Jerry was sited.... I think the Sqn was under the heaviest fire it had experienced.... Our heavy fire checked the Jerries and the infantry did not have to withdraw.

And Lieutenant Barber of 11 Troop recalls that his tanks 'spread out on either side of the burning tank ... firing bursts of M.G. and smoke shells to try and disrupt his perfect view of us'.

This slogging match lasted till dark. While it was at its height Collins's troop arrived up and joined in the party, concentrating on the German machine guns until they fell silent one by one. It was as heavy a fight as any [18 Regiment](#) squadron had ever had. Just about dusk a series of explosions in enemy territory marked the end of a 75-millimetre anti-tank gun; Jerry also had what seemed to be a tank, but nobody could get a view of it. On our side, the Browning barrels were red-hot and their rifling worn away before the day was over.

Even after dark the firing took a long time to die down. It was 11 p.m. before

the last tanks pulled back behind the Indians for the night, and well after midnight before their crews were abed, after filling up with fuel and ammunition and having their first meal for many hours. They were all feeling the want of sleep, which for a day or two had been scarce, with the nights broken by picket shifts and early morning stand-to.

So the night of 31 May found **18 Regiment** grouped fairly well together, C Squadron farthest forward, then B, then A, which during the day had gone all the way down the **Liri** to wait in a queue at the **Fontana Inferiore** bridge, and after crossing had headed upstream again, ending up with a Royal West Kent unit, after a five-mile trek, just across the river from where it had started. Regimental Headquarters was there too, not far behind A Squadron. A Echelon was over the **Liri** and parked near **Colli**. B1 Echelon, which had spent the last few days at various places just off Route 6, moving every second night or so and keeping well up behind the regiment, was not yet over the **Liri**, but was not far behind.

Judging by Jerry's recent performances, he would probably be gone from in front of C Squadron by morning. During the afternoon Morgan's troop had seen traffic moving away to the west along a road that wound away for several miles through a big valley, then disappeared behind a prominent hill crowned with another large town; evidently his main body was getting out as fast as it could, leaving a rearguard at this strategic crossroads to pull the attackers up short for the night.

And so it turned out. C and A Squadrons were both on the road, moving forward with their infantry, by 5 a.m. on 1 June; the crossroads was deserted, and the boys had a brief opportunity to admire the damage they had done. It was more than they expected—two anti-tank guns, several Spandaus, piles of ammunition and stores, seven stragglers and about forty dead. Obviously they had had much the best of the clash. The rearguard, it appeared from paybooks and other documents, was from the redoubtable 1 Parachute Division, heroes of **Cassino**, which explained the vigour of its defence.

C Squadron went only two miles or so, then turned off into an olive grove, had breakfast and took life easy, while Royal Frontier Force men went through with A Squadron following closely, and took up the pursuit along the road. As far as anyone could see the country looked peaceful and free of Germans. **Veroli** (the big town on

the hill where the road went out of sight) beckoned hospitably from straight ahead. The valley between was a lovely spot, prosperous farms dozing in the sun, vast orchards, and right in the middle the magnificent monastery of [Casamari](#), with large shady trees surrounded by a high wall, and under the wall a long row of German graves. The civilians were out in force, lining the road, waving Union Jacks (most of them blatantly home-made), clapping, throwing flowers, embracing the victors in the first enthusiasm of liberation. Here, where the war had largely spared the countryside, the Italians seemed to look on it as a sort of public show—vast contrast to the grim, unsmiling faces round [Cassino](#), where unroofed houses and dead cattle were the lightest calamities most families had suffered.

Just past [Casamari](#), at the [Amaseno River](#) (only a creek really) the column stopped for an hour while the infantry had a breather. Then two troops of tanks crossed and set out for [Veroli](#) with the leading infantry, the rest of A Squadron following a little farther back.

Out in front were the Lancers' scout cars and Reynolds's troop of B Squadron. They crossed the plain with never a sign of Jerry, then swung to the right, where the road began to rise before doubling back in a hairpin bend up the slope to [Veroli](#). But here, just as at Lucinetta, Jerry was waiting, tucked cunningly in among the thick trees with Spandaus and mortars and light anti-tank guns. From [Veroli](#) and the hillsides to the north he began to plaster the column. The Humbers were caught out in the open and three of them were knocked out very quickly; the Shermans replied with all their guns, hammering [Veroli](#), the hillsides and the road near the hairpin bend—in a house just short of the bend, says Reynolds, they cleaned up a lot of Germans. The enemy up on the hills was hard to dig out, but eventually Reynolds called for an artillery 'stonk' on a small cemetery which seemed to be the main source of the trouble, and this was very successful, silencing much of the fire. Dusk was coming on now, and the Shermans stopped for the night near a bridge at the hairpin bend. It was not a comfortable position, as there was no infantry there till morning.

While all this was going on, the Frontier Force men and the head of A Squadron had arrived in front of [Veroli](#), and at the foot of the hill, where the road looped to the right, they too ran into trouble. Major Playle tells the story:

The inf. left the road about the beginning of this loop & headed straight at [Veroli](#) by way of a lane or track. The leading Coys. were of course in open order & when they closed up to the town they were pinned down by heavy fire from houses in the town.... I lined up two tps. of tanks into a firing position and poured a lot of shells into the town. It was difficult to pinpoint the enemy positions as the inf. had trouble in describing the building from whence the fire was coming, but we did manage to silence most of the Jerries.

Before the opposition was silenced it made itself very unpleasant for some time, and the Indians lost a lot of men on the open slope below [Veroli](#). Finally A Squadron had to put down a smoke screen in front of the Indians so that they could bring their wounded back. It was a very unsatisfactory little action, with nobody able to get close enough to dislodge the rearguard, and everybody well aware that every hour was taking the enemy's main body farther away to safety. By evening, though the fire from [Veroli](#) had dropped to a fraction of what it had been, Jerry was still there and still fighting.

But next morning history had repeated itself. According to his habit, Jerry had vanished overnight, and early in the morning A Squadron went forward again with the Indians (the Frontier Force had somehow changed back to Punjabis). Apart from a few bitter-enders, who were quickly disposed of, there wasn't a German left within reach, and by 7 a.m. Indians and tanks were in [Veroli](#) and another heroes' welcome was under way. Early as it was, every Italian in the place was on the streets; there were more flags and flowers, more embraces, and gallons of lemonade from a half-demolished factory. The boys of [18 Regiment](#) were hardly used to lemonade as a drink, but on this warm summer morning it went down very well.

Reynolds's troop, with Indians riding in triumph on the tanks, entered [Veroli](#) about the same time as A Squadron. [Veroli](#) had certainly not been built with Sherman tanks in mind—the streets were narrow, the corners sharp, and Jerry had blown down buildings that completely blocked the road in several places. The boys would have liked to stay where they were for a while, for [Veroli](#) seemed a highly promising town, its people in generous mood. But the hunt was still on. With some reluctance the crews started to clear a way through the debris; then B Squadron, taking over the chase from A, moved on through the town with the Royal Fusiliers,

and went down the hill by a steep winding road through olive trees, with a wide view up a river valley to the north. Road and fields were littered with wrecked trucks and cars, all proof that Jerry had retired in great haste. He had taken a bad knock here, said the civilians—the RAF and the artillery had both got on to him, and this was the result. Our fighters were still overhead most of the time. In the afternoon A and C Squadrons and Regimental Headquarters followed B Squadron down this road, and in the evening the whole regiment had a front-row view when a fighter crashed not far away, going up in a cloud of thick dirty smoke as it hit the ground.

But a lot happened before that.

Up and down the lush green valley below Veroli thick traffic was streaming, the head of the British 78 Division, which had arrived from the south and was now attacking a stubborn rearguard at Alatri, a prominent town crowning the inevitable conical hill two miles north. Quite early in the day B Squadron's leading tanks had met a scouting column of 78 Division Staghound armoured cars on the Veroli road, and there had been a minute or two of tension before the parties recognised each other. Later the tankies had a wonderful view of the attack, Alatri sometimes almost blotted out by shell smoke, the RAF coming over and bombing and strafing all round it. When it was over the Royal Fusiliers moved on again, and B Squadron followed, leaving the road now and taking to the fields, advancing up the valley on 78 Division's right.

For a mile or two this was plain sailing; then, just opposite Alatri, the valley narrowed, the river and the hills came together, and B Squadron, pushing on over the lower slopes, ran into almost impossible country, worse even than the hills east of the Liri. The tanks struggled across a succession of ridges, with steep rises and sharp drops to stream beds, and on every slope vines, vines and more vines. How the crews cursed those endless fields of vines! They seemed to take an age to push through, the Shermans pitching like destroyers in and out of the ditches that paralleled every row, men sitting in front with heavy wire-cutters to hack a passage. There were a few compensations, for the vines were trained on cherry trees, the cherries ripe and luscious; but the grapes, though they had some colour in them, were still too sour.

Jerry was now pulling back from Alatri, and away ahead up the valley road his

transport could be seen, moving as fast as it could, but not always fast enough. The tanks blazed away a few rounds at the retreating vehicles, but they were so far away, and the battle at [Alatri](#) had spread such a haze over the valley, that you could not see whether you scored any hits or not. Nearer at hand there were little groups of Germans hastily retiring on foot, some of them not far ahead of the tanks.

It was getting on towards sunset now, and tanks and infantry stopped for the night, still only four miles from [Veroli](#) in a straight line, no more than halfway to their day's objective. There were still small parties of Germans round about, some of them escaping right through the lines in the dark, but everybody was too tired to pay much attention to them.

Daylight again, and B Squadron was off again, still at a snail's pace, shoving its way through much the same sort of country. The Fusiliers vanished away ahead. Finally, after casting about for the best way forward, the tanks got into the riverbed itself, and made much better time for a mile or two until pulled up by the wreckage of a bridge strewn all over the riverbed. Major Brown continues the story:

We recced and found a steep track up onto the road which was a high embankment of about 30 feet, turned West back to the main road which we found chocka-block full nose to tail of 78 Div vehicles, and managed to weave our way through this to cross roads at [Osta. Pidocco](#).

This crossroads was a dividing point, where [8 Indian Division](#) and 78 Division parted company. The 78 Division transport swung away to the west and climbed a road out of the valley. A mile and a half straight ahead the valley ended in wooded hills, with the town of [Guarcino](#) at their foot, sprawling up a hillside that looked almost vertical. And a mile to the right, perched up on a spur, was another small town called [Vico](#). Out in this direction were the Fusiliers; ahead on the road to [Guarcino](#) were some of the Lancers in their armoured cars; and at [Guarcino](#) they seemed to have met Jerry's next rearguard. [Guarcino](#), looking straight down the valley, was an ideal place to defend. Spandaus were firing from in front of it and mortar bombs bursting on the flat below. And Jerry's main body was evidently still on the move back, for, says Major Brown, 'we could see parties of Germans with the odd mule or horse disappearing up the re-entrants to the north (500 yards) of [Vico](#)'.

This could have been a nasty situation. With the Fusiliers in the hills to the east and 78 Division going away to the west, there was nobody on the valley floor but B Squadron and a handful of armoured cars. 'This was an awful gap', comments Brown. Fortunately Jerry was not in a counter-attacking mood these days, and the afternoon was quiet except for a swift excursion out to the right by Second-Lieutenant Jack Oxbrow's troop, just before dusk, to extricate two Honey tanks of the Reconnaissance Troop from an awkward spot. These two Honeys had gone off after a party of Germans, but the crews had then been pinned down outside their tanks by Spandau fire, and instead of collecting an armful of loot they might well have gone 'into the bag' themselves. But Oxbrow's tanks arrived at the right time and smothered the Spandaus with fire, and the Recce Troop boys were able to get back with no more trouble.

When night fell B Squadron pulled back to a flat field near the [Pidocco](#) crossroads and closed in to a 'tight harbour', the tanks only a few feet apart, everybody dug in, with Brownings set up in firing positions and extra pickets posted, for the valley could not yet be guaranteed clear of Germans. 'Fortunately,' says Brown, 'not a soul, ours or enemy, came near us.'

The story of this day would be incomplete with no mention of the epic capture of [Colleparado](#), clinging to a cliff in the mountains to the right, by Captain McBeath and Second-Lieutenants Ray Marra ⁶ and Ralph Joyes, unsupported and unarmed. These three, making a very unofficial excursion by jeep up the winding road to [Colleparado](#), found themselves the liberators of the village and the objects of wild local enthusiasm. A stray German who had somehow been left behind was handed over to them, and they were invited to return for what would amount to a civic reception. Then Joyes goes on to say:

We hopped back to H.Q., unloaded the Gerry, strapped on our revolvers, scrounged all the bully beef & chocolate we could lay hands on & set sail again for [Colleparado](#). A second time we were garlanded & feted and were escorted to the Mayor's house where we had quite a party....

Things were really rocking when panic set in & we were dragged across to the window.... There ..., spread right across the valley & advancing in extended order and using every bit of cover were dozens & dozens of Ghurkas from the Indian Div.

We were treated to a Ghurka stalk from the receiving end and very impressive it was too. I'm afraid, our rather ribald greetings from the window above them when they got close enough were not exactly in the best taste, & led to some extremely harsh observations from their O.C. when at last he made his appearance.

Such an opportunity comes once in a lifetime, if that.

Before daylight on 4 June the leading troops of B Squadron were moving out again towards [Guarcino](#). For once Jerry had not stolen away overnight, but was still there in force, with Spandaus firing all round the tanks. As the Lancers' armoured cars drove down the road towards [Guarcino](#) the Shermans opened up with everything, shelling the bends in the zigzag road up above the town, and the fire had its effect, cleaning up at least two Spandaus and an anti-tank gun.

But B Squadron could not really take the war seriously this morning, for the news had just come out of the blue that it was to be relieved almost immediately, and so Jerry was suddenly relegated to second place in everyone's mind. Canadian tanks were to come up and take over, and [18 Regiment](#) was to pull back and leave the advance to go on without it. This was unexpected and very welcome news. Shortage of sleep was beginning to tell on everyone, and the tanks were long overdue for maintenance. The only regret was that the relief was coming just when Jerry's withdrawal was getting into top gear, and a swift follow-up seemed likely to yield all sorts of prizes. [Rome](#) was ready to fall, and there was a slight general grievance at being left out of the kill—'Pulled us back on purpose so the bloody Yanks could get there first'—but you could not grumble seriously when there was the prospect of a spell out of action.

The 'Canucks' arrived during the morning, and B Squadron went back to join the rest of the regiment below [Veroli](#). A and C Squadrons had spent their two free days getting a little more practice at co-operation with their Indian infantry—the drill was not perfect yet, but there had been a wonderful improvement since the Melfa River. But now it was time to say goodbye to the Indians with a good deal of regret. Next morning the tanks were to go back again through [Veroli](#), be picked up by transporters and go back to [4 Brigade](#) in the [Liri](#) valley, where 2 NZ Division was assembling for a rest and some training.

Everyone was astir well before dawn next day. At 4.30 a.m. the tanks set out in a long procession, up the hill to [Veroli](#) and down the zigzag to the [Amaseno](#) valley on the other side. But, instead of transporters, there was only the [18th's](#) liaison officer waiting with fresh orders—stay right where you are. After so many months of order, counter-order and last-minute change, nobody was surprised by anything now; and nobody felt like objecting, for this spot looked all right, with plenty of trees, standing crops, and grapes ripening on the vines. So the squadrons quite happily set up camp. During the afternoon A and B Echelons arrived in, and the whole regiment was together again. It had been apart only eleven days, but so much had happened in that time that it seemed like months.

The tankies set to work to groom their neglected steeds. Nobody, except perhaps the harassed LAD staff, looked like breaking his neck over the job, but three days put the tanks to rights again, their minor ailments cured, and it only remained to 'T & A' the guns. A few reinforcements had come in to fill the gaps that a campaign always leaves. Then, once the work was done, everyone began to think of relaxation. [Veroli](#), only a mile away, would certainly repay a closer inspection. Leave to [Rome](#), it was hoped, would come soon.

Now that [18 Regiment's](#) second big campaign was over, it was time again to sit down and take stock. The unit had grown up since the [Sangro](#). Much of the bad luck that had plagued it there, the tanks stuck in the mud, the poor co-operation with the infantry, had been due to sheer inexperience, and had not recurred this time. True, conditions had been very much better, dry ground for the tanks, dry atmosphere to improve wireless reception; but also commanders and drivers had learnt much more about their tanks, where they could go, what they could do. They had learnt not to overload them with ammunition. They had learnt that tanks could go up or down very steep slopes where they could not go round them without capsizing.

Probably the most notable aspect of the campaign, from [18 Regiment's](#) point of view, was the discovery of what the Honey 'recce' tanks could do. They were an enormous advance on the old scout cars and a great asset to the regiment. They went where not even jeeps could go, especially with their big heavy turrets taken off. They carried supplies right up to the topmost hills; they explored the flanks while the Shermans forged ahead; they were mobile wireless links between the squadrons

and Regimental Headquarters; they carried squadron and company commanders round the countryside, they carried engineers and LAD men and medical orderlies wherever their jobs called them. In short, they had a dozen different uses.

This Liri valley war had been less a shooting party than a war of movement and co-ordination, a wireless war, a real-life manoeuvre. Casualties had been only three killed and 21 wounded. The biggest and most spectacular actions had by chance fallen mainly to B Squadron—the DSO awarded to Major Brown could truly be called a decoration for his whole squadron—but the campaign had been a triumph of hard, skilful work by every squadron and every tank.⁷

The 18th brought away from the Liri valley, as a permanent legacy, a warm regard for 8 Indian Division, which was just as heartily returned. When the tanks moved out past Veroli on 5 June Major-General Russell, the divisional commander, stood on a crossroads thanking them as they went past. And in a letter to Lieutenant-General Freyberg he paid the regiment a tribute:

I wish you to know how glad I was to have your 18 NZ Armd Regt under my command. They fought well and nothing was too difficult for them to tackle.... All ranks of the Regiment made every effort to make it easy for my Indian troops to co-operate with them; with extremely happy results....

How different the history of the war could have been if the various arms of the service had always combined so well.

¹ Tpr A. B. Gilder; Hastings; born Napier, 22 Mar 1921; storeman; wounded 30 May 1944.

² Capt G. P. Donnelly, m.i.d.; Hastings; born NZ 25 Jun 1915; farmer; wounded 31 May 1944.

³ Capt P. L. Collins, MC, m.i.d.; Hastings; born Wellington, 1 Jan 1917; warehouseman; four times wounded.

⁴ Cpl J. B. Calnan; Wellington; born NZ 2 Sep 1914; storeman; wounded 31 May 1944.

⁵ Tpr G. Hill; born NZ 28 Mar 1915; linesman; killed in action 31 May 1944.

⁶ Lt J. R. Marra, m.i.d.; Helensville; born NZ 13 Nov 1913; fat-stock buyer

⁷ Appointments in 18 Regt in early June 1944:

CO: Lt-Col H. A. Robinson

2 i/c: Maj A. S. Playle

Adj: Capt A. J. McBeath

IO: 2 Lt J. R. Marra

RHQ subaltern: 2 Lt R. A. Pickett

MO: Capt W. A. D. Nelson

Padre: Rev. R. M. Gourdie

LAD: Capt N. J. Grant

HQ Sqn

OC: Maj R. J. Stanford

2 i/c: Capt G. B. Nelson

Recce: Capt C. O. McGruther

2 Lt R. B. Joyes

Tech Adj: Capt C. N. James

QM: Lt R. H. Ferguson

Sigs: 2 Lt C. A. McKenzie

A Sqn

OC: Maj A. H. Dickinson

2 i/c: Capt W. A. Pyatt

2nd Capt: Capt C. S. Passmore

Lt J. R. Gillies

Lt L. M. Brosnan

Lt J. L. Wright

2 Lt S. B. Onyon

Capt J. B. Oliphant

B Sqn

OC: Maj K. L. Brown

2 i/c: Capt E. C. Laurie

2nd Capt: Capt S. B. Edmonds

Lt C. B. A. Jamison

2 Lt J. H. Hodge

2 Lt W. H. Reynolds

2 Lt A. J. Oxbrow
2 Lt W. H. Fowler
2 Lt W. G. Kendall

C Sqn

OC: Maj H. H. Deans

2 i/c: Capt B. W. Tipling

2nd Capt: Capt: Capt O. H. Burn

Lt. H. A. Barber

Lt P. L. Collins

Lt J. R. Greenfield

2 Lt W. A. Morgan

2 Lt L. E. Anderson

RSM: WO I D. S. Wilson

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 34 – NORTHWARDS

CHAPTER 34

Northwards

In the fertile valley below [Veroli](#), while the chase after Jerry receded northwards, [18 Regiment](#) spent all the rest of June and early July.

In June 'sunny [Italy](#)' at last comes into its own. Crops ripen, grapes sweeten, tomatoes and melons appear. The sky is deep blue, the sun bright and hot—a hard glaring heat unless diffused by trees. Happily, the regiment had trees in abundance. Most of the tanks and trucks were parked under them, with the bivvies in the shade round them or in tall standing crops. Here the war could be forgotten again for a while. The rest of the Division was several miles away in the [Liri](#) valley, the rest of [13 Corps](#) had moved on, the unit had this place almost to itself. There were parcels and a big mail from home, there were private excursions to [Veroli](#) and the surrounding farms, there was a little leave.

Even near at hand the boys could have filled in all their spare time quite happily. [Veroli](#) was a pleasant place, amazingly clean for an Italian country town; the people had not been soured by an overdose of Allied soldiers, and there were very few in the regiment who did not gain entry to at least one household. After eight months most of them could get along fairly well in quaint, ungrammatical Italian, and even though they could not understand much of what their hosts said, that did not matter. They went into the houses as honoured guests, they drank wine or sang songs, they left their washing and mending to be done by 'Momma' and the girls. A few contraband gifts in return and everyone was happy, for the civilians were short of such things as meat and salt and footwear. Here round [Veroli](#), indeed, the men saw real starvation for the first time, for Jerry had systematically stripped the district of all food. The local children, queueing up for the cookhouse 'left-overs', were pretty well looked after by the cooks.

The [18th](#) wandered farther afield too. Many of them, with or without the unofficial blessing of their squadron or troop commanders, hitch-hiked over to the [Liri](#) to visit friends in other units or to swim in the dams at [Fontana Inferiore](#). There were troop picnics to the river. Truckloads of sightseers went to [Sora](#), 22 miles away, where the rest of the Division had been fighting. Later in the month many of the

truck drivers had several days away, carting ammunition up to the battlefield north of [Rome](#), a wonderful trip which gave them a preview of the lovely prosperous hills of central [Italy](#) and took some of them to [Anzio](#), scene of the [Fifth Army's](#) landing in January.

There was also a well-organised private leave scheme to the island of [Ischia](#), near [Naples](#), which offered every delight to the tired soldier—'hot mineral baths, girls and grog', one man remembers. Here the regiment had a place where parties of thirty men could go and relax for four days, but unfortunately only a few had the chance of going there before orders from Higher Up stopped all leave to [Ischia](#).

And then there was [Rome](#).

Throughout 2 NZ Division [Rome](#) was the Topic of the Month. Ever since the Italian campaign opened the Allied commanders had sent out the call 'On to [Rome!](#)', dangling the Eternal City as a kind of bait in front of their armies. But after all this anticipation, the reality was anticlimax. Until 19 June [Rome](#) was not officially open to Kiwis at all, and then, when at last leave to [Rome](#) began, it was doled out like some rare precious drug. Eighteenth Regiment, with 650 men, had a quota of 24—one truckload—every second day; though if more wangled their way in and dodged Authority's eye, it was nobody's business but their own. The drivers on the ammunition trip, too, would have wasted a unique opportunity if they had not made time, off the record, to go into [Rome](#). But to see such a city in a day! Any good Italian would lift his hands in horror at the suggestion. All you could do was to rush madly round from the Pantheon to St. Peter's and back to the Forum and the Coliseum, perhaps out for a few minutes to Mussolini's massive sports stadium, till in the evening, your head swimming, you caught the truck home to be besieged by those who had not been there yet, all eager to hear every little detail. A day in [Rome](#) was much more exhausting than a day's work in camp.

In spare hours there was the usual baseball and cricket, while other enthusiasts spent hours at deck tennis, which was just beginning to spread like an epidemic through the Division. The Kiwi Concert Party came round with its usual good show, and a British ENSA party with one that was not half as good. For the first time the Education and Rehabilitation Service began to be spoken of, and some keen men wrote away for trade training courses and buried their noses in 'swot' with an

enthusiasm that often petered out before long. The athletes went into training for a [4 Brigade](#) sports meeting, a gala occasion which, by the worst of bad luck, was literally washed out by an early afternoon downpour.

These sudden storms, characteristic of the Italian spring, seemed to abound in summer too, for in late June there was a succession of them. One in particular was a sight to remember, a violent thunderstorm with great tongues of forked lightning and hailstones the size of marbles. Of this the war diary says:

Many of the tents got flooded out and men were to be seen in all sorts of garbs digging drains in an endeavour to stem the flood.

Evidently the lovely weather of the first half of June had lulled them into a dangerous sense of security.

With all this sport and leave and recreation of so many kinds, it does not sound as if there was much time left for work. But that is not so. From 10 June onwards there was quite a solid training programme, route-marching and drill, weapon training and range work. There was a school to train the newer members of tank crews in the basic skills that had been drummed into the older hands at [Maadi](#). There was an NCOs' school in drill and discipline which caused a few curls of the lip—drill does not make a fighting unit, said the sceptics, and as for discipline, well, the Kiwi discipline may be free and easy, but it is there when needed.

A notable feat was C Squadron's two-day march into the hills late in June, to keep fit and perhaps to find a bear. Bears were said to exist still in the wild mountains of this part of [Italy](#). It was a great success and most of the boys kept up very well, though the nearest approach to a bear that they found was a flock of Merino sheep which, Major Deans says, provided 'the toughest meat I have tried to eat'. They also found a large dump of German ammunition in a secluded part of the hills, a sight to gladden every heart.

From late June, when the harvesting was finished in the [Amaseno](#) valley, there was more infantry-tank training on a manoeuvre ground-cum-range near [Casamari](#). Before that the regiment exchanged groups of officers and NCOs with 21 Battalion for a few days, and parties from 24 Battalion came from time to time to spend a day with the [18th](#), inspect the tanks, and, in the words of the war diary, 'climb all over

them and see what makes things go'. Then the squadrons went out one by one and held half-day manoeuvres with 21, 22 or 24 Battalion, finishing up on 8 July with a grand finale, a big all-day regimental exercise with 22 Battalion, Vickers and 25-pounders. The net result of all this was most encouraging. Even in the successful campaign with [8 Indian Division](#) there had been rough spots—the 'drill' for joining up with infantry before a battle had not been perfect; neither had the wireless 'tie-up' between tanks and infantry; and nobody had yet produced a good foolproof system for infantry to point out to the tanks in action exactly where they should fire, and where German anti-tank guns were lurking. Here in the [Amaseno](#) valley these details were discussed, rehearsed and rehearsed again, down to the lowest possible level, the single tank supporting the single infantry platoon. Until now the [18th](#) had not had much chance of battle training with its own New Zealand infantry, but at the end it seemed as if, next time they went into action, these difficulties should be considerably smoothed out.

When the Kiwis first came to [Italy](#) there had been some big talk about an armoured sweep along the valley of the [Po River](#), which had died out about [Cassino](#) time, but it now began again as the Allies pushed Jerry farther and farther north. At the beginning of July the advance was going well and it did not seem as if 2 NZ Division would be needed for some time. But on 7 July, with the Germans making a stubborn stand at [Arezzo](#), 45 miles south-east of [Florence](#) and 200 miles ahead of the [Liri](#), there was a sudden call for the Division to go up and reinforce [13 Corps](#) to break this defence. The move was to begin almost at once.

To [18 Regiment](#) this news was not unwelcome. It was time, most men felt, to be moving on. After a month in one place you were apt to stagnate a little. And with Jerry still on the retreat it was a pity not to be in.

The tanks went away in two parties, forty Shermans on the morning of 9 July, all the rest on the 10th. Their dust disappeared over the [Veroli](#) hill, and the rest of the regiment set about packing and tidying up, painting out the fern leaves on the trucks, taking down New Zealand badges and titles, all the old familiar rigmarole of 'security'—rather a farce, for the local civilians knew perfectly well what was afoot. Almost the entire population of [Veroli](#) was on the streets when the tanks left, waving farewell with flowers and noisy tears.

On the road near [Alatri](#) the tanks were taken up on transporters and began their three-day journey north towards the front. At 2 a.m. on 11 July the harsh chorus of motor horns roused the [Veroli](#) camp for the last time, and at 3.30 a.m. the soft-skinned convoy was away, following the road the tanks had taken, along Route 6, past an amazing number of derelict German tanks and guns and vehicles, round the outskirts of [Rome](#), then north by Route 3 through a country of rolling hills and farms and many towns, almost unscarred by the war except for blown bridges. At first the road was tarsealed, wide and clean; on the second day it was not nearly as good, sometimes rough, corrugated and deep in fine dust that recalled the old desert sand. When the [18th](#) reached its destination—tanks on the evenings of 11 and 12 July, trucks at lunchtime on the 12th—everybody was grimy and tired and quite ready to stop. It had been an uneventful trip, with no major mishap, though fast travelling with heavy loads had been rough on tyres and had caused a lot of blowouts.

The regiment now camped in plantations of pines and scrubby oak trees, and would have been satisfied to spend a few days there just doing nothing, for this part of the country was very attractive and cooler than the [Amaseno](#) valley. But this was only a brief halt. On the evening of 13 July the convoy was off again, tanks and all together, round the western shore of [Lake Trasimene](#) and up a broad valley to the north-west, with the rumble of the guns audible for the first time in six weeks. Off the main road seven miles past the lake, then by farm lanes to its next camping ground in flattish fields with hills rising to the north. By 10 p.m. the whole unit was in and settled, except for one tank which went over a bank in the dark and had to be left till morning. Nos. 11 and 12 Troops of C Squadron were not there either, for they had gone straight on towards the front, where there was an immediate job for them.

This place, when the boys could inspect it in daylight, turned out to be very pleasant, in a sort of amphitheatre of the hills, with the town of [Cortona](#) perched straight up above it. Here, the regiment learnt, it was under 5 Brigade's command, in reserve meanwhile, but waiting to go into the line if needed to reinforce [6 Brigade's](#) thrust on [Arezzo](#). The two absent troops of C Squadron had gone under [6 Brigade's](#) command, and were very likely in the thick of things already.

As it happened, 5 Brigade was not called on, so the regiment spent a happy week at [Cortona](#), listening to the artillery going hammer and tongs not far ahead

until [Arezzo](#) was captured on 16 July, the noise then receding day by day as the advance went on northwards. Apart from the routine tank and vehicle maintenance the boys had nothing much to do. A and B Squadrons did small co-operation exercises with 21 Battalion; a draft of thirty-five 4th Reinforcements going home on furlough was farewelled with the usual wine and song; the regiment's old friend Lieutenant-Colonel Ferguson came back and took over command from Lieutenant-Colonel Robinson. About thirty men from each squadron had two days' holiday by Lake Trasimene, which they found a little disappointing, as the shallow, reedy edges of the lake were not much good for swimming.

On the afternoon of 16 July C Squadron's two errant troops came back from the front, remarkably intact and with very little to report.

On the first evening 11 and 12 Troops went only six miles past [Cortona](#) and halted for the night by the main road at [Castiglion Fiorentino](#), ready for action in the morning. On the hills north of [Castiglion 6 Brigade](#) was sitting, in unpleasantly close touch with Jerry, under shell and mortar fire as it shaped up for its attack towards [Arezzo](#). On its right a narrow winding road led diagonally forward through a gorge to the village of [Palazzo del Pero](#), six miles ahead, on a major highway (Route 73) running east out of [Arezzo](#). Along this tortuous road the tanks were directed, along with a company of 26 Battalion, a squadron of Divisional Cavalry with its armoured cars, and some engineers to deal with the inevitable demolitions. Early on 14 July the column set out, the Staghounds first, then Second-Lieutenant Greenfield's 12 Troop.

Nobody really expected to get to Route 73 the first day, and indeed it was rather a frustrating day, with mines and demolitions delaying matters at several points along the road. It was not easy country for tanks, as on each side thick scrub covered the hillsides right down to the road, giving no room for manoeuvre and cutting visibility down to almost nil. By mid-afternoon the Staghounds were at a road junction two miles short of [Palazzo del Pero](#), with the tanks just behind them and the infantry nowhere in sight—though from the noise of firing that sometimes filtered down from the hills to the left it seemed as if 26 Battalion was having its own fun up there. At the junction a big demolition held up the advance completely, so the tanks, turning off the road, parked on a grassy flat beside a stream to wait while a bulldozer went up to put things right. But Jerry was shelling and mortaring the

demolition, and the bulldozer had to give up; the Shermans, unable to do anything useful, spread out among the scrub and harboured for the night. There was a big night attack on [6 Brigade's](#) programme, but the tanks were to take no part in it.

This was a noisy night and quite spectacular, with a two-and-a-half-hour barrage up on the heights, flares going up along the skyline, and a vivid thunderstorm for good measure just before the party opened. Next morning Jerry's shelling on the demolition was half-hearted; the engineers went forward and made a bypass round it by 11 a.m., and then the tanks and armoured cars, squelching through a muddy creek, made their way past and set sail for [Palazzo del Pero](#). Jerry seemed to be pulling back through the hills ahead, and the tanks gave him a bit of 'hurry up' whenever a target appeared. But they could not do very much, for nobody was quite sure where 26 Battalion was, and Jerry's shells and mortars were cramping everyone's style. The advance faltered and stopped for the day. That night was an uneasy one for the foremost tanks, with shells still falling all round, very little infantry protection, and at one stage a battle to the left rear as Jerry counter-attacked 26 Battalion up on the hilltops. So everyone was jumpy during the night and very glad to see daylight again.

That was all the tanks did at [Arezzo](#). Hard-pressed by attacks both to west and east of the New Zealand sector, and pushed off his commanding hills by [6 Brigade](#), Jerry abandoned [Arezzo](#) on 16 July; 6 Armoured Division entered the town, and [6 Brigade](#) was pulled out of the line. The two troops of C Squadron, after a short foray along Route 73 to see if there were any prisoners or loot to be picked up, were ordered back to [Cortona](#).

Four more days of peace, and then on 20 July [18 Regiment](#) was again thrown into brief turmoil by orders to be off next day, still with 5 Brigade, westwards through [Siena](#) and then northwards towards [Florence](#), and so once more into the line.

Thirteenth Corps' original plan had been to make its main thrust on [Florence](#) down the [Arno](#) valley from [Arezzo](#), but events caused it to revise this and switch its weight west to the line of Route 2, the main [Siena- Florence](#) road. The new sector sounded interesting, for the Division would be advancing through the Chianti district, perhaps the best wine country in [Italy](#). If this was so, the Kiwis were very much in

favour of the switch. There were some good German divisions there, so the story ran, and the Division could expect some pretty tough opposition, but that drawback could be faced when the moment arrived.

This 57-mile move took the regiment through rolling, thickly cultivated and wooded hills, obviously well-to-do farm country, vineyards alternating with olives and oak woods, lanes flanked with tall hedges leading off at every turn of the road. Beautiful country indeed, but not ideal for fighting a mobile battle, for there was abundant cover everywhere, and a very small rearguard could do a lot of damage before scuttling away among the trees.

The soft-skinned convoy left [Cortona](#) after an early lunch on 21 July, skirted [Siena](#) with its tall tower and sea of rust-red roofs, turned off Route 2 on to a dusty gravelled road that wound forward for miles and miles among the hedges and olive groves, and about 5 p.m., after a stifling hot afternoon's run, reached its destination in gently sloping fields beside the road. The tanks, setting out at dusk and travelling with masked headlights, took all night over the move, partly due to a misadventure, for the officer guiding the column missed the turnoff, went a mile too far along Route 2, and then, as he says, 'had to go from tank to tank & turn the entire Regiment in its own tracks and go back the way we came'. So it was daylight when the last of the tanks arrived in.

In other ways this move had its sticky moments, for there were two breakdowns and a real epidemic of broken bogey wheels. But, as another officer recalls:

It wasn't all that bad a show.... We were rather proud of it. To shift a whole regt, on tracks, over that distance & on those roads was regarded as quite a feat. It was dark—spare driver or gunner of each tank had to sit out in front ... to give the driver a hand.

Then, when they arrived, longing for food and sleep after that dark and dusty drive, they had to get straight to work, refuel, load up with 'ammo' and prepare their steeds for action, for the infantry of 23 and 28 Battalions was already nosing ahead through closely wooded country infested with Germans, with orders to keep Jerry moving backwards, but at the same time not to get tangled up in heavy fighting, and not to advance without tanks. There were a few American tanks up there, but their

crews had 'had it' and were to be relieved at once. So there was haste. One squadron of **18 Regiment** was to go up and take over as soon as possible, and it seemed very likely that the whole regiment would be in, boots and all, before the war was much older.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 35 – TIGER COUNTRY

CHAPTER 35

Tiger Country

When 18 Regiment went into action south of Florence, despite the last-minute rush and lack of sleep, its morale was as high as ever it was.

First, there was a general feeling that, with Jerry in retreat everywhere, the end of the war was at last coming into view. Nearer home, the excellent show with 8 Indian Division had more than restored the 18th's confidence, which had shown signs of ebbing a little after the bad times at Orsogna and Cassino. It was well rested now, up to its full strength in men and tanks and equipment, well rehearsed in fighting alongside the infantry. Everyone looked forward confidently to better things than had been in the past.

But the 'new order' got away to a shaky start on that weary morning of 22 July, and the regiment needed all its morale to stand the strain. When the word went round to get ready for action, officers and men alike protested and complained, but they did it. There were only a few hours' respite. At 3 p.m. two troops of A Squadron, under Captain Pyatt, went forward to 23 Battalion on 5 Brigade's right, and Captain Laurie led two troops of B Squadron up towards 28 Battalion on the left.

The hills ahead, alternating thick trees and open olive groves, with standing crops in the gullies, were criss-crossed in all directions by shallow watercourses and narrow dusty roads. Much of the advance would certainly have to be across country, which did not promise to be easy, for the tanks would be groping ahead almost blind. In places the olive branches came down low enough to brush the turrets. The enemy here was 4 Parachute Division, not in the same class as the celebrated 1 Parachute Division, but still one of the best in Italy and a fit opponent.

That day 23 Battalion had struck bad trouble on its way forward, and, though Jerry was only fighting a rearguard action, he seemed likely to cause more headaches yet. Near the shell-smashed village of San Donato Pyatt's tanks linked up with D Company, and infantry and tanks prepared to push on north towards a tiny group of buildings called Morocco, three miles ahead and a mile and a half short of Route 2, which here cut diagonally across the line of advance. It was all very hurried—nobody had time for 'recce' or discussion first, so it was no wonder that at a road

fork a mile ahead of [San Donato](#), where the [Morocco](#) road branched left, Second-Lieutenant Jim Farrelly's ¹ 3 Troop took the right-hand road by mistake.

This was a lucky mistake, as it happened, for Farrelly's tanks arrived up with the infantry on the right-hand road just in good time to spoil a counter-attack by some stalwart paratroopers and chase away a self-propelled gun, before wheeling left across country to join Second-Lieutenant Graham Kendall's ² 4 Troop on the [Morocco](#) road. One of Kendall's tanks had gone up on a mine at the road fork, but after that the short advance was all that an infantry-tank 'do' should be, the tanks moving on steadily in line abreast, D Company's foremost sections walking on either side of the road among the tanks. It was no way to move if shells were falling, but for the moment there were none.

By 8 p.m., in the half light of the long summer evening, infantry and tanks together were approaching [Morocco](#). There was a trickle of fire coming from the houses now, and you could see the odd German flitting about. The 23 Battalion men, covered by the tanks, went from house to house dragging out a few defiant prisoners. One tank was set alight by a series of shots from a tank or self-propelled gun tucked away among the buildings, but then this moved off in the gathering dusk, and resistance in [Morocco](#) was almost over. One Sherman unfortunately fired on some 23 Battalion men who loomed up dimly ahead, and in the confusion most of the prisoners got away; but this was the only blemish in a good piece of cooperation. While all this was going on, 4 Troop had veered off to the right with one infantry platoon and occupied another little cluster of houses, from which Jerry seemed to have decamped not long before.

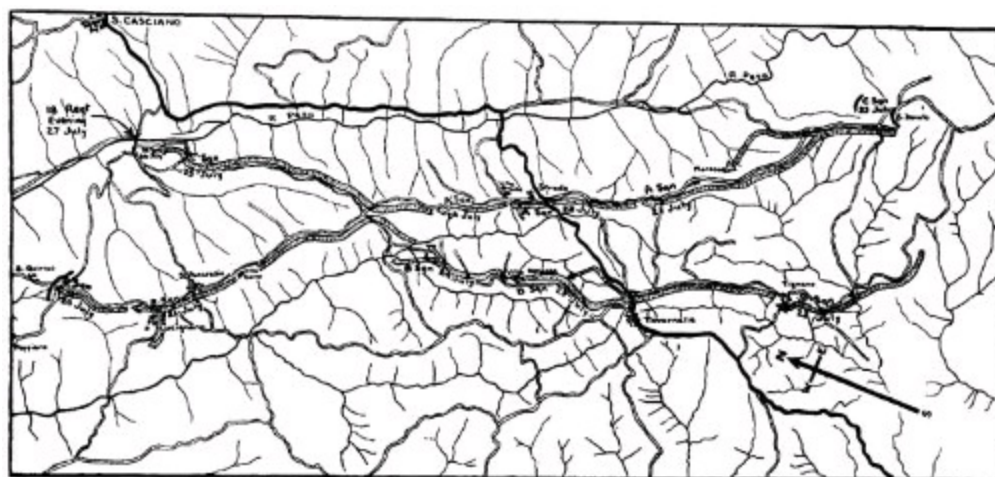
Before leaving [Morocco](#) Jerry had been up to his tricks, and had blown a demolition that almost blocked the road between the houses; but it did not take long to get round this, and the tanks then pushed on another half mile with no more interference, and harboured for the night close to the infantry among the olives by the road. About midnight Major Dickinson brought up the rest of A Squadron, with C Company, 23 Battalion, riding on the tanks, to reinforce D Company for an early morning advance next day.

Dawn saw the tank harbour full of bustle, and at 4.30 a.m. C Company was off again heading for Route 2, with Dickinson's half-squadron moving level. Jerry, it was

plain, was not far away. At a group of houses some 500 yards short of Route 2 a little outpost surrendered after some persuasion; then a demolition went up only 100 yards ahead of the first tank, and two more 'blows' were seen and heard among the trees ahead, just about where Route 2 ought to be. Lieutenant John Wright's ³ tank had a track blown off by a mine. But all this could not delay the tanks for long; I Troop, in the lead, crossed Route 2 and pushed on to the little village of **Strada** just beyond, where C Company had struck a nest of Spandaus and anti-tank rocket guns, abominable little weapons with the jaw-breaking name of 'Ofenrohre' but known to the boys as 'Bazookas' after their American counterpart. The tanks stood a little way back and hammered the buildings with all their weapons while the infantry moved in, and Jerry fled, abandoning one of his bazookas. It was still only 7.15 a.m.

Now Second-Lieutenant Doug Crump's 2 Troop, with a platoon of C Company, set to work to clear several hundred yards of a ridge, thickly sprinkled with houses, to the right of **Strada**. This was quite a long job, as Jerry was holding on stoutly, but before midday, with the help of some wonderful artillery salvos, the ridge was clear, and Jerry had moved back to the thick country behind Route 2, taking at least one tank back with him, but leaving behind another bazooka and some machine guns.

So far A Squadron had every reason to be pleased with itself. Without its help 23 Battalion would never have got



18 REGT IN THE FLORENCE CAMPAIGN, 23-27 JULY 1944

18 Regt in The Florence Campaign, 23-27 July 1944

across Route 2 or into [Strada](#). Infantry and tanks had combined pretty well, and Jerry had been hunted out of several strong positions. But this was only the beginning.

Up to now A Squadron seemed to have had most of the fun. The Maoris were advancing on the left, parallel to 23 Battalion; but their colonel had different ideas about the use of tanks, for Captain Laurie's half of B Squadron was ordered to go along, not with the foremost infantry, but behind the companies, ready to join in if any sticky situation cropped up. Except for some 'softening-up' fire by one troop towards dusk, the tanks had nothing to do as the Maoris moved on the ruined village of [Tignano](#), sticking up above the trees on the crest of a little ridge. A mile short of the village Jerry had blown a bridge over a creek, but the Honey tanks, snooping round, found a way across for the Shermans. The half-squadron spent a quiet night near [Tignano](#), and at dawn pushed on behind three Maori companies, which soon after 7 a.m. entered [Tavarnelle](#) on Route 2 with no opposition. Three hours later, after spending some time clearing mines from the approach to [Tavarnelle](#), the tanks moved on again, Second-Lieutenant Andrewes's ⁴ 8 Troop pushing up Route 2 to the north-east, Lieutenant Colin Jamison's ⁵ 5 Troop up a small road leading north-west.

Now the battle began to liven up. At the first crossroads past [Tavarnelle](#) 5 Troop was held up by mines and a bad 'blow'. The Maoris on Route 2 ran into a nest of opposition until 8 Troop, coming up behind, took a hand in the game and persuaded Jerry to leave. Then, about midday, with 5 Troop just beginning to move again, 8 Troop turned west from Route 2, crashed its way through the trees, across a gully, and up on to the next ridge, where 5 Troop was now trailing along behind the Maori companies. The road here ran along the shallow ridge-top, with comparatively open fields on both sides.

With our tanks and infantry boring into Jerry's lines beyond Route 2, the climax of the fighting approached.

The line of advance along the ridges now lay almost north. Ahead could be seen the first of those magnificent villas of [Tuscany](#) which the Kiwis were so often to meet and live in on the way to [Florence](#). On B Squadron's front was the Villa [Bonazza](#), with thick shrubberies and plantations all round it, and a mere 400 yards ahead of A Squadron the [Villa Strada](#) (christened by the Kiwis ' [The Castle](#)'), even bigger and

more imposing, and surrounded by a high wall. In and round these two houses Jerry was strongly established, covering the [Strada](#) ridge and the road forward of [Tavarnelle](#) with Spandaus and mortars.

Here A Squadron had its worst 'brew-up', a shocking affair which had a very bad effect on all who saw it. Corporal Don Cates's ⁶ tank, hit by an anti-tank shell from somewhere round the Castle, burst into flames too suddenly for the crew to get clear—Trooper John Kingsford ⁷ was killed and all the rest badly burned, Cates and Trooper 'Toby' [Donaldson](#) ⁸ fatally. Such a disaster was calculated to take the edge off the tankies' confidence quicker than anything else, especially as the whisper was now going round, 'Tigers ahead, look out!' They had heard plenty about the Tiger tank, [Germany's](#) biggest and toughest, 60 tons of armour plate mounting an 88-millimetre gun, able to outclass a Sherman anywhere. The bravest tank crew would think twice before tackling a Tiger in cold blood.

After a few shells on the Castle, 23 Battalion went into the attack at 1.30 p.m., with the remaining A Squadron tanks covering them from the [Strada](#) ridge. Here the victorious advance had its first bad check. [The Castle](#) and its grounds were stiff with Germans, and they threw everything at the attackers, who fell back on [Strada](#) in some dismay. Major Dickinson describes the scene:

In no time our haybarn was full of wounded & my crews were risking their lives to bring them in. I shouted myself hoarse telling them to take cover & disperse.... We could not do much about the shelling because it was long range & we couldn't find where it came from.... It was coming from three directions in front & from both sides. So our move forward halted & stayed put with a disorganised infantry no supporting arms and a few tanks holding precariously to the edge of a village.

A Squadron's battle report tells of the rest of the afternoon: Enemy fire increased in intensity and movement became impossible. Enemy fire included spandau, tank and **SP** fire, mortar and heavy field gun. One tank received several direct hits and the tank comd was seriously wounded.... The whole area from [STRADA](#) to the crossroads was kept under heavy fire for the rest of the afternoon and it was decided not to attempt any further advance.

This was the only possible decision. To go in again to face that weight of fire—it

was later found that Jerry had four Mark IV tanks or self-propelled guns there—would have been suicide. So nightfall found 23 Battalion and A Squadron still where they had been at midday, on the **Strada** ridge, under fire, licking their wounds and waiting their chance to push on again.

Meanwhile, on the left, the story had been roughly the same. Laurie's tanks, pressing on in the early afternoon after the Maoris, were stopped at a road bend by felled trees, mines and a demolition; mortar bombs began to fall, and from the direction of the **Villa Bonazza** fast tank shells came whistling down the road. The Maoris, moving in under cover of the Shermans' fire, cleared a few Germans out of buildings, took some prisoners and an anti-tank gun; the tanks, deployed to the right of the road, began to shoot up the villa and its grounds, but this brought on a savage reaction from Jerry, and a Tiger tank beside a little cemetery on the right flank hit and burnt two Shermans in quick succession. This was a bad half-hour. B Squadron's report on the action tells the story of its losses:

Heavy & accurate mortar fire continued throughout the operation.... Tank No. 10 (O.C. of No. 8 Troop) received direct hits by HE & AP & caught fire. Turret crew badly knocked about. I died of wounds, 2 wounded.... Decision to withdraw tanks slightly to more covered positions made. During this, No. 3 tank was hit by HE but managed to limp to cover. Remained out of action thereafter. Fire started under No. 12 tank & the commander was wounded trying to put it out. At this stage, TIGER tank identified approx. 1500 yards to NE. Heavily engaged ... & many direct hits scored. No. 11 tank received direct hit in return & caught fire. Entire turret crew killed.



ITALY MAP No.2

This slogging match lasted all afternoon. Second-Lieutenant Harry Hodge's 7 Troop, coming forward through the smoke of the burning tanks to reinforce the badly-hit 5 and 8 Troops, joined battle with the Tiger, which moved from its cemetery down the gully to B Squadron's right, and was stopped in a maize field as it tried to climb the opposite hill to Route 2. It was not easy to bring the guns to bear on it—in the end only Corporal Bruce Johnstone's ⁹ tank, with Trooper 'Squat' Warren ¹⁰ on the gun, was able to shoot with any chance of success, firing from the shelter of a tall clump of bushes. The other crews of 7 Troop took ammunition from their tanks to keep up Johnstone's supply. Johnstone writes of the action:

We used H.E. shells to observe our bursts & then continued to use AP & APHE.... We had to knock the tops off some very tall trees in the gully for us to see our target eventually.... We could see the AP bouncing from his hide.

Luckily the Tiger, being now on the far slope of the gully and stern on to its assailant, couldn't elevate its gun to return the fire. It was a rare opportunity.

While this was going on, the [Villa Bonazza](#) and its plantations, which were still full of Germans, were taking a battering from the artillery. As the afternoon wore on the fire from the villa faltered, and by evening the place was empty. Jerry had apparently had enough and had retired from the field.

The Tiger was left dead in the maize field, a pathetic derelict, damaged beyond repair and finally blown up by its crew. Nobody realised this till next morning. It was cause for celebration in [18 Regiment](#), for this was 2 NZ Division's first Tiger. The tankies swarmed over it, admiring it and the persistent gunnery that had wounded it to death. Its fame went far and wide, spread through the Division by a bold NZEF Times reporter who wrote:

Even in death she is the biggest and most lethal-looking tank any of us has ever seen. The broad tracks are broken and scarred by three armour-piercing shells. It was not these that put her out of action. The tracks are not entirely cut and the bogies are undamaged.... Apart from several shells which hit and almost penetrated the armour belt, and several more which cut great gouges in the turret, there is the

one which pierced two inches of steel, tore off the engine cover, and ricocheted back to damage the engine itself. This is the shell which finally made the Germans decide that it was time to leave.

But such victories are not won without loss. Six killed and eleven wounded in one day's fighting is heavy for an armoured unit—it was the 18th's worst day in Italy, surpassing even the famous 15 December on the Orsogna road. Notable among the dead was Corporal Cassidy Brown of the Reconnaissance Troop, hero of the 1941 Tobruk exploit, ¹¹ fighting man and boxer of renown, spoken of as 'one of those legendary types whose style & exploits enriched the unit to which they belonged'. Men like this no unit could afford to lose.

It was here that Padre Gourdie turned on the performance of his life. He was always noted for his tendency to gravitate up towards the front; wherever the regiment went he turned up at the 'sharp end', touring the foremost tanks with cheerful words and an old pack full of cigarettes or chocolate or tinned milk. On this trying day he was all over the place, pulling the men out of two burning tanks, attending to wounds and burns, braving shell and Spandau fire again and again to take carrier-loads of wounded back to the RAP. When, a few weeks later, he was awarded the unit's fifth DSO, everyone was delighted.

There were others, too, who worked like demons to haul the crews out of the burning tanks. Notable among them was Captain Laurie, who had a most hectic day apart from this, tearing up and down the ridge, keeping control of his scattered tanks and keeping in touch with the elusive infantry. Prominent among the rescue workers was Trooper E. W. Clarke, ¹² and so was Corporal Win Snell, ¹³ who was wounded while attending to the casualties. This was no job for anyone with a weak stomach.

While all the metal was flying beyond Route 2, C Squadron was spending a satisfactory day on the right flank, where a company of infantry and some Divisional Cavalry armoured cars were pushing ahead along a road parallel to the Pesa River. At dawn C Squadron moved up through San Donato, running into a shower of shells on the way, and placed itself nicely in position among the trees some half a mile north of the village. Here it stayed all day, bombarding the road and getting nothing back, which, thought everyone, was just as it should be. Views on this indirect fire business had changed now. The tankies, who six or eight months ago had been

inclined to look down on it as a menial job, had begun to pride themselves on their skill at it, and it was now quite an accepted thing in the Division that the Shermans could contribute a lot to its gun power, especially for tackling Jerry from well forward before the 25-pounders could move up.

After such a day of stress and strain, anticlimax was almost bound to follow. The Kiwis' first enthusiasm for the chase had been toned down a little by the setbacks of 23 July. Two days of heavy fighting had cost more men and tanks than [General Freyberg](#) was prepared to lose; so his orders to 5 Brigade now were to take more care, to keep up the advance but not to 'mix it' so willingly with Jerry. The tankies, who were beginning to feel unhappy about racing ahead at full speed through this Tiger country, were all in favour of taking things a little easier.

At 8 a.m. on 24 July, in a heavy mist, Captain Pyatt's half of A Squadron moved forward towards the Castle, nosing gently along the road from [Strada](#) in the infantry's wake. Nothing much was expected at the Castle now, for during the night vehicles had been heard moving away, and it seemed probable that Jerry's tanks and guns would not be there. And so it turned out. Infantry and tanks moved slowly past the Castle, everyone on the alert for trouble, for the country was very thick and broken, with gullies running down on both sides of the road. Half a mile past the Castle Pyatt's tank went up on a mine while making its way round a demolition; the rest carried on for another half-mile, and then, as A Squadron's battle report has it:

They encountered a mine field and the Tp Comds tank went up. At the same time, the infantry were held up by spandau fire and very heavy mortar and arty fire swept the road in a very efficient manner. A-Tk guns and ofenroehr were seen, and these made several attempts to get the tanks. The fwd elements were pinned down for an hour, but 3 Tp was able to get into firing position at cemetery.... Heavy fire from enemy mortars, arty and **SP** guns continued until 1330 hrs. The Squadron suffered no casualties.

Luckily there were no Tigers on the prowl today, or the story might have been worse.

Pyatt's tanks had no more excitement that day. In deference to divisional orders the attack was called off, and infantry and tanks stayed where they were till

evening, when 21 Battalion came up to take over the running from the 23rd. Now it became C Squadron's turn to go in, and A Squadron pulled back to an olive grove near [Tavarnelle](#), where the fitters and LAD men got to work to put the tanks back into fighting trim in double-quick time.

On B Squadron's front, 7 Troop and Sergeant 'Hoot' Gibson's ¹⁴ 6 Troop, under Major Stanford, came through during the night of 23 July, and in the morning took over from Laurie's tanks, pushing along the ridge from the Villa [Bonazza](#). Dodging mines and a demolition in the road, 7 Troop advanced past another mansion which crowned the point of the ridge, fired a young barrage to help D Company, 28 Battalion, on to the next ridge, then followed up and covered the Maoris as they probed further. On the right 6 Troop, making its laborious way forward with C Company and shooting up possible enemy hideouts as it went, clashed with a Panther tank, not as big and savage as a Tiger, but still a formidable tank, which blazed defiantly away from the [Strada](#) road and effectively scotched the advance on the Maoris' right. A self-propelled 'tank-buster' from 7 Anti-Tank Regiment had a crack at it but was knocked out. Sergeant Gibson was wounded when his tank ran on a mine. Nasty persistent shellfire forced the Maoris back a little way; towards dusk 6 Troop woke up to the startling fact that there was no infantry in front of it, and it pulled back to the [Villa Bonazza](#), where during the evening the rest of B Squadron also gathered.

Next day, 25 July, was better, the Maoris forging ahead against an enemy who appeared briefly here and there but pulled back smartly under the persuasion of a few tank shells. All B Squadron was up with the hunt today. On the left 7 Troop advanced across country, and it was not easy country, largely hillsides and round-topped spurs thick with trees. The rest of the squadron, headed by a 'composite' troop under Lieutenant Jamison, had a road to travel on, for here the Maoris swung across 21 Battalion's bows and took over the [Strada](#) road, while 21 Battalion side-stepped to the right. For two miles along this road B Squadron advanced, knocking holes in all the buildings it saw. Towards the end of the day, in the tiny crossroads settlement of [San Pancrazio](#), there was a short delay with demolitions, mines and anti-tank fire; but this opposition, like the rest, melted away when the tanks worked round the craters, the Maoris pressed in to close quarters, and some Divisional Cavalry Staghounds came up to join the party. By evening infantry and tanks were

still probing north and west, picking mines, both real and dummy, out of the roads. This had been a good day, a big hole had been gouged in Jerry's territory, and still he was fighting only a rearguard action and not showing himself keen for a stand-up battle.

That night B Squadron stayed at a magnificent mansion, the [Villa Corno](#), alleged to belong to the Bishop of [Florence](#), described appreciatively by one man as 'beautiful, lovely furniture, rooms big with chandeliers'. It was twice the size of the [Villa Bonazza](#) and much more splendid—the whole squadron could have lost itself in this place.

From 26 July B Squadron played a secondary role in proceedings, for 21 Battalion went to the forefront of the advance, while the Maoris moved up quietly, just looking after the left flank. One troop, under Lieutenant Oxbrow, went up to Belvedere farm, a mile and a half past [San Pancrazio](#), to cover the Maoris' open left flank, and later in the day Second-Lieutenant Hodge took 7 Troop forward to just short of San Quirico, perched up on the next ridge, where it spent the rest of the day under nagging shellfire. On the evening of 27 July the squadron left this region of palatial summer homes and moved back two miles to the [Pesa](#) valley, where a road wound downhill and crossed the river to [San Casciano](#), a big prominent town jutting up on the skyline opposite. This Pesa valley was a beautiful place, warm and peaceful now that the fighting had moved on. The ugliest scar on the landscape was a group of German tanks sitting useless in the river just where the bridge had been.

The story now swings back to C Squadron, which crossed Route 2 on the evening of 24 July and took over from A Squadron beyond [Strada](#).

That night Lieutenant Brosnan's ¹⁵ 9 Troop and Captain Tyerman's 10 Troop went up through [Strada](#) with 21 Battalion, overtook A Squadron ahead of the Castle, and at 2 a.m. moved on again to the next crossroads to support the infantry, who had been forging ahead in the dark, finding Jerry gone and all quiet. This was the crossroads from which the lurking Panther had savaged Gibson's troop the previous afternoon, but it was no longer there.

In the morning, while the B Squadron tanks climbed out of the gully to the left and swung on to the [Strada](#) road, A Company, 21 Battalion, was deflected on to a

narrower road, unmetalled and dusty, leading off to the right down a long ridge towards the Pesa River, which came into occasional view at the foot of the slope. Even after daybreak progress here was very slow. Jerry had not completely abandoned this area, but had little rearguards among the trees, and the road was blown and mined in places, so infantry and sappers had a busy morning, while the tanks spent most of their time waiting for the way to be cleared. By midday A Company was at the end of the ridge, a commanding point overlooking the [Pesa](#), with Tyerman's tanks in close attendance. About 1000 yards down the slope was the jagged gap where the bridge below [San Casciano](#) had been; down in the flat valley Route 2 ran along the other side of the river, made a right-angled turn and wound up a spur to [San Casciano](#). Jerry was still holding the near side of the [Pesa](#). During the afternoon a little attack was organised, with 9 and 10 Troops included in it, to sweep downhill and seize a stretch of the [Pesa](#) bank as far as the blown bridge.

This went well at first. The leading platoon and 10 Troop, setting out at 5.30 p.m., were in a group of houses near the foot of the ridge, just above the river, within three-quarters of an hour. But 9 Troop and the second infantry platoon, moving on towards the blown bridge, ran into trouble. From houses by the bridge and from the [San Casciano](#) spur came mortars and anti-tank shells; the infantry, after being held up for a while, finally forced their way along the slope to just above the blown bridge, but the tanks could not get forward at all. Brosnan's tank threw a track before it reached the start line; another Sherman was knocked out and Corporal Gordon Griffiths ¹⁶ killed by anti-tank fire from across the river; a foot 'recce' to the final objective found that the lane leading forward along the riverbank was no good for tanks. So the matter rested for the night, with the foremost infantry out ahead on its own, and 10 Troop in the best cover it could get. The remains of 9 Troop went back to Squadron Headquarters on the [Strada](#) road.

That night the rest of 21 Battalion moved on through San Pancrazio, and in the morning the main body of C Squadron, with Captain Pyatt now in command and Lieutenant Greenfield's 12 Troop leading, set out to carry the advance on northwards. The line of advance, working gradually over towards the [Pesa](#), had narrowed down to one battalion width, so 21 Battalion was to carry on alone for a while, with a heavy reinforcement of tanks, anti-tank guns and the self-propelled 'tank-busters'. The place was stiff with artillery observers from both 25-pounders and

'Long Toms'. Everything seemed to be going well, with a good chance of giving Jerry another punch on the nose.

But not immediately. On the edge of the tiny village of San Quirico, at another of those heavily wooded crossroads that were so apt to cause trouble, a fierce action developed suddenly, 12 Troop and the leading infantry of 21 Battalion against a strong, determined paratroop rearguard in houses and among the trees. The fight raged all day against Spandaus and mortars, anti-tank guns, and what Rumour said was a Tiger hidden somewhere in the village. Greenfield remembers this day vividly:

We had all three tanks in positions covering the houses and crossroads and were slamming everything into them. I remember my gunner firing the 75 at running German infantry while I was screaming over the intercom to use his co-ax.... With so much firing and so little movement the tank turrets were full of smoke and fumes and were becoming just about unbearable. We decided that as we stood we commanded the crossroads and so must stay there.... Obviously Jerry also felt that he must stay there and move us out again if he could.... So he seemed to bring to bear on us all the mortars he could get.... We found most success came with the use of A.P.-H.E. into each house visible and two or three through the church tower, plus H.E.... fired into the belt of trees ahead. We found the conditions inside the tanks so bad that I had the crew members taking turns to get out and brew tea under the backs of the tanks.... Looking back it seems crazy but at the time we all felt the risk was well worth-while and tea had never tasted better.... It was certainly a trying day and the troop behaved magnificently. Sergt. Alby [Reynolds](#)¹⁷ was perfect.

Honours for the day went to our side. The 21 Battalion boys had to pull back with some casualties, but 12 Troop finished the day with only minor damage to the tanks, while several Spandaus and bazookas were shelled and machine-gunned out of existence, and Jerry lost many dead in [San Quirico](#). In the afternoon half of A Squadron, under Captain Passmore, came up to 'thicken up' the next attack, and did a little shooting, knocking down [San Quirico](#)'s long-suffering tower. Church towers were a specialty of Captain Passmore's.

Farther back down the road towards [San Pancrazio](#), 9 and 11 Troops of C Squadron spent a wretched day, for Jerry landed shells indiscriminately along this road. Down past [San Quirico](#) the country fell away to a wide shallow valley which

gave Jerry a good view of our ridge, and every movement brought shells.

Down in the [Pesa](#) valley to the right, 10 Troop had an even grimmer day. Tanks or anti-tank guns on the hillsides over the river kept slamming away at the Shermans, too invisible among the trees themselves to make good targets, though 10 Troop sprayed the hill with fire. The only encouraging event of the day was when the [RAF](#) came over in the afternoon and did its best to wipe [San Casciano](#) off the map. Towards evening, with the fire slackening a little, the tankies tried to 'recce' a ford over the [Pesa](#), but this called forth a new outburst of fire. All three tanks were hit. Sergeant Jack Edgar's ¹⁸ tank brewed up, and he was killed, despite frenzied efforts by everyone to drag him clear.

So 26 July was C Squadron's black day. Better things were promised, for that night 21 Battalion advanced again, took [San Quirico](#)—12 Troop had heard Jerry's transport departing earlier in the evening—and the next settlement of [La Ripa](#). Now the whole show was to move on again and clear two more miles of the ridge road; then [6 Brigade](#), coming through, was to attack across the [Pesa](#), swinging its direction to the right and making for the town of [Cerbaia](#) on the far bank. At [Cerbaia](#) there was a bridge, but the hope of capturing it intact could be pretty well forgotten, for Jerry was making an artistic job of his demolitions these days.

Closing in on [San Quirico](#) after dark, 9 and 11 Troops were ready to push on soon after midnight, lined up on the road with some 17-pounder anti-tank guns, 'tank-busters', Divisional Cavalry Staghounds and a party of engineers. But the word to move did not come and did not come, and dawn was pretty close before the column got under way. The first of [6 Brigade's](#) infantry, with some 19 Regiment tanks, had already passed along the road in the dark. The night was full of the song of shells sailing over towards Jerry's positions beyond the [Pesa](#).

The move was unexciting at first. The infantry occupied the village of [Montagnana](#) with no argument. The tanks, slowed up by craters in the road, turned off towards [Cerbaia](#), then on to a road running north-west along the side of the last ridge before the [Pesa](#). It was now broad day, and from over the river an anti-tank gun was sending fast shells whizzing among the tanks—not dangerous shelling, but very vexing. Rumour still had Tigers ahead, and certainly there were plenty of the unmistakable broad Tiger tracks to be seen. So the situation was uncomfortable,

especially as there was no infantry anywhere around.

This had been a handsome road before our artillery smashed it up. It was thickly lined with houses, lovely houses many of them, reputedly the summer villas of wealthy Florentines. By about 8 a.m. the C Squadron tanks were in among the buildings, keeping an eye on that open left flank and firing at the odd target above [Cerbaia](#) (not that there was much visible to fire at). Jerry had quite recently left this area. At one stage his last troops were seen withdrawing over the river to the left, and the tanks put a few shells among them at long range. The [Cerbaia](#) bridge had only just been blown, and [6 Brigade](#) was striving, under heavy fire, to establish a bridgehead over the river by [Cerbaia](#). The valley was blanketed in smoke, and the noise was appalling.

That evening, with [6 Brigade](#) well across the river and the position looking a little better, C Squadron was recalled and joined 10 Troop in its now quiet area by the [Pesa](#).

It had not been quiet all day. Jerry had pulled out overnight from the slope in front of [San Casciano](#), but he was still not far ahead—10 Troop, to quote the war diary, 'remained under hy fire throughout the morning but this eased in the afternoon and the fitters were able to get to work making these tks road worthy again'. During the day the watchers on our side of the [Pesa](#) had the satisfaction of seeing New Zealand tanks, Staghounds and infantry go up Route 2 and into [San Casciano](#).

Some of the spadework for this had been done by [18 Regiment](#), though [San Casciano](#) wasn't officially included in the unit's scheme of things. Quite early in the day Honey tanks of the Recce Troop had made their way across the [Pesa](#) and up the [San Casciano](#) road until the first tank went up on an anti-tank mine, injuring all the crew. Several people, including Lieutenant-Colonel Ferguson and Captain Passmore, had taken jeeps up in the same direction, lifting mines and trying to find a way up for Shermans—no easy job, as every little culvert was blown. Lieutenant Jamison of B Squadron had been killed when his jeep hit a mine on a narrow road down towards the river. In this fair [Tuscan](#) countryside there was no place you could trust. Along the edges of roads, in ditches, in farmyards, crops and hedges, at every crossroads, Jerry had sown his mines. He had stretched wires across the lanes to take jeep

drivers at throat height. You had to be suspicious and alert all the time.

This was the end of [18 Regiment's](#) first foray into Tiger country. The whole unit came down to the lush grass and peach orchards of the [Pesa](#), with B₂ Echelon only five miles back on Route 2. Crews and fitters set to work to put the tanks back into first-class shape, for, though the regiment now went back from 5 Brigade's command to [4 Brigade](#), it was still on call and might be summoned forward any time at short notice.

The past six days had seen the [18th](#) mixed up in confused fighting, difficult to understand or control, each half-squadron acting more or less on its own, and as a rule nobody knowing what anyone else was doing, or where. Some sticky situations had arisen—the paratroopers, steady fighters and well armed, had done a lot of damage in short engagements before slipping away northwards. The [18th](#) had had 12 killed and 18 wounded, seven Shermans and one Honey knocked out, seven more Shermans disabled on mines and dragged back by the recovery people.

To the men in the tanks, knowing nothing but their own little part, the whole thing was a nightmare, intensified by the cruel heat of the long summer days. Lieutenant Greenfield speaks of the blurred memory of those days that remained in the mind:

I remember heat, dust, smoke, noise, constant movement, a shortage of rest, no time for meals, sleep or reconnaissance, no time for thought. I remember the smell of rotting flesh, the explosion of mines and shells, the mad chatter of spandaus and our own guns, the fumes of the guns ... combining with the dust and heat to make the tanks almost unbearable.... Half the time I had no idea where we were or what the ground was like, and there was no time to find out, but we were going forward in spite of it all and we had to keep going.... There were Tigers about and there was a fear of them felt by us all.... We were always driving our tanks towards the unseen and dreaded 88's, not knowing whose turn it was to be the first target. There was little time for food, and little appetite for it. The need was for another mug of tea, but there was often not the time to boil the water and so we had to make do with coffee and milk made with warm water. Night and day we were kept on the go.

And Padre Gourdie speaks of the campaign as 'extremely exacting.... Often the sleep gained was very short, many not getting to bed until 11 p.m., midnight or 1 a.m., and the tanks starting up at 3 or 3.30 a.m. next morning'.

What an introduction to the rich land of [Tuscany](#), the garden of [Italy](#), whose beauties have been sung by poets down the centuries!

So far the story has dealt almost entirely with the fighting squadrons, and has passed over the 'bits and pieces', the less glamorous links that held the chain together. There was the Reconnaissance Troop, perhaps the hardest-worked of all, tearing round the country, keeping the whole show more or less coherent, exploring lanes, showing the squadrons the way over new ground. There were the energetic fitters who had gone up forward and doctored wounded tanks on the spot, sometimes while shells were still falling. There were 'Doc' [Nelson](#)¹⁹ and his RAP boys who had the heart-breaking job of patching up the burnt men on 23 July. There were the Dingo scout cars of the Intercommunication Troop, lent out to the squadrons as message carriers, reconnaissance cars, wireless links, and a dozen other things. There were the signallers, under Second-Lieutenant 'Chook' Fowler, always on the go, chasing the tanks round the [Tuscan](#) hills with new batteries, toiling to keep telephones working only to have their lines torn down, over and over again, by bulldozers or other Juggernauts. And there were the B Echelon people, worried and hampered in their efforts to keep up supplies because in this mad, hurried campaign nobody ever knew where anyone else was.

Fortunately, food was no worry, for it was full, ripe summer, and there were plenty of local supplies, tomatoes and peaches and pork and potatoes, that could be bought, or more often just 'borrowed'. The regiment almost literally lived off the country.

The tank tactics in these few days had been an interesting experiment. The 'half-squadron' system, two troops under the squadron commander and two under the second-in-command or battle captain, had worked pretty well in this advance on narrow fronts through close country with the infantry nearby. It had enabled more tanks to be up with the infantry and at the same time under control from well forward. It had made 'leapfrog' reliefs quite simple as the battle moved on. It had allowed half the squadron to get some sleep and look after its tanks. But it was not

a popular idea, and after the [Florence](#) campaign it was little used. It certainly cut down the squadron's 'punch', and would have been a poor system in open country or in a stand-up battle—on that notorious 23 July, when B Squadron had its epic fight with the Tiger, two troops had been inadequate, and a third had to be called up in a hurry.

The most striking point about this campaign was the moral effect of the Tiger tank. Unless the cards all turned in its favour a Sherman was no match for a Tiger, twice its size and armed with a gun that made the 'seventy-five' look like a pop-gun. From the moment the Tiger appeared it became a kind of bogey, and the air was full of rumours of more and more Tigers lying in wait just ahead; just as in the desert every German gun was an 'eighty-eight', so here every tracked vehicle heard over in German territory was a Tiger. The natural result was that, quite suddenly, the New Zealand tanks became more cautious than they had ever been before. You could not blame the tankies, who were acting under divisional orders not to 'stick their necks out'. But to the infantry, who did not realise the length of the odds, and who had come to admire the Shermans for their willingness to tackle anything, the change was puzzling and disappointing. Infantrymen were apt to think unkind thoughts about the tankies' new caution; tankies to feel that the infantry was unreasonable and expected far too much of them. The high mutual regard of New Zealand tanks and infantry was in danger.

Bound up with all this was the question whether tanks should be 'under command' of the infantry, taking orders from infantry commanders, or only 'in support', fighting alongside the infantry but under their own regimental or brigade control. Ideas clashed on this. The infantry preferred, naturally, to have its tanks under command, saying that it led to better co-operation and smoother work on the battlefield. The tankies bitterly opposed this—how on earth, they asked, could infantry commanders, who did not know a bee from a bull's foot about tank tactics or tanks' difficulties, tell them what to do? At [Strada](#) and [Tavarnelle](#) they had been under command, and there was already a feeling abroad in [18 Regiment](#) that they had been given suicide jobs that led to unnecessary losses. One squadron commander has said: 'I could never appreciate the demands made on the stamina of tank crews by infantry commanders.' The tanks needed a lot of looking after to keep them in action; and what chance did they have, asked the tankies with heat, when

they were kept in action day after day from 3 or 4 a.m. to midnight?

Here were two viewpoints that could hardly be reconciled. The argument remained to the end of the war, and in some instances feeling ran high. It would be exaggeration to say that the old harmony between tanks and infantry was gone; but after the [Florence](#) battle it was not always what it had been.

¹ Lt E.J. Farrelly; [Auckland](#); born NZ 12 Oct 1917; linotype operator; wounded 4 Dec 1941.

² [Capt W. G. Kendall](#); [Kerikeri](#); born [Napier](#), 8 Apr 1916; storekeeper.

³ [Capt J. L. Wright](#), m.i.d.; born England, 10 Nov 1919; insurance agent; wounded 23 Jul 1944.

⁴ [2 Lt F. N. Andrewes](#); [Panguru](#), [North Auckland](#); born NZ 7 Sep 1916; wholesale merchant; wounded 23 Jul 1944.

⁵ Lt C. B. A. Jamison; born [Taihape](#), 16 Sep 1922; Regular soldier; killed in action 27 Jul 1944.

⁶ [Cpl D. C. Cates](#); born NZ 29 Sep 1919; farmhand; died of wounds 28 Jul 1944.

⁷ Tpr J. J. Kingsford; born NZ 12 Feb 1914; shop salesman; killed in action 23 Jul 1944.

⁸ [Tpr I. Donaldson](#); born NZ 23 Sep 1919; dairy farmer; died of wounds 23 Jul 1944.

⁹ [Sgt W. B. Johnstone](#); [Auckland](#); born NZ 18 Apr 1920; wool classer; wounded 2 Aug 1944.

¹⁰ [Cpl W. G. Warren](#); born NZ 14 Apr 1920; farmhand; killed in action 21 Apr 1945.

¹¹ See page 178

¹² Sgt E. W. Clarke, MM; New Plymouth; born New Plymouth, 27 Sep 1915; groom; wounded May 1941.

¹³ Cpl W. R. Snell; Kawakawa; born Whangarei, 26 Jul 1921; butcher; wounded 23 Jul 1944.

¹⁴ Sgt A. C. Gibson; born Blenheim, 17 Aug 1920; carpenter and joiner; wounded 24 Jul 1944.

¹⁵ Capt L. McN. Brosnan, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wyndham, 27 May 1909; motor mechanic.

¹⁶ Cpl G. N. R. Griffiths; born NZ 13 Aug 1918; truck driver; killed in action 25 Jul 1944.

¹⁷ Sgt A. F. G. Reynolds; Te Awamutu; born Te Awamutu, 27 Oct 1918; farm labourer; twice wounded.

¹⁸ Sgt J. A. Edgar; born NZ 5 Apr 1916; builder; killed in action 26 Jul 1944.

¹⁹ Maj W. A. D. Nelson, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Auckland, 8 Nov 1915; medical student.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 36 – FLORENCE—BUT NOT QUITE

CHAPTER 36

Florence—But not Quite

From 27 July, with the [Eighth Army](#) drawing close to [Florence](#), Jerry began to dig his toes in. The whole New Zealand front was over the [Pesa](#) now, and was shaping up aggressively to the last defence line before [Florence](#). Until 4 August, when Kiwis and South Africans surged forward to the very edge of [Florence](#), the story is one of hard, bitter slogging, attack and counter-attack along the pleasant ridges running up from the [Pesa](#). From [Cerbaia](#), where [6 Brigade](#) had forced its way across the river, one ridge sloped up two miles to [la Romola](#); the second ridge to the left of this was crowned by the still smaller village of [San Michele](#), not much more than a church and a double line of houses straggling for two or three hundred yards along the dusty ridgetop road. These two obscure little rural hamlets were in those few days to be written in large, permanent letters on 2 NZ Division's battle record. This was infantry country, with vines on the lower slopes and thick woods farther up, and on the infantry fell the main burden of the fighting; but the armour was there too, supporting the attacks, bolstering the line against Jerry's counter-strokes, working hard under difficult conditions, until the weight of the advance broke Jerry and sent him hurrying back across the River Arno.

This was the summer's hottest part, just before it turns towards autumn. Baking sunshine day after day, the nights very little cooler. Everything tinder dry, so that drivers had to take it easy along the lanes, for, as warning notices told them, 'Dust brings shells'. Everyone went stripped to the waist, and torsos were magnificently brown.

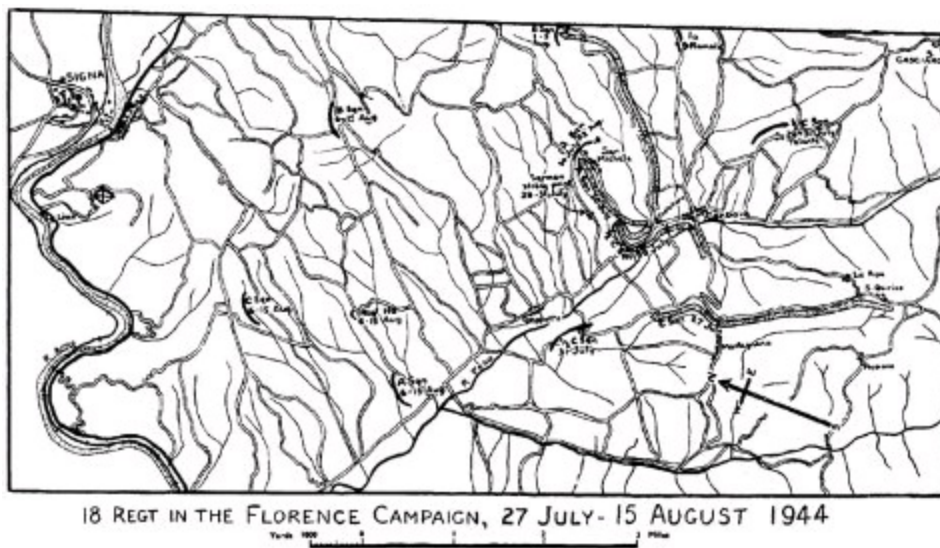
The prospect of a few days' spell by the [Pesa](#), then, suited the regiment very well. But it did not turn out that way. The misadventures of [6 Brigade](#) on 28 July put a sudden end to that. Before dawn that day 24 and 26 Battalions, with tanks of 19 Regiment, penetrated deeply along the intervening ridge between [la Romola](#) and [San Michele](#); then Jerry, counter-attacking with a vigour not shown for a long time, tumbled them back almost to their starting point. Anti-tank guns on both flanks wrought havoc among 19 Regiment's Shermans. Before midday a call for help had gone through to [18 Regiment](#), and at 1 p.m. C Squadron was ordered forward urgently. By 1.30, after a fevered scramble to pack up, Lieutenant Brosnan had 9

and 11 Troops on the move. The rest of the squadron followed later in the day.

That was 28 July. From then until 3 August **18 Regiment** led an unstable life—Regimental Headquarters, A Echelon and a few odds and ends in the **Pesa** valley, the fighting squadrons disappearing forward one by one, perhaps to reappear after two or three days, tired and dirty, full of tales of hide-and-seek with Jerry among leafy lanes and fields where his bazookas and anti-tank guns were so desperately hard to locate.

During those few days the most straightforward, least exciting job fell to Brosnan's tanks. After dark on 28 July they groped their way up from **Cerbaia** to the **Talente** ridge on the right flank, where daylight found them looking across a shallow valley at Jerry's commanding position at la **Romola**. On 29 and 30 July, while 22 Battalion struggled vainly to drive Jerry from this height, the tanks were busy, pouring high explosive into la **Romola**, crumbling houses on the ridge where Jerry was almost certainly lurking, shooting up any traffic brave enough to appear on the ridge road. For a while everything looked pretty hopeless, as Jerry sat tight on his ridge and could not be shifted, even by fighter-bombers. But in the dead of night on 30 July 22 Battalion, with Shermans of 20 Regiment in support, launched a set-piece attack on la **Romola**, climbed the ridge, and early next morning entered the village. All day there was a confused struggle up and down the ridge, but Brosnan's tanks could no longer fire without danger of hitting our own men, and their usefulness here was ended. They came down from **Talente** and back to their postponed rest in the **Pesa** valley.

Over on the left flank, still open and insecure, with Divisional Cavalry's Staghounds dodging round on mysterious patrols,



18 Regt in the Florence Campaign, 27 July-15 August 1944

Captain Pyatt with the other half of C Squadron had a very different kind of job. On the evening of 29 July the half-squadron headed off in that general direction, with orders to attach itself to Div Cav to help with the patrolling. Both 10 and 12 Troops crossed the [Pesa](#) in the dark, joined the Staghounds in the grounds of a big house near [Cerbaia](#), and by dawn were ready to set out exploring the network of roads that criss-crossed the map on this side of the river. The Staghounds led the way, followed by 12 Troop, which took a road parallel to the river, and 10 Troop, which turned uphill along the road to [San Michele](#), a little over a mile up the ridge.

This operation, by any standards, was a mess. The fields and vineyards round here were still infested with Germans, snugly hidden, well dug in and hard to shift. In [San Michele](#) were some 24 Battalion men and some Shermans of A Squadron, and on the next ridge to the west a group of German anti-tank guns was making life in [San Michele](#) sheer hell. The C Squadron tanks, as they moved on, fired at everything they saw; 10 Troop and the Staghounds tried to find a way to get at the offending anti-tank guns, but the only result was that Captain Tyerman's tank ran on to a mine and was then set alight by an armour-piercing shell. Farther west a Staghound was also hit, and retired from the battle with its turret crew dead.

Lieutenant Greenfield of 12 Troop takes up the story:

So there we were with armoured casualties both ahead and behind us and Jerry sitting on top of the ridge throwing 88 m.m. A. P. at us.... It was certainly an emergency.... There we were in a sunken road without infantry support and in close

country with very little knowledge or information.... We exchanged A.P. with whatever was firing at us from the ridge but we couldn't really see what was there and every time we fired the muzzle blast raised a cloud of dust which obscured the shot.... Finally we were ordered to withdraw which we did with A.P. skipping all round us.

There was little prospect of this excursion being a success. There was one good piece of co-operation, when 10 Troop reported the position of an anti-tank gun and an A Squadron tank tackled it and put it out of action after a lively duel. But the C Squadron tanks could do no real good there. They pulled back to their starting point by [Cerbaia](#), spent the afternoon there harried by shells—for Jerry had [Cerbaia](#) well 'taped'—and in the evening were recalled across the [Pesa](#) in a tearing hurry to go into position for another 'do' next day. This time the Shermans were to stay west of the river and hold Jerry down while Divisional Cavalry made another sortie on the east bank.

This seemed a crazy move, typical of this crazy campaign. The six tanks set out at midnight with sleepless crews. Just before dawn Greenfield's tank went up on a mine at a crossroads looking down on the [Pesa](#), at a place which supposedly had been cleared of mines. The Shermans then stayed where they were, two at this crossroads, the rest farther up the hill more or less under cover, and when day broke they began to make themselves as unpleasant to Jerry as they could, harassing the roads beyond the [Pesa](#) and knocking pieces off the houses.

All the tanks had a good view over the valley, and at first had a wonderful time, but this was no healthy spot, for soon Jerry opened up with everything he could muster. The two tanks at the crossroads were sitting shots. Both of them were knocked out by big anti-tank shells, and their crews eventually had to make a quick dash up the hill and over a crest with metal flying all round them. The other tanks took revenge later when they scored hits on an anti-tank gun and put it out of the fight, but still the day's honours were with Jerry. What made the tankies particularly sore was that, after all this, the Staghounds across the river did not even move that day.

That was the Shermans' last job on the left flank. When night fell the remaining tanks moved back to the rest area. After two nights with practically no sleep, the

crews could have asked for nothing better.

[San Michele](#), that tiny cluster of battered houses, was a focal point of [6 Brigade's](#) fighting. It changed hands several times, and sometimes was a sort of no-man's land. It was the scene, from 28 July, of the Kiwis' most violent action since [Cassino](#). Early on 29 July a company of 24 Battalion entered the ruins almost unopposed, but was then hit by furious counter-attacks. Four Shermans of 19 Regiment which accompanied the infantry were all put out of action, most of them in flames. At nightfall a few 24 Battalion men still had a precarious hold in the church crypt, but unless they could be reinforced the prospect was very doubtful. Without tanks or anti-tank guns Jerry could hardly be kept out, and 19 Regiment was now low in tanks and needed relief. So at 8 p.m. an urgent call went back to the [18th](#) for a squadron to come at once and attach itself to 19 Regiment.

The Sherman crews, disinclined though they might be for hard work at ordinary times, could move fast when they had to. In less than half an hour A Squadron was on the move, and by 9.15 p.m. it was over the [Pesa](#) and had joined 19 Regiment at [Castellare](#), near the junction where the [San Michele](#) road turned uphill away from the river.

This looked a hot spot all round. Shells were smashing into [Castellare](#), and up at [San Michele](#), according to Major Dickinson, 'all hell had broken loose'. So far A Squadron had been too busy to learn what its sudden move was all about, but now the news went round that 24 Battalion had been pushed out of [San Michele](#) or most of it, and that there was to be a fresh attack to get it back. This sounded like one of those midnight moves that seemed to come up so regularly these days, and which everyone hated.

There was a lot of coming and going at [Castellare](#) as the counter-attack force assembled. A company of 25 Battalion appeared from somewhere; so did a few anti-tank guns; and Second-Lieutenant Speakman's ¹ troop of A Squadron made ready to join the party. About 1 a.m. the infantry set off up the road with the tanks following. In front of them 25-pounder shells were falling, making the night almost unbearably noisy.

Surprisingly, there was not much for the tanks to do. On the way up they

frightened away a few stray Germans who were popping up where they had no business to be, and Speakman reports: 'We accounted for at least one Hun, who attempted to mount one of the tanks to throw grenades in the turret.' But [San Michele](#) itself was empty except for the handful of Kiwis in the crypt, a few corpses, the still burning remains of 19 Regiment's tanks, and a mess of gear and weapons lying higgledy-piggledy all round the place. The 25 Battalion men went through the village and established themselves at the far end, with the tanks and anti-tank guns in among the buildings not far behind.

The previous evening [18 Regiment](#) had been all set to relieve the whole of 19 Regiment. This emergency at [San Michele](#) put thoughts of routine relief out of everyone's mind for the night, but in the morning as soon as it was light enough to see the armour was on the move again, [18 Regiment](#) Headquarters forward over the [Pesa](#), two more troops of A Squadron up towards [San Michele](#), the 19th back out of action with all its bits and pieces. By 11 a.m. these had all vanished, and the [18th](#) was in sole support.

The early morning lull on the ridge was followed all too soon by another storm. From mid-morning poor little San Michele seemed to be the target for all the 'hate' the whole German Army could unleash. One man wrote, heavily underlined, in his diary: 'Hottest spot of war.' All day Jerry did his best to push the defenders out, stabbing from the front with vicious little counter-attacks, smothering the ruins with shells, bombarding village and ridge from three sides with mortars and rifle grenades. This was a day to try any nerves. Much of the shooting came from the left rear, on the next ridge to the west; Speakman's tanks, parked safely (they thought) beside buildings in the lee of the village, unexpectedly came under fire from a high-velocity gun not far away in that direction, and nobody could spot just where this gun was, though Captain Passmore took his tank over to that side of the ridge and gave all likely places a 'doing over' with high-explosive and armour-piercing shells. All the tanks in [San Michele](#) were hit and had various bits knocked off them. A Sherman from Regimental Headquarters, which had come up that morning with an artillery OP officer aboard, was set alight by the same elusive gun. Trooper Howard ² was killed and two more of Speakman's men wounded, and there were a dozen infantry casualties when a house in the village crumbled under the shelling.

Jerry had no monopoly of the war that day. A Squadron worked hard to keep

him in his place. Two German tanks tried to get into [San Michele](#) from the north, but ran into a hostile reception from Shermans and artillery, and then from the [RAF](#), which came over bombing and strafing, a skilful piece of work, even if a little too close to our own troops for comfort. Several times during the day the fighter-bombers were over, going for Jerry's high ground a bare two miles ahead, but this support, cheering as it was, was a bit haphazard because for most of the time the wireless link between [San Michele](#) and the outside world was pretty shaky.

By evening it was more than shaky, it was non-existent, for all the tanks' wireless sets were out of action. Major Dickinson came hot-foot up to the village, very worried at the silence, greatly relieved to find his tanks and crews still more or less intact. Hearing the full story of the German guns to the left rear, he moved the Shermans back to a slightly more sheltered position, for there seemed no sense in exposing them to the same thing next day.

That was a bad night in [San Michele](#). There were rumours of more counter-attacks, but nothing came of them, which was just as well, for the defenders were in mediocre shape now, jittery and shaken by the shelling, hungry and tired, liable to shoot at anything that moved. But for the Shermans, whose presence put some heart into the infantry and tended to discourage Jerry, almost anything could have happened.

The fight for [San Michele](#) did not rise again to such heights. On 31 July the village was still an uneasy place, under constant fire, still dominated from the ridge to the west, with Jerry still close to the northern edge and still dangerous. But [San Michele](#) was now more or less a backwater, for the main action moved east to 22 Battalion at la [Romola](#). Between la [Romola](#) and [San Michele](#), too, 26 Battalion was slowly pushing uphill, and was now level with [San Michele](#) and still going.

At 11 p.m. on 1 August our artillery put over another big barrage, [6 Brigade](#) attacked up the road from [Castellare](#), and Jerry departed. When the [San Michele](#) garrison got up on 2 August it was no longer in the forefront, and everything was unusually quiet. The battle had receded overnight, and could now be heard away up on the hilltops to the north.

This night attack from [Castellare](#) marked B Squadron's return to battle after five

days' rest. It was better off than A and C Squadrons this time, for it was fresh and it had nearly a whole day's notice to move, so that Major Stanford could go forward, make thorough preparations and tie up all details. At 9 p.m. B Squadron set out for [Cerbaia](#) and thence to 25 Battalion on the [Castellare](#) road. Some of the Shermans had six-pounder anti-tank guns hitched on behind, and one had a big 17-pounder, all with the gun crews riding on the tanks. A new idea this, intended to bring the anti-tank guns into action as quickly as possible once the attack was over, so that the tanks could retire, refuel, restock their ammunition, and have repairs or minor maintenance seen to.

This attack was a complete success, but not before the tanks had had a bit of fun. Just past [San Michele](#) Lieutenant Oxbrow's troop, which was leading, had a short shooting match with some Germans in two houses beside the road. While the shells were flying Lieutenant Collins's troop slipped past and pushed on to the shallow rounded hilltop which was the final objective. There was very little shooting, but by the light of flares Jerry could be seen departing in a hurry. On top of the hill was another German post in some houses, but even here the opposition was very half-hearted, and Jerry did not wait to discuss matters fully with the tankies. The whole thing had been astonishingly easy. The air had buzzed with the usual rumours of Tigers, but there had been never a sign of one. By dawn two companies of 25 Battalion were firmly on the hilltop, with Collins's troop right forward among them, and the other troops one behind the other, back down the road at intervals of a few hundred yards, guns trained forward. The anti-tank guns were unhitched and put into position just behind the objective.

At daybreak mortar fire began to come in from the hills ahead, and everyone was looking for a counter-attack, but none came. The foremost tanks had a few light anti-tank shells fired at them from the right flank. A little way down the hill in this direction Collins's tanks shot a house to pieces for the infantry, and also started a spectacular fire in the scrub.

Then, suddenly, round a corner in front of the objective, a Mark IV tank appeared, evidently not suspecting trouble, moving serenely along the road with its crew sitting outside. The surprise lasted only a few seconds; then the 17-pounder crew swung into action, and 'fixed' tank, crew and all with one shot at a hundred yards' range. This was pretty good evidence that the position was secure, and that

there was no need to fear counter-attacks too much, even if Jerry was game to launch any more. A little later a 'tank-buster' also arrived on the scene to improve matters still further.

There was no counter-attack, but there was a slogging match that lasted all day. Though thrown off this round hill, Jerry was still on the hills to the left, where a little village called [Santa Maria](#), stuck up on a high ridge, seemed to be the centre of resistance. B Squadron's foremost tanks kept up their fire, aimed largely at [Santa Maria](#); the 25-pounders laid a smoke screen in front of the village to spoil Jerry's observation; our wonderful fighter-bombers came over and had a crack at it too. Life, in short, was made as distasteful as possible for the [Santa Maria](#) garrison. Collins's troop had a satisfying day, made more so by the fact that some of the boys, from the highest hilltop just ahead, could see in the distance the tall towers of [Florence](#) sticking up out of a grey haze.

After dark on 2 August the firing gradually died away; the last part of the night was unusually quiet, and next morning searching patrols found Jerry gone. On the Kiwis' right flank, after several days of hard slogging with little visible result, 5 Brigade had at last cracked Jerry's resistance and was heading for [Florence](#). Now 6 Brigade found itself suddenly unemployed. At 11 a.m., the B Squadron tanks, their usefulness over for the time being, left 25 Battalion and went back to rejoin the rest of the regiment among the trees and vines just above [Cerbaia](#).

The triumph and anticlimax of this campaign, when on 4 August New Zealanders burst through to the southern suburbs of [Florence](#) only to be pulled back into reserve just as they reached it, concerns 18 Regiment only indirectly. It was still sitting near [Cerbaia](#), quite comfortable, if a little unhappy at not being in at the kill. When the story of [Florence](#) found its way back, the 18th was as indignant as everyone else about the way the Division had been treated, but this was futile anger and soon spent itself.

The last few days of action had been very scrappy from the 18th's point of view. It had had no cohesive fighting, only squadrons and half-squadrons away out all over the place busy with their own little battles. Casualties had been light this time, one man killed, sixteen wounded, five Shermans wrecked, a few more knocked about. There had been plenty of frights and some sticky moments. Luckily, the regiment

had met no Tigers this time. Their great wide tracks had been all over the ground in places; 5 Brigade had come up against them farther east, but to [18 Regiment's](#) relief they had not come into the fight ahead of [Cerbaia](#).

On 5 August, now that the war had passed on, both halves of B Echelon came up to [Cerbaia](#) and the regiment had one of its rare days together. 'The day passed by uneventfully,' says the war diary, 'and everyone enjoyed the spell.' It was a very short spell, for on 6 August the tanks were once again on the move.

The New Zealanders, having been dragged back from [Florence](#), were now to sidestep to the left and take over from [8 Indian Division](#) and Canadian tanks facing the [Arno River](#), which was now the front line. Jerry was holding here strongly, was in no hurry to leave, and had the bad habit of crossing the river and patrolling round at night. So this new job might well provide a little fun before it was over.

The regiment was now back in its own 4 Armoured Brigade, quite an unusual thing these days. The riverbank was to be held by 22 Battalion, with the tanks in support, spread out by squadrons in 'gun lines' for indirect fire over the [Arno](#). They were also to be ready to see off counter-attacks, but, said the war diary in one of its flashes of masterly understatement, 'this is rather unlikely to happen'.

This meant another night move, which nobody liked, but there was no option, as the roads ahead of [Cerbaia](#) were still in Jerry's view and dust still brought shells. The CO and the squadron commanders, with their 'recce' parties, were all heavily shelled when they went up to arrange the changeover. Regimental Headquarters went up late on the afternoon of 6 August and set up shop in a big battered house. The squadrons had to wait till the Canadian tanks moved out, as the roads here were narrow and twisty and difficult for tanks even in daylight. However, all three squadrons were on their way forward just after midnight, and before dawn they were in their gun lines and the crews were digging the tanks in. Before the Shermans arrived advance parties, Honey tank crews and others had begun this work, but there was still a good deal to do, for it was no mere token job. The tanks were buried in good big holes, some of them to above the tops of their tracks.

The squadrons were a long way apart here, B and C about two miles from the [Arno](#), A Squadron farther back, not far uphill from the Pesa River, so that it could

drop shells on the south bank of the [Arno](#) if necessary. The ridges were a little flatter than round [Cerbaia](#), but still liberally covered with trees and vines, and the tanks were well hidden. The crews lived in bivvies or houses or under the tanks. 'OPs' were set up on the highest points that could be found, looking out over the [Arno](#) to miles and miles of flat country, with a dim line of mountains beyond. One of these OPs was in a huge monastery, full of refugees and occupied by artillery observers of all shapes and sizes; it was a perfect observation spot, its only disadvantage being that, as an outstanding landmark, it was one of Jerry's favourite targets.

The set-up here was very poor from the signallers' point of view. As there was a strict wireless silence to hide 2 NZ Division's move to the left, telephone wire had to be run from Regimental Headquarters to all the squadrons and up to the OPs, which took all day and used up every inch of wire the [18th](#) possessed or could scrounge.

For eight busy days the regiment was there, and it certainly kept Jerry on the jump. [Signa](#), a big industrial town straddling the [Arno](#) in front, was 'stonked' repeatedly, and shells were poured into the smaller towns across the river (all no doubt stuffed full of Germans), and on to houses and crossroads and bridges. In the first two days B Squadron had the joy of blowing up two bridges—this was a most unusual feat, and presumably demolition charges were hit, for the bridges went up with lovely big explosions which could not have come from 75-millimetre shells alone.

In those two days there was perhaps a little waste of ammunition, for the war diary says:

After hearing of the amount of amn that we are using Division became a little alarmed as to supply and from tomorrow we have been restricted to 300 rds. for the Regiment.

This was the first time tank ammunition had been rationed, but the restriction weighed very lightly on the regiment, which had a good stock saved up. So Divisional Headquarters' orders were blandly ignored. 'Five rounds rapid' from all sixteen tanks of a squadron was quite common, and on 12 August the whole regiment combined to 'stonk' mortar positions across the river. One man commented: '48 guns with 5 rounds each on same target within as many seconds

must have scared Ted'.

There was also a neat piece of work at [La Lisca](#), on the south bank of the [Arno](#) just where the river takes a sharp bend. Here Jerry used to cross at night and man two houses, both in a little hollow and hard to observe from any distance back. Before dawn on 11 August a telephone line was run to a house only a few hundred yards away, and from this close vantage point Major Stanford of B Squadron directed A and B Squadrons' guns on to the houses, smashing them both badly.

Up here by the [Arno](#) the [18th](#) did not have everything its own way. Jerry was very free with his shells, and put over some regular 'plasters', all squadrons getting their share. Every move was shelled, even a lone jeep sneaking along the lanes. The OPs caught it heavily. The telephone linesmen seemed to spend their waking hours crawling round the country mending broken lines. One stray shell on A Squadron killed Second-Lieutenant [Doug Crump](#)³ and wounded two others, but these were the only casualties. A few trucks and jeeps were damaged, one scout car was badly bent by a direct hit, there were a lot of bad scares, and that was all—except for the famous episode of Captain Passmore, who got a piece of shrapnel in his leg one day when a shell blew the front wall out of A Squadron's OP house, and that evening, visiting the RAP to have it cut out, was given a large mugful of Friar's Balsam in mistake for rum. The effect of this medicine was much severer than that of the wound. Captain Passmore was one of the regiment's best-known characters, and the story went like wildfire round the unit, gathering embellishments as it went.

These few days in the gun line, after the furious actions at Route 2 and the [Pesa River](#), were anticlimax, especially as the Kiwis, according to the grapevine, were due to move out of action. On 13 August Major Playle went away into the blue with an advance party, and everyone knew that something was going to happen. Then on the 14th the order arrived to pull out the same evening, except for one squadron, which would hold the fort until the arrival of the Americans who were to take over the New Zealand line.

This was pretty short notice, and, as the war diary records, the squadrons had to 'get busy to fire away small dumps of amm which had been put on the ground in their areas'. This was very satisfying, as the previous night Jerry had turned on an extra special 'stonk' and ruined everyone's sleep. It was, thought everyone, a fitting

farewell to these [Tuscan](#) hills, so beautiful to look at and so vile to fight in.

B Echelon left for the rear that afternoon. At dusk Regimental Headquarters, B and C Squadrons and one troop of A Squadron moved out and groped their way back down the dark lanes on the [Pesa's](#) east bank, stopping for the night just short of [Cerbaia](#). This first leg of the trip was slow and uncomfortable, the narrow road thick with traffic, the dust rising in choking clouds. The short move, less than ten miles, took about four hours, and it was after midnight before all the boys were in bed. During the night a few shells passed overhead to land round [Cerbaia](#), but there was nothing near the tanks.

Next morning they crossed the [Pesa](#) and went on past their old battleground at [Strada](#), through [Morocco](#) and [San Donato](#), through [Castellina](#) (where [18 Regiment](#) had first come into the [Florence](#) sector), and by peaceful hedge-lined lanes to its new camp, miles from anywhere, high up in the hills, in what seemed at first glance a pretty desolate spot. Here were open, straggly olive orchards and oak woods, scattered farms and tiny, rather down-at-heel villages, very different from the opulent [Florence](#) country with its mansions and well-kept farms.

The rest of A Squadron stayed in its gun line on 15 August and was relieved that evening by the American tanks; it spent the night by [Cerbaia](#), and after lunch on the 16th it followed the regiment's trail, along with some of the recovery people who, as usual, had stayed behind just in case. By 4 p.m. it had reached the camp in the hills, and the whole unit was together, B Echelon and all, out of earshot of the guns, more than ready for a bit of leave and relaxation, and also (but not quite so eagerly) for refit and training for wherever the war would take it next.

Doubtless it would be in again before long, for Jerry's vaunted '[Gothic Line](#)', the first really strong, prepared, permanent defence line since [Cassino](#), was not far ahead of our armies, and it was a safe bet that there would be a full-scale attack to break this line while the summer weather lasted. So the boys had to make the most of every short respite.

Here in the Sienese hills, despite their uninviting look, the [18th](#) managed to have a thoroughly good time. This was still the edge of the Chianti district, and there was a reasonable supply of wine. By this time, too, some of the boys had learnt the

essentials of the distilling profession, and if the resulting 'shudder juice' did not have the smoothness of the best local brews, it had all their strength, and more.

There was very little to do round camp. The boys wandered round the lanes, and some of them got quite excited to discover bushes of ripe blackberries tangled among the hedges—the first of these anyone had seen since New Zealand. The local peasants were a bit stand-offish here, and it was hard to get washing done, which was considered a poor state of affairs, for the boys had become rather spoilt for doing their own washing.

As much leave as possible was organised. A lucky few went for four days to a leave camp outside [Rome](#). The unit began a private leave scheme to the west coast, where eighty men at a time went for two days, camped in a pine plantation, spent their time in the lovely warm, clear, buoyant [Mediterranean](#) water, or strolled along the waterfront to the nearby town of [Follonica](#), where the Americans had a leave centre with a real picture theatre and more home comforts than the British ever thought of.

And nearly everyone went to [Siena](#) for at least one day. [Siena](#), eight miles from the regiment's camp, was now swarming with sightseeing Kiwis, but still had something to offer, lovely locally-made pipes, assorted wineshops, a magnificent cathedral, old paintings and sculptures for those whose interests lay that way. You could buy big, luscious water-melons quite cheaply there. There was also the skyscraper tower of the Municipal building in the main square, a landmark visible for miles, an incredible height above the town. This was the first of the immense towers of northern [Italy](#) that the men had seen at close quarters, and most of them made a point of climbing it, even though their legs were ready to give out before they reached the top.

In the nine days here, work took a very second place to play. In theory there was a full-time training programme for all hands, but after the repairs and maintenance on tanks and trucks were finished, the guns 'T & A'd', gear and stores brought up to scratch, nobody could bring himself to think very seriously of training. Even the big parade for Winston Churchill on 24 August roused only languid interest.

This parade was not really a success. It was very hot; the boys had to polish

themselves up as they had not done for months, then ride five dusty miles in trucks, and line the road for what seemed an interminable wait, with no relief from the glaring sun, till Mr Churchill appeared, driving along with [General Freyberg](#) in an open car, with his big cigar and 'V' sign. Orders for this parade said, 'Officers will salute, OR's will cheer'; but the cheer that rose was pretty thin, not through any lack of respect, but because Kiwis are not demonstrative and resent being made so to order. Anyway, it was too hot to cheer. So Mr Churchill passed along through largely silent ranks.

After this the next move came quite suddenly. A long move this time, halfway across [Italy](#), back to the Adriatic coast that the Division had left seven months earlier. The movement orders arrived on 25 August, and that afternoon an advance party disappeared southwards towards [Siena](#), while the rest were busy packing gear and painting out the New Zealand signs on the vehicles. After lunch on 26 August the soft-skinned convoy left, and at 9 a.m. on 28 August the tanks. Both groups met their [4 Brigade](#) convoys on Route 2, two miles outside [Siena](#), then headed south and east through [Siena](#) to leave the hills of [Tuscany](#) behind for good.

¹ 2 Lt [H. M. Speakman](#); [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 20 Nov 1914; accountant.

² Tpr [F. L. Howard](#); born [Christchurch](#), 18 Aug 1917; bowser attendant; killed in action 30 Jul 1944.

³ 2 Lt [D. R. Crump](#); born NZ 5 Jun 1919; law clerk; died of wounds 7 Aug 1944.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 37 – THE ROAD TO THE PLAINS

CHAPTER 37

The Road to the Plains

When 2 NZ Division had first crossed the [Apennines](#) it had been winter, with snow low on the hills, and its next stop was to have been [Rome](#). Now it was crossing back again, summer was just ending, dust hung above the roads, the heat beat down, and the [Po](#) valley was the promised land. Everyone was brimful of confidence. The attack on the [Gothic Line](#), according to reports, was going well; the [Fifth Army](#) was to push through the mountains north of [Florence](#) and out into the flat country by [Bologna](#); the [Eighth Army](#) was to break through along the Adriatic coast; the Kiwis would charge across the [Po](#) valley from the Adriatic side, taking everything in their stride. Put like that, it all sounded so easy.

The way led east from [Siena](#) round [Lake Trasimene](#), past [Perugia](#) on its lofty hill, past [Assisi](#) sprawling over a slope up to the left. Then through the real, rugged [Apennines](#), down a majestic river gorge with quaint stone villages hugging the road because there was no other flat place for them, then north again over a jumble of rolling hilltops, and so to [Iesi](#) and the [Esino River](#). Nearly 220 miles in all.

For the regiment, barely recovered from the exhausting [Florence](#) battle, the heat and long hours of this move were pretty tiring. Much of the driving was done at night. The soft-skinned convoy took two days, stopping for the first night near [Foligno](#), a big road junction just south of [Assisi](#). Officially all towns were out of bounds, but that did not stop the boys from exploring [Foligno](#) to see if it was worth a quick visit, or from going back for a casual look at [Assisi](#), one of the few places that nearly everyone had heard of. The tanks took two days to drive to [Foligno](#), where, to the drivers' relief, they were picked up by transporters for the last, toughest, most mountainous part of the journey. A few of them had the usual minor breakdowns early in the move, and there was a bad accident when a Honey capsized, injuring two men severely.

In contrast to the surly civilians of the Florentine hills, who had seen their homes smashed up and looted by both sides, the people who crowded round the vehicles at the halts, or shouted and waved on the Apennine roads, were friendly and smiling. There were plenty of fruit and eggs and wine for sale, or just as often

freely given.

And so to [Iesi](#) and the [Esino River](#). Here the hills flattened out into a coastal plain several miles wide, and the regiment found itself, for the first time since [Piedimonte d'Alife](#), camped on level ground. There were plenty of good shady trees on the camp site, grapes and peaches and tomatoes to be had without going far—what else could life provide? The Esino was within easy reach and the Adriatic only eight miles away. Every day truckloads of swimmers made for the coast, for, though the edge had gone from the trying heat of the [Tuscan](#) hills, it was still hot, and salt water a luxury. The beaches near the [Esino](#) were pebbly and shelving and not as attractive as the golden sand of the west coast, but the water was cool and inviting. There was even the nearest approach to surf that anyone had seen for a long time.

One feature of this place was the continual parade of Allied air power overhead. [Iesi](#) was on the direct route forward from the [Pescara](#) airfields farther down the coast, and almost from dawn to dark there was such a procession of planes that after a couple of days you did not even glance up at them. There was an airfield not far away where many men spent their spare time. It was a busy place. 'The Kittybombers leave here,' said one diarist, 'with their three bombs underneath & a while later return empty if they can find a target.' This was very satisfying and good for the morale. The select few (there were still some in the [18th](#)) who had suffered under the [Luftwaffe](#) on [Crete](#) and at [Alamein](#) could reflect that this was a gentleman's war now, very different from those far-off days.

Nobody tried to kill himself with work here, though the tanks needed the usual attentions. 'Many of our tanks,' said the war diary, 'are now getting on in service, and as they grow older so does repair become more frequent particularly after long moves during hot weather.' But there was little attempt at organised training. It did not seem worth while. It was pretty widely known, or guessed, that this pause was very temporary, that the Kiwis would be in the middle of the fighting again very soon.

But before the regiment was again within range of Jerry it shifted three times, following up after the battle, for the Gothic Line had now been brushed aside and the front was receding northwards. So 2 NZ Division stayed handy, moving up in little bounds along Route 16, which was later to become as familiar to it as any road

in [Italy](#). This lovely highway ran for mile after mile beside the Adriatic beaches, through the fishing ports of [Senigallia](#) and [Fano](#) and [Pesaro](#) and [Cattolica](#), past [Riccione](#) (once a fashionable holiday resort and [Mussolini's](#) favoured playground), to [Rimini](#), where the hills ended and the wide plains of [Romagna](#) came down to the sea. On these first moves the tank crews saw very little of this road, for the Shermans moved mainly on back roads, inches deep in dust and badly signposted, the crews with practically no idea where they were supposed to be going.

The 18th's first jump forward took it to the smashed port of [Fano](#), into flat vineyards just outside the town and a stone's throw from the beach. Here for eleven days the boys drank wine and swam and played football and ate tomatoes and muscatel grapes, and sometimes did a little work, mainly rifle shooting on the [Fano](#) range, wireless and mine training. There was all too much scope for this last, for the place was lousy with mines left over from the battle that had recently passed that way. The regiment lost a carrier and a jeep and two wounded, and nearly every day someone from some unit was blown up.

Here the regiment was back within sound of the battle— quite a battle, judging by the perpetual grumble of the guns. On 14 September C Squadron (now under Major [P. B. Allen](#)) left for the front at the shortest of notice. After breakfast on the 16th the rest of the tanks moved on, followed in the afternoon by B Echelon; up through [Pesaro](#) they went, past the empty, forlorn [Gothic Line](#), and on to [Gradara](#), whose round hill was topped with a grey old castle, complete with dungeons and instruments of torture, all reconstructed for the benefit of Kiwis and other twentieth-century tourists. The battle was not many miles ahead now, and from nearby heights overlooking the sea you had the unusual sight of warships standing off the coast belting away at Jerry's defences. Rumour said that he had dug his toes in at [Rimini](#), and that it was going to be quite a job to get him out. The Kiwis were all geared up to go. The regiment was now under 5 Brigade again, and the officers of A and B Squadrons had already been to see 28 and 21 Battalions to arrange preliminary details.

But there were still a few days of respite. On 18 and 19 September the regiment went up to [Riccione](#), the elegant pre-war seaside resort, now very close behind the front line, where it found C Squadron, fresh out of battle after three busy days, and full of stories about Jerry's horrible habit of fighting from Panther tank turrets solidly

emplaced in concrete and mounting 88-millimetre guns.

This story begins at 3 p.m. on 14 September, when C Squadron's tank crews were called away, half of them from a football match at the [Fano](#) stadium, and told to pack up and leave just as soon as they could. Where they were to go, or why, nobody could find out, though the rumour circulated that they were to deal with some German tanks that had suddenly put in an appearance and were 'holding up the works'.

Actually there was a lot more to it than that.

The Canadian Corps, driving up the coastal plain towards [Rimini](#), had been going well, without much opposition from Jerry, until that morning. But then the position had changed. The 3rd Greek Mountain Brigade, attacking on the inland side of Route 16, had struck solid resistance from the stalwart I Parachute Division, backed up by tanks or self-propelled guns, and had taken a bad knock. A squadron of 20 Regiment, which happened to be the handiest, had hurried forward to help, and at the same time [18 Regiment](#) had been ordered to send one squadron up urgently to take over, for 20 Regiment was waiting with [6 Brigade](#) to be called into action as soon as the battle went past [Rimini](#), and was to be kept intact meantime. Hence C Squadron's sudden call.

The squadron was vexed to find, on arriving at 20 Regiment Headquarters after its frantic race from [Fano](#), that it would not be needed till the next afternoon, and that until then there was nothing for the crews to do but twiddle their thumbs. However, that kind of thing was always happening, and it was no good



Panther turret on Rimini airfield

Panther turret on Rimini airfield

Prepared for rain—a Reconnaissance Troop Honey tank. *See p. 550*



Prepared for rain—a Reconnaissance Troop Honey tank. [See p. 550](#)



B Squadron troop out of action, 19 October 1944

B Squadron troop out of action, 19 October 1944

C Squadron gun line at Faenza



C Squadron gun line at Faenza



Over the bank at the Scolo Tratturo, 10 April 1945

Over the bank at the Scolo Tratturo, 10 April 1945

Stuck in the ditch, 13 April 1945



Stuck in the ditch, 13 April 1945



Maori infantry ride on the tanks

Maori infantry ride on the tanks

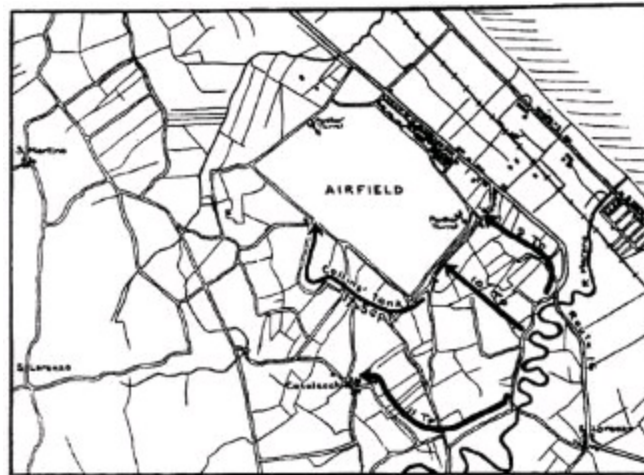
Recovery tank drags out a Tiger



Recovery tank drags out a Tiger

getting upset about it. So C Squadron sat and waited, while on the morning of 15 September the Greek brigade, with stout help from the 20 Regiment tanks and a handful of 22 Battalion men attached for 'moral and physical support', pushed north slowly and laboriously, crossed the Marano River (a trickle of murky water with willows all along its banks) and worked their way towards the [Rimini](#) airfield north of it. Here the paratroopers were holding on, with Spandaus and mortars all along the southern edge of the airfield and among hedges and vines to the west; so the Greeks paused to organise a full-scale attack for the afternoon, complete with their New Zealand tanks and infantry. This was where C Squadron came in. At 1.30 p.m. the squadron (except 12 Troop, which stayed in reserve) crossed the [Marano](#) and took over from 20 Regiment on a country road beyond.

Till now nobody had known what was happening or about to happen, but it appeared that the attack on the airfield was beginning almost at once, with all three Greek battalions side



C SQN 18 REGT AT RIMINI AIRFIELD, SEPT 1944

Scale: 1:50,000

C Sqn 18 Regt at Rimini Airfield, Sept 1944

by side, one troop of Shermans with each battalion, one platoon of 22 Battalion with each troop for help in emergencies and for night protection.

The set-up here seemed slightly unusual. This was the Greeks' battle, or so C Squadron had been told; but 22 Battalion seemed to be running it, and it was a little difficult to find out who was in control. Both at the outset and during the next two days Major Allen got most of his orders and information through Lieutenant-Colonel [Donald](#)¹ of 22 Battalion. C Squadron gained an impression of the Greeks as good fellows and brave soldiers, but rather disconcerting to deal with because of the language barrier.

Just before the battle our fighter-bombers roared over, and could be seen and heard going for the airfield and the country farther left, where the Canadians were said to be in trouble at a place called the [San Martino](#) ridge. Then the tanks were off, fanning out along the lanes, Lieutenant Barber's 9 Troop on the right near Route 16, Lieutenant Collins's 10 Troop straight up the middle towards the airfield, Second-Lieutenant Colin McIntosh's² 11 Troop to the left. In this flat country of vines, farms, hedge-lined lanes and irrigation canals you could not see far ahead, you were always apt to be held up by some unexpected obstacle, and you never knew where Jerry

might be lurking with a gun. Air photos, studied and pored over beforehand, had shown some suspicious bumps on the ground by the corners of the airfield, and these were very much in the troop commanders' minds as they went forward.

The left-hand battalion, with 11 Troop moving along behind, made for a little crossroads hamlet called [Casalecchio](#), just a church with a couple of houses round it. During the morning Jerry had been very unpleasant round here. Now the Greeks took the houses with no trouble, but a few paratroopers held out in the church and could not be dislodged till 11 Troop came up and attacked directly on the heels of an artillery 'stonk'. The 22 Battalion platoon and a few assorted Greeks who happened to be in the right place joined in the attack.

That was as far as anyone went in the meantime, for when the Greeks tried to move on they came up against Spandaus and mortars on the western edge of the airfield, and decided against it. The tanks stayed by [Casalecchio](#), parked among the vines, stirring up no unnecessary trouble, but ready to meet any that might come their way.

The right-hand battalion, attacking up Route 16 towards the east side of the airfield, was the least successful of the three. Perhaps expecting the attack to come up the main road, Jerry had this side strongly held, with garrisons in the hangars and airfield buildings and in houses on the seaward side of the road, mines laid thickly all over the place, and at the southern end of the field, covering Route 16, just where one of those bumps had appeared on the air photo, a great Panther tank turret dug into the ground, with a long black 88-millimetre gun. All this broke up the infantry attack before it got very far; there was practically no liaison between Greeks and tanks on this flank, and the advance bogged down with the tanks still in the thick country short of the airfield. Lieutenant Barber comments:

I myself found it impossible to get any assistance chiefly because I couldn't understand their language.... The only Greeks I saw were dead ones, and the others looting everything in sight.

Barber's troop was ordered to tackle the Panther turret next day, a job that gave it a nasty feeling in anticipation. So there was great joy in the morning when the word went round that the turret had been 'scuttled' by its own crew during the

night.

The story behind the scuttling belongs to 10 Troop, which had more than its share of excitement that first afternoon. In contrast to the other troops, it worked in pretty well with its infantry, partly because Lieutenant Collins could make himself understood in Greek. The tanks moved up behind the advance, knocking holes in the houses they passed, just in case. Jerry was not in evidence in the cultivated country south of the airfield; but as the tanks approached the open field one German appeared ahead, and suddenly the battle broke loose. Germans bobbed up everywhere. The air was thick with metal, and the infantry had to dive for cover, while the tanks, manoeuvring forward one at a time along a line of hedges, emerged into the forefront of the attack, all their guns firing. It was not a nice position to be in. The 'eighty-eight' over by Route 16 was ready and eager to deal with anything that came out into the open; lurking among the trees near the south-west corner of the field was a self-propelled gun; and all round the tanks were determined paratroopers with Spandaus and bazookas. Trooper Jim [Sloan](#)³ tells the story:

Cleaned up the dugouts with H.E. & Grenades.... Jerries came back with hands up and Joe [Lieut Collins] relieved some of the Lugers etc. We killed a hell of a lot.... But meanwhile [Peter Wood's](#)⁴ tank had been brewed up.

[Sergeant Wood's](#) tank fell victim to the self-propelled gun on the left flank. It was one of those tragic 'brew-ups' that leave everyone sick and despondent. Troopers Don Baillie⁵ and [Dudley Bowker](#)⁶ were killed; Trooper Albie Lawson,⁷ trapped in the tank, was dragged out later after tremendous efforts, but was fatally wounded. Both the other crew members were burned and shocked. Lieutenant Collins, having put down a screen with smoke shells and grenades to hide his other tanks from this deadly gun, went up to the burning tank, turned a machine gun on the nearest Germans, and strove to rescue the crew, along with Corporal Laurie [White](#),⁸ who stood on top of Wood's tank pouring water into the turret.

The enemy was now pulling back in a hurry, and Collins's two tanks moved out to the left and helped him on his way while the Greeks, having recovered from their disarray, kept up the fire from the right flank. The self-propelled gun must have gone too, for nothing more was heard from it. The Panther turret could not be reached before dark, but its crew apparently lost heart now that its protecting infantry had

gone, and during the night, after 10 Troop had turned on a noisy demonstration in front, they blew it up and decamped.

There was not much work for the tanks on 16 September. Nos. 10 and 11 Troops made no move, though the Greeks on the left made a little headway through the thick country beyond [Casalecchio](#). On the right the Greeks pushed forward towards the airfield buildings, while 9 Troop advanced to the south-east corner of the field, spraying the whole place with its Brownings. It was no easy move, as the tank crews and their attendant 22 Battalion men had to lift mines ahead of the tanks while mortar bombs were falling and Spandau bullets buzzing round. But then their action was over for the day except for a few exchanges of fire from time to time with the Germans in the houses beyond Route 16. Luckily, there seemed to be no anti-tank guns or bazookas round this corner of the field.

For most of 17 September the story was much the same. On either side of the airfield the Greeks wormed their way a little farther forward. The Canadians were losing a lot of tanks round [San Martino](#), where the fighting was as bitter as ever; some of their 'brew-ups' could be seen from the airfield, and it was not an encouraging sight.

Then, in the afternoon, to quote Major Allen's battle report, 'the CO 22 NZ MOT Bn called me up to say that the Canadians had called for Air Support on a dug in Panther Turret with 88mm gun on North Corner of 'drome. I was asked if we could assist as this gun was taking heavy toll of tks towards San Martino.'

This was quite a problem. This second turret, set in concrete just like the other, was right on the northern edge of the airfield, impossible to attack from the front, and with a perfect field of fire in almost every direction. Half a dozen planes had a go at it but missed, and the 25-pounders tackled it with no visible effect. It seemed that only C Squadron could have any hope of dislodging it.

And there seemed to be no easy answer to the problem for C Squadron. 'No. 9 Tp,' says Major Allen, 'could not engage from their position nor could No. 10. No. 11 had moved up but I did not let them engage as I thought the range of 1500 yds too great and the position they were in was very exposed.'

Then Lieutenant Collins of 10 Troop, who had meanwhile been exploring the

lanes on the west side of the field, came on the wireless to Squadron Headquarters with a proposal to stalk the gun from that side. The idea was at first turned down as too risky, but then, as Major Allen reports, Collins 'informed me that he could engage with a feasible plan of attack. He was so confident that I allowed him to proceed.'

While Corporal White's tank went to the south end of the field to divert Jerry's attention if necessary, Collins's tank, stripped of all unessential gear and loaded to capacity with armour-piercing shells, moved off round the left side, advancing unobtrusively along a tree-bordered lane, across a field of wooden box mines, and through vines and scrub. At the same time the 25-pounders farther back laid a smoke screen in front of the Panther turret. Collins's tank was now out on its own in Jerry's country, but Jerry was apparently too surprised by its sudden appearance to do anything about it except a little ineffectual mortar and Spandau fire. A few minutes was all the tank needed. It pulled in beside a house which gave it some protection; the smoke cleared away, and there was the turret, 1200 yards away, straight across the open field. Then, says Sloan, 'we ... let drive. The 4th shot got it. Then we kept blazing away.... We put the gun out of action and knocked hunks off the turret.' Before many shots had been fired the turret crew abandoned their post and ran for their lives into the trees behind, helped along by Collins's machine guns. Having made a thorough job of the turret, the tank withdrew, shielded by another smoke screen laid by itself.

This was a fine piece of work, and the crew had every reason to be pleased with themselves, particularly Collins and his gunner, [Trooper Morrie Woolley](#),⁹ whose fast, accurate shooting had finished the affair off very quickly.

That was the end of C Squadron's part in the [Rimini](#) airfield action. Freed from the menace of that vile gun, the Canadians on the left began to get under way again, and the Greeks moved on past the airfield. Before dawn on 19 September tanks of 19 Regiment came up to relieve C Squadron, which went back to [Riccione](#) to wait for the rest of the [18th](#). One tank of 11 Troop, which had hit a mine the previous day, was dragged back by the recovery section.

The regiment could quite happily have sat out the rest of the war at [Riccione](#). It was a handsome town, still almost intact although so near the front line. There were big splendid hotels, still with some of their fittings, including luxury beds, some of

which somehow found their way into [18 Regiment's](#) billets before long. The regiment was housed in an old hospital with plenty of room for everyone, and the boys appreciated the change from bivvy life, for the nights were getting cooler now.

The Adriatic was a bare 100 yards away, and the days were still warm enough for swimming. The beach was very fine, though somewhat spoilt by Jerry's barbed wire and mines. A lot of interest centred in a series of huge kiosks on the beach, brightly painted, with 'gelati' (ice-cream) in big letters on their sides, but behind the paint concrete forts with big guns pointing seaward. A very satisfactory waste of German labour and ingenuity, for they had never been used.

A few miles ahead, just inland from [Rimini](#), the Canadians were now battling Jerry on his last defence line before the hills ended. Here, on the low [San Fortunato](#) ridge, overlooking the vast [Romagna](#) plain, was fought one of the bitterest battles in [Italy](#), beginning on 18 September, going on for three days of thunderous barrages and air bombardments, and ending on the night of 20 September when the 'Canucks' cleared the ridge, pushed on down to the plain beyond, crossed the Marecchia River and established themselves on the north side of its wide, many-channelled bed. Now, after weeks of waiting, it was the Kiwis' turn, led by 5 Brigade, to go in, push through the Canadian bridgehead beyond the [Marecchia](#), and head north along the Adriatic coast, keeping Jerry on the run.

After nearly a year of fighting in places not very far from vertical, the Kiwis were at last approaching the goal they had so long been promised, the huge flat plain of northern [Italy](#), with no more mountains between them and the [Po River](#). Optimism, which had sagged badly from time to time in the last few months, took a sudden upward swing. 'Once we get out on to that flat,' thought everyone, 'there will be no holding us. We'll be away, tanks and all.'

They were wrong.

¹ Lt-Col [H. V. Donald](#), DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); [Masterton](#); born [Masterton](#), 20 Mar 1917; company director; CO 22 Bn May-Nov 1944, Mar-Aug 1945; four times wounded.

² Capt [C. B. McIntosh](#); [Auckland](#); born [Kaiapoi](#), 16 Dec 1914; farmer.

³ Sgt J. F. Sloan; Palmerston, Otago; born Auckland, 21 Jul 1921; motor mechanic.

⁴ 2 Lt P. R. Wood; Hicks Bay; born Napier, 11 Jul 1919; farmer; wounded 15 Sep 1944.

⁵ Tpr D. Baillie; born NZ 1 Mar 1919; shop assistant; wounded 14 Apr 1944; killed in action 15 Sep 1944.

⁶ Tpr D. B. L. Bowker; born NZ 31 Jul 1914; sharebroker; killed in action 15 Sep 1944.

⁷ Tpr A. C. Lawson; born Christchurch, 13 Feb 1920; wool-store worker; died of wounds 17 Sep 1944.

⁸ Sgt L. C. White, m.i.d.; born NZ 11 Oct 1914; motor driver; wounded 15 Sep 1944.

⁹ Sgt M. Woolley; Kaponga; born Cambridge, 17 Dec 1920; grocer's assistant.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 38 – MUD SCRAMBLE IN THE ROMAGNA

CHAPTER 38

Mud Scramble in the Romagna

It rained.

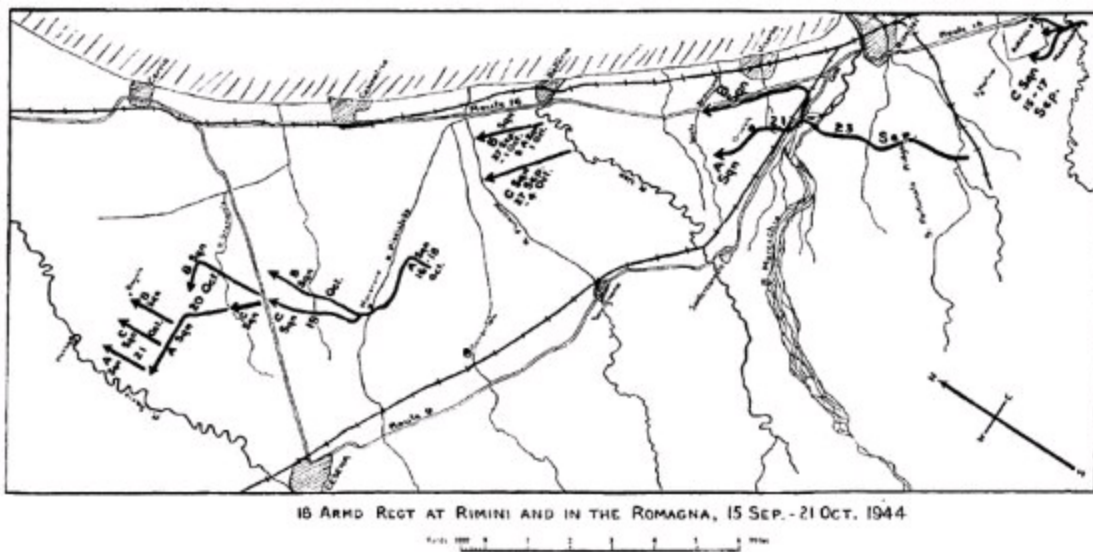
It rained, and the reclaimed swamp land of the Romagna turned, literally overnight, from dust to greasy mud, and Jerry's jubilation was equalled only by the Eighth Army's dismay.

On the evening of 20 September, when 5 Brigade moved up handy for its advance through the Canadians, it was pouring. Traffic jammed the lanes, drivers long unaccustomed to mud put their vehicles into the roadside ditches. There was a hold-up while a jeep convoy carrying Canadian dead came down from the line. Everyone was drenched and out of sorts. Nobody even laughed at the sight of the 18 Regiment tanks moving up in solemn procession with big umbrellas (souvenirs of Riccione) over the turrets and drivers' hatches.

That was a night that nobody wanted to repeat. The tankies camped in open fields in front of the artillery. Everyone slept, or tried to, in the tanks; water dripped into the turrets, mud off your boots got all over everything, and if you did drift off into a fitful doze the guns just behind would shake you awake again. Everyone audibly hated the rain and the Army. It was inky black, too, and the cold beams of searchlights did not relieve the darkness much.

These searchlights were a rather weird idea. They shone from a few miles behind our lines, their beams angling across the sky to reflect off the clouds over Jerry's head. They did not make anyone any happier. They were an unknown quantity, and the conservative Kiwis were always suspicious of anything new.

Next afternoon, still in misty, soaking rain, the tank column set out for the front. Out came the umbrellas again. The Shermans, each carrying a cargo of soaked, blasphemous infantrymen, squelched forward over the sodden fields and dripped their way up and over San Fortunato ridge. Then,



18 Armd Regt at Rimini and in the Romagna, 15 Sep.–21 Oct. 1944

just after the first half of A Squadron gained the northern slope, the mist broke, revealing the scene to watchful German eyes on the plain below, and over came the shells.

This misfortune mixed the whole show up in double-quick time. The Maori infantry jumped off A Squadron's tanks and took to the gullies leading down towards the Marecchia River, and that was the last seen of them that day. After half an hour's delay A Squadron's two leading troops went on alone to the river; the rest of A Squadron and all of B waited till dusk before crossing the crest of the ridge.

This San Fortunato ridge was a scene of total destruction— every building shattered, every tree stripped bare, dead Germans and Canadians lying thick on the roadsides, dead cattle in the fields, dead tanks and trucks everywhere. Nobody wanted to linger in such a ghastly place. Up in the front line it might be more dangerous, but it could not be more depressing.

The Marecchia crossing was easy, for Jerry, amazingly, had left a heavy timber bridge intact. Before dark the first half of A Squadron, [Second-Lieutenant Russell Bright's](#) ¹ 2 Troop and [Second-Lieutenant Dick Kerr's](#) ² 4 Troop, with Captain Passmore in command, were over the river and parked by a brickworks on the north bank. Ahead of them a main road cut across the front, with a steep railway embankment just beyond. But where was all the infantry? The Canadians were supposed to have a flourishing bridgehead north of the river; the Maoris had last been seen heading in this general direction; but now the tanks seemed to be on

their own. There was dead silence ahead. You could not even raise anyone on the wireless for long enough to learn anything. It was a disturbing position.

Finally searchers located a few Canadians, whose story was even more unsettling—there seemed to be barely a company of infantry across the river, and Jerry was just a little way ahead. Passmore's tanks, it seemed, were the first vehicles to have crossed.

While these few poor scraps of information were being gleaned, the Maoris' forward companies had reached the brickworks, having had a lot of trouble finding their way. Later in the evening the rest of A Squadron (which had spent some time hunting in the dark for the right road) arrived too, and the position was now easier, though nobody knew who, if anyone, was on the flanks.

The B Squadron tanks, following A Squadron across the river, swung right on reaching the far bank, and moved a few hundred yards downstream, hoping to meet the forward companies of 21 Battalion, who had decided about the same time as the Maoris that tanks were not healthy for infantry to ride on. But here, too, there was not a soul about, though there were battle noises a little way off to the right. In the end B Squadron camped on the riverbank and sent out patrols to scout round and look for this elusive 21 Battalion. Daylight had broken before tanks and infantry linked up again.

During the night the rain eased off, but not the shells. Jerry continued to land them in ones and twos all round the Marecchia crossing; our own 25-pounders were shelling the railway embankment, far too close for comfort, but with wireless communication almost nil nobody could do much about it. It was a jittery, unhappy night.

But actually it was not as bad as it seemed. A few hundred yards to the right the Canadians and 22 Battalion had cleared the [Celle](#) junction, where the two main highways of the [Romagna](#) diverged, Route 16 going on up the coast, Route 9 turning off to the left on its long journey to [Bologna](#). The companies of 21 Battalion were across the river and not far away, though they knew no more than the tankies of what was going on. By daybreak four 'tank-busters', some anti-tank guns and Vickers were up with A Squadron at the brickworks. (Later it was found that the approaches

to the wooden bridge were mined, but luck was with the Kiwis that night.) C Squadron had also crossed the [San Fortunato](#) ridge in the friendly dark, and was hidden among the trees just short of the river, handy in case of need. And Brigadier Burrows of 5 Brigade was in a position to say to 21 and 28 Battalions: 'Push on as soon as possible after daylight.'

But this was more complicated than it sounded.

By 5.30 a.m. 21 Battalion and B Squadron were on their way up from the river towards [Celle](#). Almost at once there was trouble. The ground ahead was a sort of jigsaw puzzle of deep



18 Armd Regt, 21-23 Sept. 1944

drains and tall vines, and there German paratroopers lurked. East of [Celle](#) 21 Battalion's right company got going very slowly, working its way forward against hidden Spandaus and snipers. The railway embankment west of [Celle](#) was so well 'taped' by Jerry that the infantry could not even cross it. The Shermans, which were to have gone up Route 16 clearing out all the houses, found the road so well guarded by anti-tank guns and bazookas that they could not get under way in the meantime.

For a while the only active tanks were two Honeys from the Reconnaissance Troop attached to the infantry; they had a very busy morning, dashing round on all sorts of errands, and at times getting caught up in skirmishes, as they carried the

company commanders backwards and forwards between their platoons.

By midday the right-hand company was not far from its objective, the Molini Canal, which cut right across the front between solid earth banks, with several hundred yards of huge, dingy factory buildings sprawling beside it. The Shermans had come up by this time, and were in close attendance as the infantry went from house to house, collecting little groups of prisoners, most of them Turkomen, short, grubby, unshaven and Oriental. Nobody had ever seen soldiers quite like them. The sniping from the houses had slackened off now, but there was still plenty of mortar fire coming from in front.

The situation on the left of Route 16 had now eased a little, but progress was still only a crawl. Jerry fought for every house here, little groups lay low while the attackers passed and then bobbed up and fired at the rear platoons. But a 75-millimetre round or two into the houses usually persuaded any occupants that resistance was suicide. Lieutenant Greenfield's tank flushed over twenty prisoners from troublesome dugouts a little way off Route 16. Another Sherman distinguished itself by knocking the top off a tower which housed a German observation post.

Shortly before midday the two companies had drawn level again as they approached the Molini Canal. One tank on the left of Route 16 was knocked out by an anti-tank shell from a row of houses beyond the canal, but the 21 Battalion mortars got smartly on to the target, after which the infantry had little trouble in establishing itself along the canal there, with the Shermans just behind. A little Italian anti-tank gun with a short barrel also tackled some of the B Squadron tanks after 21 Battalion had bypassed it, but it was not made to deal with Shermans, for its armour-piercing shot just bounced off.

East of Route 16 the factory on the [Molini](#) bank slowed the battle for a while. It looked the kind of place where Jerry might well be hiding, and the infantry moved in very cautiously after the Shermans had 'done it over'. During the afternoon the infantry crossed the canal from the factory, followed by a troop of Shermans, who helped to keep Jerry meek while the company consolidated its position. Major Hawkesby,³ the company commander, was injured when a Sherman on which he was riding was hit by a mortar, but the tank was hardly damaged.

By evening Jerry was cleared out from the canal bank. It had been a trying day, and 21 Battalion had lost a lot of men, though the tanks had come off lightly. But there was a very satisfactory bag of prisoners and German gear, and the cooperation between tanks and infantry, after a shaky start, had been good.

While all this was going on, 28 Battalion and A Squadron had been getting into serious trouble on 5 Brigade's left.

Before it was properly light the Maoris moved off, crossed the railway embankment at a tiny village called San Martino, and set out northwards, with the tanks following. Everything had been done with a rush and a scramble—the tankies, troop commanders and all, had been dragged out of bed at a moment's notice, and had to shake the sleep out of their eyes as they went along. At first the Shermans met heavy fire whenever they poked their noses over the embankment, and their chances did not look so good, as the San Martino crossing was blocked by demolitions. A Honey tank of the Recce Troop, exploring to the west, found a crossing several hundred yards away, and about 8 a.m. 4 and 2 Troops crossed in single file, turned east again, and set off to find their infantry, who had now crossed the Molini Canal (a much shorter advance here than with 21 Battalion) and were moving on and driving Jerry back. Lieutenant Wright's troop went away out along Route 9 to guard the left flank, which was very open and empty and a potential danger.

In front of A Squadron Jerry withdrew quite readily, as there were not many houses to fight for, but he gave the Maoris a warm time all the way. By 11 a.m. the battle had moved on some three-quarters of a mile from the railway to a little hamlet called Orsoleto. The tanks systematically shot up all the houses as they went, with very little result except a stray prisoner or two. Sergeant McCowatt's⁴ tank, out on its own on the left of 4 Troop, stumbled into a nest of bazookas just short of Orsoleto, and had a close-range running fight which ended in the Germans departing in a hurry.

Orsoleto was no prominent landmark, only a cluster of eight or ten houses on both sides of a narrow road, but it was a good place to pause for a breather. The Maoris (D and A Companies) took up residence in two houses at the eastern end of the village. No. 4 Troop was right up with D Company, 2 Troop not far behind A

Company, all the tanks hidden behind houses or haystacks.

Then the German artillery, which had not so far been really troublesome, got the range, and shells and mortars began to rain down, and the Maoris began to have casualties. Back at the brickworks and the [Marecchia](#) crossing it was worse than farther forward—as bad as any shelling that anyone could ever remember. A Squadron could not retaliate because Jerry was so hard to locate. The Honey tanks made a foray to a house behind [Orsoleto](#) and cleaned out a pocket of Germans who were annoying the Maoris from the rear; Sergeant Alex Holgerson's ⁵ Honey ran the gauntlet of the shellfire three times to take back wounded and bring up ammunition; but there was no way of improving matters in the meantime.

Then, early in the afternoon, really bad trouble arrived. Two huge Tiger tanks came into [Orsoleto](#) from the west. One sat fair and square in the middle of the village street, within 100 yards of the Maoris' houses, and began to shoot them up.

The Shermans were in a nasty spot here. One shell from a Tiger could make dead meat of a Sherman, while the 75-millimetre guns were little better than peashooters against a Tiger's hide. The nearest tanks wisely drew back a little way. The Tigers were having it all on their own, firing armour-piercing shells at everything they could see, knocking lumps off the houses behind which the A Squadron tanks were sheltering. Captain Passmore called urgently over the wireless for dive-bombers or medium guns to tackle these pirates; but the rain had kept the [Air Force](#) on the ground that day, and the 'Long Toms' could not be safely used so close to our own men. Passmore himself went as far forward as he dared—Second-Lieutenant Bright comments, 'He was determined to capture Tigers on foot I think'—and directed the 25-pounders on to the nearest Tiger, but to no avail. His own tank had a crack at it, scoring direct hits which seemed to make no impression. A 'tank-buster' came up from the rear, but could not get into position without offering itself as a sitting shot for that deadly 'eighty-eight'.

Then the day drew to a close, and Passmore recalls:

Towards dusk the Tigers fired Machine gun tracer & fired the haystacks. I then informed the Maori Coy Commanders that as my tanks were illuminated by the flame I would ask them to withdraw. They agreed to this so I asked the Arty for smoke

cover.... The Infantry withdrew under cover of smoke & tanks firing. After infantry had taken up new positions the tanks pulled back also.

To everyone's mighty relief, the Tigers withdrew out of [Orsoleto](#) when the smoke came down. Evidently their crews were only human.

So ended a gruelling day for 2 and 4 Troops. They were now in the shelter of houses some 300 yards short of [Orsoleto](#), and the crews managed to snatch a little sleep during the evening; but before midnight, again at little more than a moment's notice, they were up and about, ready to follow the Maoris as they pushed farther on behind a massive barrage.

Evidently Jerry was not to be allowed to settle into a defensive line—though he was fighting back so strongly among the farms and vines that this hardly seemed likely to worry him. This midnight attack was to be a short jump of a mile to the [Scolo Brancona](#), another of those wretched ditches that cut across the map in straggly blue lines. There seemed to be so many of these. Already the high hopes of a dashing advance across the plains had faded.

This was the first attack [18 Regiment](#) had done under the searchlights, and it was an impressive sight, the continuous yellow flicker of the guns stabbing across the cold silver beams of the 'artificial moonlight'. The tankies were still a bit shy of this new idea. It certainly helped you to see where you were going, and took away some of the strain of night driving, but at the same time it made you feel rather naked and visible. And added to all this illumination, the fitful light of haystacks set ablaze by the barrage produced the most eerie effect.

But the mighty barrage seemed to have cowed Jerry. On the right, 21 Battalion struck next to no opposition, and was on the [Scolo Brancona](#) by 3 a.m. The B Squadron tanks, which had driven casually up Route 16 behind the infantry, joined the foremost companies just short of the ditch, and their night's work was over.

A Squadron's advance with the Maoris was a different story. It was, Captain Pyatt writes, 'practically unique in that we actually advanced with the Inf in night attack, a tank up with each fwd platoon'. Right at the outset Second-Lieutenant Bright's tank broke down and Second-Lieutenant Kerr's collected one of our own 25-pounder shells which smashed up its radiator. Twice Kerr's troop ran into the

barrage, for no detailed instructions had been available, and the Maoris had temporarily disappeared.

Jerry offered no opposition for the first half of the advance, but then, while moving in towards a farmhouse on 2 Troop's front, Majors [Mitchell](#)⁶ and [Te Punga](#),⁷ the Maori company commanders, were killed by a Spandau burst, and for a few minutes the show lost its momentum, nobody quite knowing what was going to happen next. Then Sergeant [Bernie Roberts](#)⁸ reports:

There came the question of how to get the Germans out. My tank was brought forward & Russell Bright was going to put some H.E. into the house but then it was decided to machine-gun instead. Finally just as we were about to open up the Maoris decided to do the job & after some grenade throwing & some yelling five or six jerries were captured.

The driving force behind this was Captain Passmore, who, appearing on the scene while things were disorganised, took charge of the nearest Maoris and sent them in to clean up the house.

The future of the attack was still a little shaky. Nobody seemed sure whether they had reached the objective or not, but finally, just as it began to get light, Lieutenant-Colonel [Young](#)⁹ of [28 Battalion](#) came up and moved his companies farther on. No. 2 Troop, plus one of 4 Troop's tanks, went forward too, taking occasional shots at snipers and Spandau posts which were now popping up on the left flank. Then, when the Maoris stopped and dug in, the tanks pulled back to the farmhouse and camouflaged themselves away beside outhouses, haystacks and cypress trees, ready to join in the fight again if need be.

This was as far as the regiment went. During the morning [6 Brigade's](#) infantry came through, with tanks of 20 Regiment, all confident that their next stop would be [Venice](#), for the air reconnaissance reports, said they, indicated that Jerry had gone. The boys of [18 Regiment](#), both A and B Squadrons, pointed out that they had just been under pretty heavy mortar fire from the north, but all they could say seemed to have no effect until the 20 Regiment tanks ran into extremely hostile anti-tank guns just ahead. Eighteenth Regiment and 5 Brigade had their troubles too, for Jerry's defensive fire thickened up dangerously, and there was little let-up all day from

mortar and Nebelwerfer 'stonks'.

In the meantime there had been a lot of early morning coming and going in C Squadron. At 3.30 a.m. two troops, under Captain Brosnan, moved up with 23 Battalion to [Viserba](#), just behind the Molini Canal, as a 'back-stop' for the right flank, but nothing happened, and the tankies just had to sit there, play cards and try not to feel bored. A little later, at the usual short notice, Major Allen took the rest of C Squadron up to Route 9 west of [Celle](#), in case the two prowling Tigers came in from the left again. Here, too, though there was quite a lot of Nebelwerfer and mortar fire, there was no sign of Jerry in the flesh, only hundreds of Canadians moving up.

The regiment now spent three days of peace back on Route 9 near [Celle](#), while [6 Brigade](#) carried on the fight. After bringing their steeds up to action standard once more, the tankies did very little. There were unofficial sightseeing trips to [Rimini](#) and the Republic of [San Marino](#), which for some weeks had been visible, its incredible mountain topped with three towers dominating the western skyline. Nearer home there were some Panther tank turrets to be inspected, one of them blown to bits, another intact. Some of C Squadron took a special trip back to the [Rimini](#) airfield to gloat over the turrets there.

More important than any of these short excursions, the first men to go on a week's leave to [Florence](#) had departed on 20 September and missed the last few days' fun. It was the first time that a big leave party had ever gone away while the [18th](#) was in action, and perhaps this was a sign of better times coming. The promise was that everyone would now be able to have a week's leave before many months were past. For men who had been rather starved for leave since coming to [Italy](#), this was very good news.

Here by [Celle](#) the regiment was pretty well organised for comfort. Nearly everyone had houses to live in. Plenty of local wine had been 'borrowed' in the course of the battle, and this was put to good use, for sixty-one of the unit's oldest inhabitants, all that was left of the 4th Reinforcements, were sent off on the first stage of their long trip home. For their sakes everyone was happy to see them go, but saying goodbye is never a happy business, and a lot of sorrows had to be drowned.

The Kiwis' first action on the [Romagna](#) plain had not been very encouraging; the next was even less so. By 26 September [6 Brigade](#) had pushed on a mere three or four miles, had crossed some more muddy ditches and the larger but equally muddy [Uso River](#), and was heading for the [Fiumicino](#), or [Rubicon](#), beyond. The advances were measured in terms of single watercourses, not a bit like the promised [Po Valley](#) gallop. Most of the boys had heard of the [Rubicon](#) as the scene of one of Julius Caesar's exploits long ago, but they were not very impressed. What they wanted was the chance for some twentieth-century Kiwi exploits.

Prospects for this did not look too bright. By the afternoon of 27 September, when [5 Brigade](#) prepared to take over the running again, [6 Brigade](#) had made only another mile in twenty-four hours, against heavy opposition, and it looked like rain. Nobody was very optimistic about the immediate future.

That evening [21 and 23 Battalions](#) relieved [6 Brigade](#), and [18 Regiment](#) went too, [B Squadron](#) with [21 Battalion](#) on the right, [C](#) with [23 Battalion](#) on the left, each squadron with two troops forward and some British self-propelled guns attached. And as they moved forward, down came the rain.

It was only light rain, but it was ominous. The tanks had to cross the [Uso](#) by a rickety bridge reached by a home-made track over the fields, already greasy and treacherous in the dark. Just over the [Uso](#) they floundered through soft demolitions in the road. The country beyond the river, as far as they could see by the artificial moonlight, was horribly open, with only a few scattered houses, and a lot of ploughed ground cut in all directions by the inevitable drainage ditches. The first sight of it by daylight confirmed the night-time impression that this was a dismal hole indeed.

There was little time to take stock, for by 9 a.m. the leading tanks were off again on the infantry's heels, advancing towards the [Fiumicino](#). It was bad going for the infantry across the soft plough and through wet vines. At the ditches the tanks were held up while the crews piled out and shovelled like mad; sometimes the drivers had to reverse the tanks through bad spots. On every lane, too, there were demolitions. But on top of all this they had Jerry to contend with. He was perched up in the top stories of the houses just short of the [Fiumicino](#), and his Spandaus and mortars were pasting the whole area. His bazooka merchants lurked in vines and

haystacks. The Shermans and self-propelled guns hammered the houses, but it did not help much. The Air Force could not help because the weather was too thick.

Then, early in the afternoon, a gale blew up from the sea, and the rain began to come down in torrents.

This was one of the most dreadful afternoons and nights that the Kiwis ever had to spend. The infantry struggled ahead through pouring rain and rapidly deepening mud. The tanks did their best to keep up; communications broke down almost completely, tanks and infantry lost each other, and at one stage the tanks were out in front quite unprotected. Tracks slithered on the sodden ground or clogged up with mud. Tanks bogged down and the others had to haul them out. One B Squadron tank had its radiators holed with mortar shrapnel.

Under such miserable conditions it was quite a feat for infantry and tanks to reach the [Fiumicino](#) late in the afternoon. But their hold on the riverbank, once gained, was very thin. There were still Germans on our side of the river, and it was impossible to cover a continuous front. Most of the tanks were a little way back from the high floodbanks of the river, but a few of both B and C Squadrons were right up against the banks, in a pretty poor position (their crews thought), without much view of the battlefield, and vulnerable to any raiding party that might nip over the river.

There was to have been a 'set-piece' attack across the [Fiumicino](#) that night, but it would not have been humanly possible to mount it. In the evening the gale screamed even higher and the rain increased to solid sheets. It was an appalling night. There was almost no cover, for most of the houses had been shot to pieces by the tanks. Wounded infantrymen died of exposure, an almost unknown thing in 2 NZ Division.

In the afternoon and evening infantry patrols with tank officers braved the storm to inspect the riverbank. There were numbers of Germans visible on the far side, and some worthwhile targets were passed back along the chain of men and then by wireless to the nearest tanks. But the reports on future prospects were gloomy. In a few hours the little [Fiumicino](#), usually not much more than a creek, had become deep and turbulent and wide. The banks were mined and festooned with barbed wire. However, that would not be an immediate worry, for the tanks would never be

able to move in the morning.

This was all too true. Day broke on a scene of waterlogged desolation. Tanks and even jeeps were stuck fast. Supplies for the tanks had not come forward, for the track to the [Uso](#) bridge was so bad that traffic slowed to a crawl and jammed up on both sides of it. The few tanks still free did their best to pull the others out so that they could move closer to the [Fiumicino](#), for the orders now were to consolidate the near bank before crossing; but these orders were quite impossible to carry out. The rain had stopped, but it made little difference. Between the [Uso](#) and the [Fiumicino](#) you could not navigate even the roads.

Surprisingly, 30 September was fine, but the damage was done. Experts who inspected the riverbank on the night of 29 September thought the tanks would not be able to cross for three or four days. The farmyards and fields were morasses. Only the Honey tanks were still more or less mobile, and they were kept running to and fro on all sorts of jobs.

Inevitably, these days developed into artillery and mortar slogging matches, each side trying to knock down the other's front-line houses and put his guns out of the fight. The B and C Squadron tanks in the line took their fair share in the 'house-hunting' duels that went on across the [Fiumicino](#), knocking the top stories off some houses just over the river, and doubtless annoying Jerry, who replied with an almost continuous shower of mortar bombs round the tanks. By 30 September the [Fiumicino](#) farms were already beginning to look like a [Flanders](#) scene from 1917.

On the night of 30 September there was a general changeover, 28 and 22 Battalions taking over from 21 and 23. A Squadron came up with [28 Battalion](#), and B Squadron gladly retired. The last three days, for all their rain and unpleasantness, had been desperately busy ones for B Squadron, which had shot away as much ammunition as in any three days in [Italy](#). The war diary comments: 'An absence of houses in the battle area has resulted in a lot of them [B Sqn] getting very wet.' This was a common complaint round the [Rubicon](#) about this time.

The B Squadron tanks went back only a mile or two to [Bellaria](#), another of the seaside towns which almost overlapped along this stretch of coast. Regimental Headquarters and all the tanks not in the line had gone there on 29 September. It

was a nice town with plenty of good houses to live in, but much too near the front for a rest area, the boys said. Jerry paid it too much attention; it was as dangerous as the firing line. Within three days [18 Regiment](#) had four men wounded there. In particular there was a big fast gun called the 'Adriatic Express', whose shells came roaring down Route 16, shaking the houses as they passed and bursting with a terrible concussion. There would not be much left of a house if one of those things collected it, thought the boys nervously.

And so it went on for three more dreary days. A Squadron's stay up beyond the [Uso](#) was very short, for on the evening of 1 October a Greek battalion, complete with tanks of 20 Regiment, came up and took over from the Maoris, and A Squadron happily pulled back to [Bellaria](#). C Squadron, whose two troops were the only [18 Regiment](#) representatives in the line now, was kept on the go; Captain Laurie, who had just taken over the squadron, had his tanks shooting at Jerry's houses by day, and at night there were patrols from both sides wandering round the front. One night a small but cheeky German attack on 22 Battalion's left spilled over on to C Squadron's left-hand troop, which, says the war diary, 'shot every weapon they had and the spot was a hot one for some time'.

The other squadrons had more to do than just sit round. The unit's recovery tank was busier than it had ever been, pulling tanks out of the [Rubicon](#) mud. Parties went up, by Honey tank, scout car, or sometimes on foot, to recover gear from tanks that could not be hauled out. Sometimes they ran into trouble on their own account. A typical adventure is told by Captain Don Thomson of B Squadron:

Left [Bellaria](#) in a Honey ... and proceeded towards the tanks, but when some 1000 yards away, the road was blocked by a knocked out 20th tank and in endeavouring to pass it, the Honey slipped into the mud and there it stayed. That track had become a hot spot ... and we were very pleased when the Arty O.P. quickly put down a smoke screen to allow us to get back...

That night I took a patrol of half-a-dozen across country to recover the equipment.... It was very dark and we were moving across open farm lands when ... we were mortared very heavily and so accurately that we were all well plastered with mud. It was quite obvious that the Germans ... had listening posts and patrols out and had our patrol so well taped that it was wiser to retire.

The ground, which on 1 October seemed to be drying out slightly, got as bad as ever when it rained again on the 2nd. It looked as if the big advance was 'off' indefinitely. C Squadron's forward crews were wet and cold and miserable, and picketing the tanks at night was a vile job. Everyone had discarded summer clothes and was back in battle dress by now, and the real winter gear, leather jerkins and scarves and balaclavas, was reappearing after six months.

But even the worst job comes to an end eventually; on 4 October C Squadron was relieved, and the whole regiment went back six miles to [Viserba](#), behind the Molini Canal, near where B Squadron had opened the ball on 22 September. One tank bogged down near the [Uso](#) bridge and had to be dragged out next morning after its crew had spent a cold, dinnerless night. Captain Brosnan of C Squadron surprised everyone by bringing back a tank that had had its radiators perforated by shrapnel the day before. The war diary says: 'He filled the holes up with mud, put on a good mud pack over the radiator and had four men with four gallon water cans working on the back the whole time.'

The [18th](#) had a whole block of houses in [Viserba](#), but had to evict a number of assorted squatters before it could take possession. It had never had better billets anywhere. [Viserba](#) had been a holiday resort like [Riccione](#), 'only,' remarked one man, 'not so flash'. The civilians, such of them as still remained there, were very friendly. Regimental Headquarters had an unusual billet in a nunnery, and the nuns, one man wrote appreciatively, were 'kindness itself'. B Echelon arrived up the first afternoon, and the whole unit was together again for a while, with the luxury of cookhouses and the [YMCA](#) canteen. The tanks had to be parked in a paddock half a mile outside the town, with one troop from each squadron living with them and picketing them, but this was a minor inconvenience.

Sheltered by the good waterproof houses of [Viserba](#), which had not suffered too badly in the fighting, the boys could thumb their noses at the rain, which began again on 6 October and kept on solidly for two days. They were well supplied with life's comforts—the tanks had come out of action loaded up with such things as bedsteads and pigs and poultry. There were hot showers not far away. The mobile cinema turned on a show nearly every night. There was football, there were vino parties. Some of the boys got hold of a German Mark IV tank that had been captured

near the Molini Canal, and drove it up and down the beach, which was right next door to the billets.

But despite this comfortable existence, there was a dark mood among the Kiwis, who had gone into battle by [Rimini](#) with their tails well up. The irresistible charge across the plains had turned out a real 'fizzer'. Instead, they were floundering in the water only a few miles from where they had started. There were a few sarcastic remarks about old Julius Caesar and his feat at the [Rubicon](#); the opinion was heard round the camp that he could not have had Shermans with him.

And what was to happen next? Surely not another whole winter like the last! It was hard to accept such an idea, but it was beginning to look inevitable.

¹ Lt R. T. Bright; [Blenheim](#); born [Blenheim](#), 19 Sep 1907; carpenter.

² Lt G. T. Kerr; [Tawa](#); born [Granity](#), 17 Feb 1915; painter.

³ Maj G. H. Hawkesby, DSO; [Howick](#); born [Auckland](#), 18 Apr 1915; manufacturer's representative; wounded 28 May 1944.

⁴ WO I J. A. McCowatt, MM; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 18 Mar 1911; iron moulder.

⁵ Sgt A. C. Holgerson, MM, Bronze Medal (Gk); [Auckland](#); born [Waihi](#), 3 Mar 1911; bushman; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

⁶ Maj H. M. Mitchell; born NZ 24 Aug 1914; Regular soldier; wounded 16 Dec 1941; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

⁷ Maj H. P. Te Punga, m.i.d.; born [Lower Hutt](#), 27 May 1916; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

⁸ Maj B. J. L. Roberts; [Otorohanga](#); born [Feilding](#), 19 Dec 1909; clerk; three times wounded; ex-CO [Waikato Regt](#) (Lt-Col).

⁹ Lt-Col R. R. T. Young, DSO; England; born Wellington, 25 Jun 1902; oil company executive; CO NZ School of Instruction, Feb-Apr 1943; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1943-Jul 1944, Aug-Nov 1944; wounded 26 Dec 1943.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 39 – ARMoured ATTACK

CHAPTER 39

Armoured Attack

Twelve days at [Viserba](#), and then the regiment was back again within reach of the guns.

The Kiwis had meantime exchanged the wet, dismal fields of the [Rubicon](#) for a slightly drier but equally dismal stretch of country a few miles farther west, one jump nearer the foothills, just north of the [Rimini- Bologna](#) railway whose embankment had given the tanks so much trouble on 22 September. Here Jerry was retiring unwillingly and slowly, helped along by outflanking British attacks in the hills; the Kiwis were following up, pressing him hard from farm to farm and from ditch to ditch. At present it was almost entirely an infantry 'do', but when the time was right 4 Armoured Brigade was to go through and advance over the plain, the tanks at long last in the van of the attack.

It seemed incredible that this was really going to happen. For months, ever since [Cassino](#), the tanks had been nothing but infantry support weapons or mobile artillery, with little prospect of ever being anything else. Then they had reached the wonderful flat plain promised to them, and all they had found was ditches and floodbanks and impossible mud. But now, after all that, they were to have their big moment. The weather was still louring, but there had been nothing as bad as the downpours of late September. This might be the only chance for an armoured thrust to push Jerry a good long way back before the inevitable winter stepped in.

From 11 October [18 Regiment](#) was on six hours' notice to leave [Viserba](#), which somewhat curtailed the pleasure excursions round the country. There was plenty to do. The tanks were moved from their wet paddock to drier ground nearer the coast. They were thoroughly cleaned up. The guns were 'T & A'd' with targets rigged on boats off shore. On 15 October everyone packed up as far as he could and stood ready, for there were persistent rumours that the move was very close. And after breakfast on the 16th away they went.

It was only a 16-mile move, all of it through country that had been sadly scarred by the war. This was nothing new; all the [Romagna](#) had taken a savage hammering, more than almost any other district the boys had seen. [Rimini](#), many of them

thought, was flattened nearly as badly as [Cassino](#). Now, where the tanks passed on their way back to the fighting line, every farm and crossroads village was a wreck, the smell of second-hand war was everywhere, dead men and dead cattle lay bloated and unburied in the fields. Most battlefields, for the sake of elementary hygiene, were cleaned up pretty soon after the war moved on; here everyone seemed too apathetic to care, too fed up with this bloody [Romagna](#).

Round the village of [Gambettola](#) B and C Squadrons got billets of a sort, mostly in poor, flimsy, half-ruined houses. A Squadron went two miles farther on, joined forces with 22 Battalion, and one troop went up to where the leading company held a small stretch of the line on 5 Brigade's right flank. Two more tanks went to the second company, about a quarter of a mile ahead of Battalion Headquarters, and the rest of the squadron found what living space it could round Battalion Headquarters.

This was a district of few, scattered houses, a network of clay roads criss-crossing each other every few hundred yards, many willow-lined canals, and the same old vines and plough that everyone hated so much. A mile and a half ahead of the leading company was the Pisciattello River, not much more than a creek, but flanked by the usual high banks and stiff with German paratroopers. The current plan was that the infantry should cross this creek first, the engineers would put bridges up as quickly as they could, then [4 Brigade](#) would cross, push through the infantry, and away. On the right [18 Regiment](#), on the left 20 Regiment, with carriers of 22 Battalion scouring the battlefield behind the leading squadrons and picking up stray Germans.

But first this [Pisciattello](#) had to be crossed, and this was not going to be easy, for Jerry was fighting for every clay road, and laying massive artillery and mortar and Nebelwerfer 'stonks' across the front and as far back as [Gambettola](#). All 17 October our infantry battled to cover the last few hundred yards to the river. In the evening, Jerry having at last pulled back to the north bank, [6 Brigade](#) relieved 5 Brigade and moved up to the river, all ready to cross next night.

In this hard fighting on 17 October A Squadron and 22 Battalion had a vigorous part to play. During the day the 22nd's leading company, with its troop of tanks in close attendance, gained 1200 yards, which brought both tanks and infantry to the last road before the river, with 400 yards of vines still to go. How everyone cursed

the vines, which practically blinded the tankies and provided such good cover for Spandau and bazooka teams. The tanks, standing back a little, turned their guns on the country ahead of the infantry, spraying houses and haystacks and ditches with shells and Browning bullets. There were two troops of A Squadron up with the fighting now. On that last road two clusters of farm buildings, [Casalini](#) and [Fossalta](#), were both full of stubborn paratroopers; against each of these moved a platoon of 22 Battalion and a troop of tanks, which smothered the buildings with fire as the infantry moved in. At [Fossalta](#), too, the artillery joined the party, landing shells all round the place just before the attack. This kind of treatment did not suit the paratroopers, who stood their ground till the last minute and then came out with their hands up.

It was late afternoon now, and it was raining again; the lanes were sticky and treacherous, and everyone was glumly picturing another fiasco like the [Rubicon](#). Also 22 Battalion's flank was wide open, Jerry was still holding out a mile east of [Fossalta](#) with nothing in between, and it seemed unlikely that the night would pass without trouble. The infantry at [Casalini](#) and [Fossalta](#) made ready to repel boarders. The tankies at [Fossalta](#), dissatisfied with their quarters there, moved to other farm buildings farther west along the road, set up their Brownings to fire along fixed lines, and settled down to get some sleep. It had been a big afternoon; the tanks had been very busy, firing off ammunition just as fast as the trucks could bring it up, and everyone was tired.

But the crews did not get the full night's sleep they longed for. At 2 a.m. mortar bombs began to fall thickly on [Fossalta](#), and along the road from the east came the paratroopers, with Spandaus and bazookas and even grenades, moving aggressively in to close quarters. The tank crews were alerted and stood ready. The [Fossalta](#) garrison stood firm, but at daybreak Jerry was still there; a call for help was wirelessly out to the tanks, which moved in from the west just as another 22 Battalion platoon arrived from the south. The paratroopers, taken by surprise, were 'not so much repulsed as annihilated', as A Squadron's report put it. Eight were killed, half a dozen captured, and the rest fled, taking several wounded men with them.

This was a good beginning to the day, and did a lot to lift the gloom, particularly as the rain had stopped and the outlook was a little brighter. All through 18 October

the artillery was moving up, digging positions all round the [18 Regiment](#) tanks at [Gambettola](#), ready to help [6 Brigade](#) across the [Pisciatiello](#) that night. During the night a bridge was to go up at a tiny village called [Macerone](#), a squadron of the 19th was to go across to protect [6 Brigade](#), then the [18th](#) would follow, and at daybreak on 19 October the balloon would go up.

The Air Force, too, would be in the party. The Allies could now afford to be smug about their air support—never, even on [Crete](#), had Jerry had so much of it. German planes had become a rarity. The most spectacular new development was the ‘cab rank’, a patrol of Kittybombers hovering overhead waiting to be called down by radio on to targets ahead of our troops. Since the regiment had returned to the line this had been in full operation, the ‘Kitties’ swooping to drop their bombs just across the [Pisciatiello](#), too close altogether, some men thought. There were also the air OPs, the cheeky little ‘shufti’ planes that prowled over Jerry's lines and passed down information to our guns. At [Viserba](#) [18 Regiment](#) representatives had put their heads together with the men who flew these planes, and arranged a private code by which, they hoped, the OP planes could direct the tanks quickly on to targets. It remained to be seen how this would work in action.

After the paratroopers at [Fossalta](#) were seen off the premises, 18 October was a quiet, waiting kind of day. In the afternoon Canadian infantry took over from 22 Battalion, and A Squadron pulled back from the line to get ready for the big ‘do’. The road back was very soft, and there was one deviation that took a lot of getting round, so tempers were a bit short before the afternoon was over; but before dark all the tanks were back at [Gambettola](#) waiting for the starting signal. The barrier might go up, they were told, any time after 3 a.m. In the meantime everyone grabbed what sleep he could.

There was an impressive barrage that night as [6 Brigade](#) crossed the [Pisciatiello](#), but it was largely wasted ammunition, as Jerry had pulled farther back and offered very little opposition. At 3 a.m. all the [18 Regiment](#) squadrons were out on the road ready to go, with their full complement of tanks and all the trimmings, artillery OP officers, a Valentine bridge-laying tank, a Sherman bulldozer, a party of engineers to ‘recce’ routes and clear mines and fill demolitions. A company of 22 Battalion was standing by to ride into action on the reserve tanks, and so were the 22 Battalion

carriers which were to come behind and mop up.

Right at the outset there was a delay. Two assault bridges were put over the [Pisciatiello](#) in quick time, but the 'scissors' bridge at [Macerone](#) was damaged by a 19 Regiment tank, and the [18th](#) was left sitting sleepily on the roadside in the rain, which began at 4 a.m. and went on steadily till dawn. All this time Lieutenant-Colonel Ferguson was dashing about at white heat, trying to 'recce' routes for his tanks to the other bridge. By seven o'clock the scissors bridge was usable again, and by 8.30 C Squadron was leading the [18th](#) over the river. There were queues of assorted traffic waiting to cross, and the tanks had anything but a clear run, but before 10 a.m. the whole regiment was across and lined up by 24 Battalion's foremost companies along a road half a mile ahead. Apart from all the delay it had not been a hard move, with little of the shelling or mortaring that had been expected. Jerry had been most cooperative in withdrawing just at the critical moment.

At 9.50 a.m., a year and a day after the New Zealand armour had left [Egypt](#), the tanks began to roll forward on 4 Armoured Brigade's first and last massed attack.

For about a mile it looked as if the leading squadrons—B on the right, C on the left—were out for a picnic. There were a few stray shellbursts here and there, but nothing to delay the tanks as they pushed north along the lanes. But then they began to strike ditches and demolitions and soft mud, and the gallop became a walk. Tankies and engineers had to explore the place on foot to find crossings. Some tanks finished up in the ditches, and the crews had to get busy with shovels while the Sherman bulldozer and [18 Regiment's](#) recovery tank came up to haul them out. The free tanks carried on northwards, shelling all the houses and machine-gunning all the haystacks in their path, a precaution which for the moment seemed to have little effect.

The day's first objective was a road, a real one, much better than the usual muddy farm lanes round these parts; it ran from [Cesena](#) on the left to [Cervia](#) on the coast, and it was a landmark visible a long way off, lined with rows of tall trees, and with little clusters of houses at every crossroads. It was also the line to which Jerry had withdrawn during the night. Just after 1 p.m., as the first tanks came near it, they began to run into little pockets of German infantry, and fighting began. Jerry

was in no great strength, but he was in good commanding positions in and round the farmhouses, and could make a considerable nuisance of himself.

For a while the tanks had the upper hand, advancing towards the road and shooting up Spandau and bazooka posts in the ditches and farmyards; the occupants of these posts, or such of them as were left alive, either ran away or hoisted white flags. The front was dotted with burning haystacks. But the tanks were not out of trouble. Spandaus were still firing ahead, mortar bombs and Nebelwerfers were falling, and tanks found the open fields increasingly soft, and were apt to end up bellied in the mud. All the shooting they had done that morning (most of it wasted effort) was now catching up on them, for some of them were running out of ammunition at awkward moments and having to call urgently for more. Some troop commanders were asking for infantry to come up and help dislodge the paratroopers, but this could not be arranged at a moment's notice.

It would have been amazing if the tanks had had no losses. At 3 p.m., in an unpleasant, wet, exposed area just short of the [Cesena- Cervia](#) road, Second-Lieutenant Eric Brennan's troop of B Squadron met unexpected self-propelled guns firing from buildings at a crossroads ahead. The tanks were caught in the open and had no chance to dodge. All three were hit and 'brewed up' one after the other. By the most wonderful good fortune nobody was wounded.

The air OP was right on the job, and within minutes a big 'stonk' was on its way over to the German guns, but the smoke of the burning tanks and haystacks was now drifting over the front and obscuring the view. For the moment all our guns and tanks could not shift Jerry off the road ahead.

About five o'clock trouble suddenly flared up in C Squadron too. Two tanks of Second-Lieutenant Binet's ¹ 9 Troop, which had for some time been bogged down in a patch of soft mud, were attacked by paratroopers with bazookas, who hit Binet's tank and set it alight, wounding all the crew. Lieutenant Collins's and Sergeant 'Curly' Mason's ² tanks of 10 Troop were close at hand, and when they moved in to the rescue, tossing out smoke grenades as they came, the action was very lively for a minute or two. Trooper Sloan records what happened:

We went forward to attempt to pull Bin out. Just moved forward when I saw it.

A Bazooka fired from 30 yds on left hit Bin's tank.... Did have the wind up! But forward we went everything blazing to within 30 yds. Then the 75 jammed & the Co-ax went out the monk. Joe hopped out to assist crew of brew up. Maurie went after. Jim Smith ³. on the lap gun, Lew Armitage ⁴ on the Ack Ack gun kept a hail of fire going down.... Spandaus blazing away everywhere.... It was hell. Expected a Bazooka at any time there.

Binet's tank crew had meantime crawled back from the burning tank with tracer flashing all round them, except for Trooper Attwood, ⁵ who was trapped in the tank and fatally injured.

Collins's tanks had some good shooting at wandering groups of paratroopers. 'We had the curious position,' says Collins, 'of Jerrys walking alongside us & not knowing it till we cleaned them up ... at 25 yds range.' And not long afterwards 10 Troop



Loaded up for the final advance

Loaded up for the final advance

Crossing the Reno



Crossing the Reno



Across the big rivers—the Po

Across the big rivers—the Po



Across the big rivers—the Adige

Across the big rivers—the Adige

July 1945—tanks ready to leave the regiment for the last time



July 1945—tanks ready to leave the regiment for the last time



Lt-Cols J. R. Gray and J. N. Peart

Lt-Cols J. R. Gray and J. N. Peart



Lt-Col R. J. Lynch

Lt-Col R. J. Lynch



Lt-Col C. L. Pleasants

Lt-Col C. L. Pleasants



Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson

Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson



Lt-Col H. H. Parata

Lt-Col H. H. Parata

flushed three self-propelled guns, probably the ones that had ambushed Brennan's troop, and knocked two of them out as they tried hastily to get away.

The first of 22 Battalion's infantry then hove in sight on its way up to protect the tanks for the night. Both B and C Squadrons retired a few hundred yards, leaving the infantry in position just short of the [Cesena- Cervia](#) road, while the tanks harboured for the night and the crews cooked an overdue meal. A Squadron, which for the last part of the afternoon had been busily rounding up pockets of Germans behind the other squadrons, also harboured a mile and a half farther back.

This first day of the great attack had been only moderately successful. True, the tanks had gone ahead fast in the morning, but later in the day a comparative handful of Germans had seriously disrupted the show, and the tankies would have been more than glad to have had some infantry around to drag them from their lairs. Now the tanks were to push on again next morning, and nobody was very happy about it, for when the day's battle had been broken off Jerry had still been full of fight.

But that night Jerry pulled back, covering his departure with mortar fire. On [18 Regiment's](#) left the 20 Regiment tanks had broken into his line at one of the many crossroads on the [Cesena- Cervia](#) road, and farther left still, in the foothills and on Route 9, British and Canadians had surged forward into the important town of [Cesena](#), so that Jerry, if he did not want to be outflanked, had no option but to pull back on the plains. The noise of demolitions as he left could be clearly heard, and the 25-pounders several times came into action to help him on his way. In the early hours of 20 October 22 Battalion patrols found no sign of Jerry on the road ahead.

C Squadron set the ball rolling that morning, advancing across the [Cesena- Cervia](#) road and on to the north-west. There was no opposition, but the ground made up for that. Jerry had made a horrible mess of the roads, with mines and huge craters; the engineers were hard at it from the start, filling up the holes and helping to find routes for the tanks, and the tank commanders spent a good deal of their morning hunting on foot for passable country. A handful of infantry rode on the leading tanks, hopping off when necessary to do what little they could to help the tanks through the mud. The advance now cut diagonally across the direction of the roads, and it took the whole morning, slogging through swampy fields, to reach the [Granarolo](#) stream, only a mile ahead of their starting place. The Granarolo, with its inevitable steep, slippery floodbanks, and with every little bridge thoroughly blown,

was quite impassable until a Valentine bridge-layer came from the rear and put its bridge down across the narrow stream. Now A Squadron passed through and took up the hunt beyond the [Granarolo](#).

A Squadron, luckier than C, had a narrow but firm road to travel on, for the advance now swung due west towards the Savio River three miles away. This road, like the rest, was mined and pitted with craters, but in between the holes it was in reasonable order for the tanks. By 1.45 p.m. the head of A Squadron was coming up to the last crossroads before the [Savio](#), when suddenly the day's first opposition came along.

It was pretty second-rate opposition, not a real defensive line, but only a little rearguard with a few Spandaus guarding the approach to the [Savio](#), and a mortar or two firing from across the river. The tanks had some good shooting as they came up, laid low a few Spandau posts and picked up a few prisoners, but these were a poor bunch, nothing like the paratroopers who had been providing the excitement lately. Most of them did not wait to be captured, but just melted away.

The attacking [4 Brigade](#) was now in a salient, well ahead of its neighbours on either side. Divisional Cavalry was supposed to have some Staghounds up to guard the right flank, but nobody had seen them all day. On [18 Regiment's](#) left 20 Regiment was up level, and left of that again were the Canadians, but between 'Canucks' and Kiwis was a wide empty gap. However, Jerry was very much on the defensive now, and this last lot of prisoners did not seem the counter-attacking kind, so nobody worried unduly. In this kind of war your neighbours were as dangerous as the enemy. Once or twice some of the tanks were nearly embroiled in shooting affrays before the 'other chaps' were recognised as friendly; once Second-Lieutenant Jack Clough's troop of C Squadron, which veered off course to get round a huge demolition, while being 'bribed' with 'plonk' and eggs at a farmhouse was accidentally machine-gunned by an A Squadron troop to which these pickings rightfully belonged.

The notable feature of the day's advance was the craters. Never had [18 Regiment](#) struck so many or such big ones. Tankies, sappers, and anyone else handy had worked like fury to get the tanks forward, cutting down trees to toss into the craters, throwing in bales of straw, rubble from houses, furniture and household

fittings, in fact everything they could lay hands on. It was a real feat of endurance and ingenuity, even taking into account the poor show Jerry was putting up.

There seemed to be no point in pushing right up to the [Savio](#) bank that night, so when daylight began to fail the tanks harboured where they were, A Squadron's troops spread out over a mile of their road, B and C Squadrons not far head of the [Granarolo](#). Early in the evening there was an outburst of shooting somewhere in the rear, and B and C Squadrons closed into a tight circle for mutual protection, but the noise turned out to be some Staghounds clearing out a little pocket of Germans that had been missed.

Very little disturbed the tankies' rest that night—a few mortar bombs and an occasional Nebelwerfer salvo, and 25-pounder shells sailing over at intervals to land on the far bank of the [Savio](#). There was a lot of noise from the left, where the Canadians tried without success to establish themselves across the river. A Squadron, 22 Battalion and the sappers sent out patrols to the river; there seemed to be no Germans left on the near bank, but, the patrols reported, there was no way across for tanks until a bridge was up and a track bulldozed over the floodbank.

For next day the direction of the attack was changed again. The [18th](#) was now to turn north along the [Savio](#), and sweep up parallel to the river, clearing two miles of the near bank. This stretch, on yesterday's right flank, was still nobody's country, and there were certainly some Germans still there, for during the night Spandau fire had come from that direction.

But nobody expected much trouble, and C Squadron was given the job on its own. All the rest of [18](#) and 20 Regiments were to follow up northwards and pull in near a little crossroads village called [Bagnile](#), and then that night both regiments were to take part in a fake barrage over the river to keep Jerry guessing, while a real barrage and attack went in farther south on the Canadian front.

At 10 a.m. two troops of C Squadron set out northwards. At first the pattern of events was the same as before—no sign of Jerry, but soft, greasy ground which forced the tanks to keep to the lanes, and big craters that needed every available labourer to fill them up. The local Italians, most of them bravely sporting Partisan armbands now that Jerry had gone, were out in force shouting a welcome. A mile

north the settlement grew thicker, with houses quite close together along the lanes, something like sprawling town suburbs. And here the day's trouble began.

Once again it was only light opposition at first, a few Spandaus and the odd bazooka, nothing much else. But as C Squadron pushed farther north, towards a big river bend where the town of [Mensa](#) poked its rooftops up over the floodbank on the far side, it got worse; the bazooka merchants, hidden away between the buildings where you could not see them till you were on top of them, were beginning to be a menace, so A and B Squadrons were ordered up, one on either side of C Squadron, to make a regimental 'do' of it.

Even with three squadrons advancing on parallel lanes a few hundred yards apart, the attack stalled. B Squadron on the right was held up at [Bagnile](#) by a big demolition, mines, and Spandaus and bazookas ahead. In the centre C Squadron, pushing slowly ahead towards the thick of the opposition, the tanks firing continually as they went, scored a lot of hits on German infantry posts. On the left A Squadron was in among buildings on the road nearest the [Savio](#), in an awkward position, facing heavy fire from a row of houses in front of it. The tanks were back in paratrooper country today, this was clear from the tenacity of the Germans. Every demolition—and there were a lot—was defended, and the tanks could not easily get round the craters because of the mines and mud in the fields.

What [18 Regiment's](#) battle report calls 'choppy fighting' went on till well after dark. Several tanks were bogged and freed again after a lot of hard work. The Shermans put down an enormous volume of fire; they played very safe, shooting up every building and haystack, and towards the end of the day some of them had to call for more ammunition, which was scraped together (some of it by robbing the reserve tanks) and hurriedly sent forward.

Just after dark Clough's 12 Troop, leading C Squadron, overran a group of bazooka men lurking in the roadside drains, and a hard little fight flared up. Clough tells the story:

I decided to move my tanks out onto the road [from behind a house] and try to set things alight. The Hun was well established ... in the drains and dugouts alongside the road.

Well my tank moved out first, but we only got onto the road when up jumped a Jerry right alongside of us with a Bazooka, and bang we copped it in the side; I ordered the driver to reverse back behind the farm house and checked for damage....

I decided to move out again but this time we had more clues and came out blazing at everything.... We were right on the corner when all hell seemed to hit us. The next I knew was seeing red in the bottom of the tank. I called Bale out, my gunner, wireless op and self jumped out and into the drain—on the non arrival of the driver ... I jumped on to the tank and ... asked him if the tank was heating up as I had seen a red blob, he said there is no fire here, so I called out a new army or tank order (Bale in), then off we went again....

We pulled in behind another farm house and got out to survey the damage. The wireless had gone bung. The 75 mm main gun had received a direct hit and was bent, my Bren had only the butt left.... At this stage a Spandau opened up on us; my driver was killed and I got shot up in the legs.... The drains were still full of Huns. So I decided we would move back to the original farm house.

The paratroopers followed up with a small, sharp counter-attack, but the 22 Battalion men were now in position and ready, and Jerry met such a warm reception that he soon faded away again, having apparently had enough. Apart from the casualties—Trooper Mick Brady ⁶ killed and two wounded —there had been very little damage to the tanks.

All through this action mixed and slightly incoherent reports filtered back to C Squadron headquarters:

1800 [hrs]: ... While we were getting tea there were voices raised on air, sounded almost like panic. Jerry had countered & they [tkns] were calling reinf. up & giving each other orders....

1818: No. 1 being fired on by spandaus & bazookas. They are going flat out, firing everything.

1830: Jack Clough wounded in leg would not lie down or rest, & helped them with other chap ... who was in a bad way....

1917: Itais round them report 100 Jerrys coming up road towards them, our inf report about 1 dozen....

1937: Inf occupying 3 houses, more Jerrys have come up & have them surrounded. Our tanks firing to keep them away from houses.... 2 tps have houses covered & are firing everything....

2000: Stonk going down just behind houses....

2002: Another stonk started.

2007: One of the tanks has forgotten he is on A set & is giving fire orders to his crew.

2019: No. 1 tp short of ammo want some sent up.... Had to strip our tank of ammo & load honey for tanks....

2112: Jerry shows signs of chucking it in.

C Squadron then settled down for the night. It was alone again now, except for the infantry, for A and B Squadrons had pulled back to [Bagnile](#) to fire their fake barrage. For all the good this was likely to do, the boys thought, there was a lot of work attached to it. Some of the tanks could not get clearance for their shells until trees were cut down in front. Bringing up the extra ammunition was no joke, for the roads were poor, narrow and greasy. The tanks shot off about 150 rounds each. The uproar kept everyone awake, but once it was over the night quietened down all along the New Zealand front. C Squadron, a bit on the jump after that counter-attack, posted double pickets, and fired a few shots at intervals all night to warn Jerry that we were awake and he had better not try any funny business.

Again that night it rained, and 22 October broke cold and threatening, the ground even more treacherous than before, the mud in the fields impossibly deep. Part of C Squadron pushed on at dawn with 22 Battalion towards [Mensa](#), but went only a few hundred yards before the road was blocked by mines. As the infantry moved on alone, the tanks smoothed the way by shooting up the buildings ahead, including a tall, watchful tower just over the river in [Mensa](#).

Nobody knew what was to happen now, and the tankies set to work to 're-ammo' their steeds as fast as possible, for things were apt to break at short notice round here. The armourers and fitters came up to the squadrons to work on the tanks just in case. But no orders came through, only a delightful rumour that there was to be a relief, and that the Kiwis were pulling out of the line. Rumour soon became reality. During the day the New Zealand infantry were all relieved by Canadians, and [18 Regiment](#) just sat where it was, waiting for someone to come and

relieve it in turn.

That was the end of 4 Brigade's one and only armoured attack. It did not look as if, under winter conditions, there would be another. On paper it had worked all right, the tanks co-operating as they should with engineers and artillery, 22 Battalion moving close behind to take over the ground won by the tanks, and behind that again 6 Brigade to make a firm infantry position. The tanks had forged ahead when Jerry was not there, and had 'liberated' a lot of farms and small villages, quantities of wine, flocks of hens, herds of pigs. But the gluey mud, the dozens of tiny creeks and drains, the mines and demolitions, the bazookas and the Spandau teams had all combined to slow up the advance. Time after time the tank crews had prayed for infantry to do all sorts of little jobs on the spot, and when they most wanted help there had been no infantry around. The tank crews had had very little rest, and were very ready to stop at the end of their three days. With the roads in such a state it had not been easy to keep up supplies; ammunition in particular had given a lot of people headaches, and the Honey tanks had once again worked like packhorses to get it forward. They had also carried engineers all round the place, scouted round the lanes to find clear tracks forward for the bigger fellows, and sometimes had joined in the fighting as well.

Communications had worked reasonably well, with very little delay in getting the recovery people or the fitters forward when they were needed, but sometimes it had been infuriatingly difficult, for some obscure reason, to get hold of the tanks of your own squadron that were nearest to you. Here, again, the extra wireless traffic of a mobile battle had been rough on batteries, which had been running flat. And batteries were big, heavy, bulky things to bring forward.

The best thing had been the wonderful air support. The code arranged with the 'shufti' planes had worked well, and with these eyes working for them the tanks had often got on to their targets in double-quick time. The regiment's diary gives the 'shuftis' a special pat on the back:

Flying over us all the time they had located nearly everything. Gun and tank positions, and but for their invaluable co-operation casualties would have been much higher.

The Kittybomber 'cab ranks' had not been around all the time, but had given spectacular help, coming down and bombing just in the right spots, sometimes only a few hundred yards ahead of our tanks. On 20 October, while pulling back over the [Savio](#), Jerry got the full treatment from the [Air Force](#), and the noise of bombing and strafing and the snarl of engines round the river were almost continuous.

In other ways, too, this had been the noisiest battle anyone could remember. Jerry, in spite of the [Air Force](#), had put down heavy concentrations of shells and Nebelwerfer bombs all over the place, and in return our guns and tanks had fired and fired till the crews were tired out and bemused with noise. Looking back, the battle seemed like a horrible nightmare in which the sequence of events was all mixed up and lost.

The Eighth Army's long-heralded advance across the [Romagna](#) had so far been a pretty dismal failure. In a month it had made no more than 20 miles. Now the Army Commander decided to regroup his divisions and try again. The New Zealanders were to go back into reserve for a while, to train and refit for another crack at Jerry. The beautiful dream of finishing him off before winter had been put right out of everyone's mind now. All were disappointed and disgruntled. Morale in 2 NZ Division was running pretty low; the soldiers' traditional growling held a new, sour note. Only the thought of leaving the cheerless [Romagna](#) now raised the spirits and brought a spark back into the eyes.

¹ [Lt G. V. Binet](#); [Auckland](#); born Aust., 22 Dec 1916; radio mechanic; three times wounded.

² [Lt S. Mason](#); [Palmerston North](#); born [Wellington](#), 10 Jul 1912; truck driver.

³ [Tpr J. A. Smith](#); born [Palmerston North](#), 2 Jul 1920; storeman

⁴ [Tpr L. Armitage](#); [Mataura](#); born [Petone](#), 3 Dec 1914; machine assistant.

⁵ [Tpr F. T. Attwood](#); born NZ 1 Nov 1922; farmhand; died of wounds 20 Oct 1944.

⁶ Tpr M. J. Brady; born [Opotiki](#), 26 Sep 1922; farmhand; died of wounds 21 Oct 1944.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 40 – THROUGH MUD AND WATER TO THE SENIO

CHAPTER 40

Through Mud and Water to the Senio

Away back out of earshot of the guns, where the Esino River winds across a wide basin among the Apennine peaks, many of the Kiwis on their journeys round Italy had passed through Fabriano without giving it a second look. Now 18 Regiment went to live there, and discovered what a fine place it was for freshening up wilted morale.

The soft-skinned convoy had a long day's trip back on 24 October, and the tanks an even longer, freezing cold night's run on transporters. Fabriano had points in its favour from the outset, for after such a trip any place that offered food and rest would have appealed to the boys. But Fabriano, they very soon found out, was also a most profitable and pleasant town in its own right.

Profitable, because in this well-to-do part of Italy the civilians were short of everything except money. The first day a swarm descended on the 18th brandishing large bundles of banknotes, and, as one man put it, 'trying to buy all we possess'. German loot salvaged from the Rimini battlefields, spare food and clothes and boots, everything had its price, though the whole business was highly illegal and would have raised a red-hot rumpus if word of it had spread abroad. But the auction sale—for that is what it developed into—went off without interruption, in a friendly spirit all round, and with few of those wordy battles that often mar such functions.

Pleasant, for many reasons, chiefly the strange, spontaneous bond of sympathy that grew up between the unit and the local people. Here, as nowhere else, the Kiwis were star guests, went freely into civilian homes for meals and parties and sing-songs, and had the best china and silver brought out in their honour. The war had skimmed past these mountains without leaving its trail of wreckage behind, so that the civilians could still look with a kindly eye on foreign soldiers.

And the Kiwis must have almost full marks for their behaviour. It was not all voluntary—a pretty firm discipline was clamped down, with a 10 p.m. curfew, restrictions on the local wineshops, a town picket to squash any disturbance—but all these precautions would have been no good if the mass of soldiers in Fabriano had wanted to be unruly. But they did not. Most of them reacted very well to Fabriano's

hospitality.

There were other ways to spend spare time. Two picture theatres which were packed out every night, Kiwi Concert Party and [ENSA](#) shows, an excellent [4 Brigade](#) concert which included all [18 Regiment's](#) star talent, boxing tournaments, inter-squadron and inter-unit rugby, a unit dance (which was a washout as only half a dozen girls turned up). There was a big [YMCA](#) canteen in town. The ERS ran a class in the Italian language that attracted a crowd of enthusiasts from the regiment.

The Sunday church services, with all the [4 Brigade](#) units together in [Fabriano's](#) ornate Opera House, with a band playing and hundreds of voices singing in unison, were an attraction in themselves, even for those who normally did not care two straws about religious observance. Everyone will remember the Sunday when the boys, on their way to the Opera House, passed a civilian memorial service for their war dead, the main square packed tight with people dressed in their sombre best, an impressive scene indeed.

To add to [Fabriano's](#) attractions, the regiment was billeted, contrary to custom, right in the town. There was no lack of living space, so the billets were good. The houses had electric light and running water, both rare luxuries; some even had baths. Some rooms had stoves or fireplaces, all in continual use, for the weather was miserable.

With winter coming on fast, you could not expect anything better. The first day at [Fabriano](#) it rained, and the second, and the third. The field where the tanks were parked soon became a mud lake. Early November was no better, with cold mists hanging down from the hills, and often heavy frosts in the valley. On 10 November the first snow fell, not very much of it, but enough to cover the ground briefly with a thin white blanket.

Here at [Fabriano](#) the burden of work lay very lightly on the regiment. For the first week everyone concentrated on giving tanks and trucks and gear a good clean-up and overhaul. After that, theoretically, training began; but there was actually very little except occasional squadron route marches up into the hills. The unit ran refresher courses in wireless, driving and maintenance. All the tank guns were carefully 'T & A'd', and the gunners had a little practice at [4 Brigade's](#) range outside

the town. There was a particular interest here, for the unit had just acquired four Shermans with 17-pounder guns, and their performance had everyone quite excited. Now at last it seemed that the Shermans had a gun that could even things up with the Tigers.

There was a little more leave now, and more men were able to have an overdue holiday. Parties went off to [Florence](#), to a rest camp outside [Rome](#), to a new [YMCA](#) camp at [Riccione](#); though the war diary comments, 'The latter not so popular as it is half way to the front and extremely cold, besides everyone is very satisfied here.'

They would have been hard to please if they had not been satisfied. They could, they felt at the time, have happily sat out the war lotus-eating at [Fabriano](#).

As November slipped into its second half, talk of the next move grew and snowballed. As usual, it began with quiet rumours, many of them from the civilians, who always seemed to know everything in advance; then it gradually became common talk in canteens and cookhouses; then advance parties went off along Route 76 towards the coast, and then it was only a question of a day or two. The farewells here were very difficult, and there were floods of tears from the [Fabriano](#) women, who had taken the boys to their hearts. But the war could not be won in these friendly little Apennine towns. Farther north there was a hard struggle going on, and battles were still to be fought before [18 Regiment's](#) work was done.

So off went the regiment on its travels, the tank transporters with their loads after lunch on 22 November, the soft-skinned convoy early on the 24th. You would hardly have known the unit that had trailed wearily south a month earlier. The rest had done wonders, tanks and trucks were bright and clean, the boys had regained their old bounce. Now they were bound for [Cesena](#), which meant that they would soon be in the thick of it again. The farewells over, [Fabriano](#) had to be pushed into the background of the mind and attention fixed on the next job.

This did not promise to be attractive. [Rimini](#) and the plains beyond looked greyer and more cheerless than ever, now that most of the foliage had gone and left only bare gnarled willows and sad, drooping vines. The stopping place near [Cesena](#) was a bare field where the men pitched bivvies on the mud, quite a jolt to the system after the luxury of the past month. The old jam-tin brazier, unused for

months, suddenly came out again, for there were no cosy stoves here, and it was cold and raw and damp.

The front now ran along the [Lamone](#), another of those [Romagna](#) rivers that writhed over the plain, cutting across Route 9 and the railway, then wandering on north-east between high stopbanks. The lifeline of the front was Route 9 and the railway—but for them it would have been an appalling job to maintain a line in such a mud hole. Route 9 ran as straight as a ruler forward from [Cesena](#), through the big town of [Forli](#), now chock-a-block with reserve and rear-line troops, then over the [Lamone](#) to [Faenza](#), whose roofs and towers dominated the stopbank for several hundred yards on both sides of the road.

In the last month the battle had moved on only 20 miles. It was still the same old slogging match, and still the Eighth Army was pounding away, losing precious men and ammunition on penny gains to obey the call of wider strategy and keep as many Germans as possible tied down and away from the main front in [Europe](#). Now 2 NZ Division, coming in fresh and ready for battle, was to press on and press on until winter closed down. What would happen then nobody dared think about. After that last winter at [Orsogna](#) the boys had sworn that they could never stand another; now it seemed as if they would have to.

On 26 November, when the regiment moved up through [Forli](#) to the [Lamone](#) front, the tank crews had a taste of what they were in for. Nearly every unit in the Division seemed to be on the move at the same time. Traffic was dense and driving difficult. Only Route 9 could be called a road; all the others were just long muddy puddles. The clouds were louring, and in the afternoon it began to pour. By then A and B Squadrons were reasonably well settled in the line, A Squadron with 6 Brigade just north of Route 9, B with 21 Battalion on 6 Brigade's right, the men crowded into farmhouses, the tanks parked in the yards. But C Squadron, on its way to 22 Battalion on the extreme right, was out of luck. It was turned off the road into the fields to let 6 Brigade traffic through, and there the rain and failing light caught it out in the open, with no hope of carrying on in the dark. A few of its crews found shelter in buildings, but most spent a miserable wet night in their tanks or bivvies. By morning the lanes were awash, a detour ahead was completely ruined, and C Squadron had no option but to stay put. Two tanks from Squadron Headquarters tried to force their way through; one broke a track, and the only one to make the full

distance was Major Laurie's, which, says the squadron's battle report, 'negotiated a field with the greatest difficulty to swing wide of the obstruction'. Not till 28 November, after the engineers had put a Bailey bridge over the bad detour, did two troops of C Squadron at last make their way up to 22 Battalion.

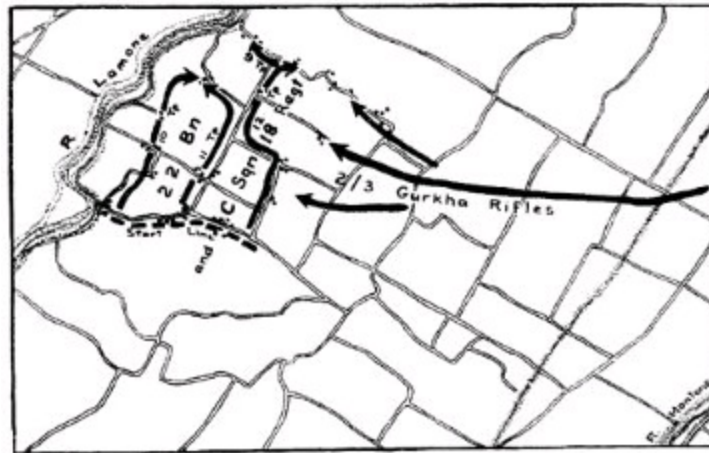
The other two troops spread out into a gun line among the willows, faced north, and prepared to shoot right across 22 Battalion from left to right. An unusual proceeding, this. But then the situation here on the [Lamone](#) was a bit unusual. As soon as the rain-swollen river fell to manageable size the Kiwis were to cross it and drive Jerry a little farther back. Hard on 22 Battalion's right flank, on our side of the river, was a pocket of Germans, well armed and full of fight; this pocket had to go, and urgently, for it would be a nuisance and a danger to the attackers.

Bringing the tanks' guns to bear on this pocket was quite a feat. The regiment could now justly boast that it had brought indirect firing up to a fine art; but never before had any of its tanks, from three miles back, scored direct hits on houses not 200 yards from their own OP. In this flat country where you could not see past the next line of trees, any OP farther back would have been useless. This of C Squadron's was right under Jerry's nose, in a house occupied by a Gurkha platoon, and the men living in it swore they could feel the wind of the 75-millimetre shells passing low overhead. They felt more than wind, too, when Jerry retaliated with heavy mortars all round the house.

Apart from this shooting, plus a few rounds over the [Lamone](#) here and there, there was not much profit in the first two days. Jerry had some self-propelled guns just over the river and plenty of heavier stuff behind, and switched his attention impartially all over the place. Our own artillery fired reluctantly, for 25-pounder ammunition, so the story ran, was getting woefully short again. The boys filled in their leisure searching for firewood with indifferent success, and collecting fowls and pigs and wine, which helped the war along a great deal, official rations not being the best at the moment. Civilians were rounded up from their farms and sent off in voluble, resentful truckloads to the comparative safety of [Forli](#).

All this time a surprise was being worked out for the Germans in the pocket. The only way to persuade them to leave, it seemed, was to go in and push them out in person. A company of 22 Battalion was to do this, moving out to the right, parallel to

the Lamone, with C Squadron in close attendance. At the



C SQN 18 REGT & 22 BN ATTACK, 30 NOVEMBER 1944

C Sqn 18 Regt & 22 Bn Attack, 30 November 1944

same time Gurkhas of 10 Indian Division would attack straight towards the Lamone on 22 Battalion's right and link up with the Kiwis. This T-shaped attack had an awkward feel about it

and sounded dangerously apt to lead to a mix-up; on the map it looked even worse.

But in spite of thick misty rain, mines, demolitions and Jerry, it went off very well. First the 25-pounders and 'Long Toms' bombarded Jerry's houses. Then 10, 11 and 12 Troops of C Squadron helped the infantry forward from house to house, first turning their guns on the buildings, then covering them while the 22 Battalion men went in and dragged out any Germans who cared to resist. There were not many, except on the left flank, where Second-Lieutenant Norman Shillito's 10 Troop, working along the river, struck Spandau fire from holes in the stopbank. From the shelter of a farm a self-propelled gun tackled Lieutenant Hugh McLean's 11 Troop, but retired when the pace got too hot. A few dejected prisoners were rounded up from some of the houses; more of them got away over the bank into the riverbed under the cover of the mist and smoke. Towards the end of the attack Lieutenant Barber's 9 Troop, coming up the centre into the forefront, escorted the infantry forward to the house that was its final objective.

The B Squadron tanks, with an OP in the tower of a house overlooking the river, were also in the party. At one stage they chased away a Spandau that had been causing 22 Battalion a lot of worry.

By 4 p.m. the job was done. Infantry and tanks had advanced nearly three-quarters of a mile downstream, which was pretty good, as the ground was so sodden and treacherous that the tank commanders had to brave the Spandaus and 'recce' forward on foot most of the way. Ploughed ground had been quite impossible. One tank had lost a track in the mud, another in a minefield. For the last few hundred yards there had been no opposition except mortar 'stonks'. None of the attackers had been hurt; the only casualties were two of the 17-pounder tank crew wounded by shell splinters back at C Squadron headquarters.

Everyone was pleased with this effort, including [General Freyberg](#), who wrote in his diary that it was a 'good show— excellent co-operation by all arms'. There had been no misunderstandings with the Indians, and by nightfall the [Gurkhas](#) were in a line of houses only about 300 yards from 22 Battalion. By this time some 'tank-busters' had come up to take over from the Shermans, which pulled back for the night to some of the less battered houses just behind the front.

The way to the [Lamone](#) was clear now, but plans were changing, and the New Zealand attack over the river was 'off'. Instead, the British 46 Division was to cross farther south, away out to the left of Route 9. Later the Kiwis were to move in behind 46 Division, push through and carry on where the British left off, taking the attack forward over the next river, an insignificant little ditch called the [Senio](#).

In the meantime the regiment had some busy days by the [Lamone](#). A Squadron on Route 9 shot down [Faenza](#)'s towers and belfries, which stuck up above the rooftops, lovely OPs for Jerry, much too good to be left standing. Captain Passmore was chief tower-demolisher—his technique of firing several armour-piercing shells, followed by armour-piercing high explosive, at one side of the tower seemed to give first-class results. Lieutenant Oxbrow's 12 Troop of C Squadron dealt with another tower just over the river from 22 Battalion in the little village of [Ronco](#).

All the squadrons took their share in 'tickling up' Jerry's houses and headquarters and supply routes, and in trying to demolish dugouts in the [Lamone](#)

stopbank. On the night of 3 December, when 46 Division attacked across the river, 2 NZ Division, tanks and all, put over a big barrage to divert Jerry's attention and keep him guessing, and this was repeated next day, when [18 Regiment](#) shot off 6200 shells, a record (it claimed) for any New Zealand armoured regiment in one day. That day was particularly noisy, all the guns pounding away, Jerry replying with the full weight of his defensive fire on both sides of the river, the [Air Force](#) queueing up to roar down on to Jerry's side, the little 'shufti' planes adding their drone to the medley of noise.

But not every day was like this. All too often the clouds closed down, the planes had to stay at home, the tanks stopped firing because they could not see what they were shooting at. More than that, after the vast heaps of ammunition shot away on 3 and 4 December, [18 Regiment](#) suddenly found itself faced with rationing, the first of a series of shortages that was to harass it all through the winter.

Most of the time, apart from a few spasms of activity, Jerry's shelling was very moderate. About 7 December he seemed to have worked out exactly where the regiment's tanks were, for he threw a lot of heavy stuff straight at them, including great 170-millimetre and 210-millimetre shells that shook the houses. One salvo landed just in the wrong place, killing Trooper Bob Dodds ¹ and wounding another man, and damaging two tanks in C Squadron's gun line.

There were few other incidents to remember. One day a tank from C Squadron headquarters, on its way up to the forward positions, hit a mine and was a complete write-off. Another evening half a dozen German planes, the first for a long time, suddenly came racing over just above the treetops in a hit-and-run raid somewhere to the rear. Then occasionally the [Air Force](#) sent over its rocket-firing Thunderbolt fighters against Jerry's line on the [Lamone](#), and everyone watched enthralled as they dived, then seemed to pull up short in mid-air with the shock as their rockets went away.

So life went on, pretty easily for the most part, until 12 December, and now the next move was imminent. South of [Faenza](#) 46 Division was well across the [Lamone](#), but only after stiff fighting and at heavy cost. Now the Tommies were fought almost to a standstill, and 2 NZ Division was to carry out its part in the scheme. The first murmur of this penetrated to the [Lamone](#) front about 8 December; then it was

postponed, and then postponed again, and finally 13 December was the day.

Meantime the New Zealand infantry had shifted out little by little, and [10 Indian Division](#) had side-slipped to the left to take its place, so that from 8 December the regiment was working with [Gurkhas](#) instead of 22 Battalion. The [18th](#) liked the [Gurkhas](#). Happy memories of the [Melfa](#) and [Liri](#) hills seven months ago still lingered. Good types, said the boys, and a lot less critical than our own Kiwi infantry.

When the time came for the move, it took hours of hard work to get the regiment back on to firm ground. The soft-skinned vehicles finally got away at 8 a.m. on 13 December. The pace was deadly slow. For two hours the tanks sat and waited, lined up in the lanes, the crews champing at the bit and hoping that no shells would come over. What on earth, they thought, were the people ahead playing at? Then they moved on across Route 9, and discovered the reason for the hold-up.

All up and down [Italy](#) the Division had struck all types of roads, some good, some indifferent, some downright dreadful; but this road to the [Lamone](#) was the champion of the lot. It startled even the oldest hands. In a desperate, urgent effort to keep supplies up to 46 Division the engineers had hacked the road out of cattle tracks, fields and river marshes. They had blown down houses and dumped tons of brick and rubble on top of the mud; they had put down hundreds of tree trunks; they had built Bailey bridges under Jerry's nose. They had shored up the ditches beside the track, and still these caved in under the weight of passing trucks. Sappers had to toil continuously to keep the road open.

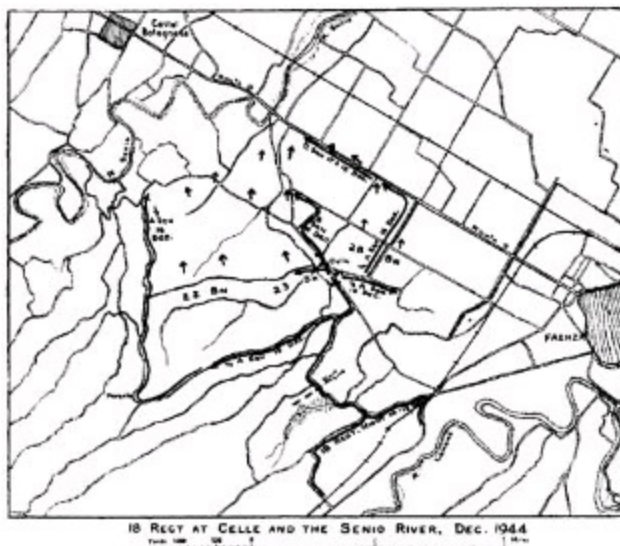
Along this incredible road the whole of the regiment had to pass. No wonder the 14-mile move took all day. The convoy crept along at walking pace, past dozens of trucks lying forlornly with wheels in the air, past gang after gang of workers. One man wrote, 'There were Itais, Basutas, Indians, Tommys, Kiwis building the track up as each tank went past.' They had to, for at the soft places every tank left its quota of damage. By the [Lamone](#), where the road came into Jerry's view, the unit went through a smoke screen specially laid for it, a thick grey fog that blotted everything out except the few yards immediately round you. Not a shell came near throughout the move, and everyone breathed freely again, for that road had an evil reputation.

The attack to break out of 46 Division's bridgehead and storm the [Senio River](#)

was to be on the night of 14 December, exactly a year after that tremendous [Sfasciata Ridge](#) attack which so many of the [18th](#) still recalled with a shudder. This next 'do' did not promise to be any easier. The roads here were worse, if anything, than back behind the [Lamone](#)— narrow, rutted, deep in mud, full of shell-holes and craters, edged with wide ditches. The whole place was infested with mines. Jerry was shelling the bridgehead heavily and often, and dropping Nebelwerfer 'stonks' on to the roads. And he was said to have anything up to forty Mark IV tanks and some Tigers lurking ahead. So you could not blame anyone for being lukewarm about this attack, though at the same time nobody wanted to be long in the overcrowded bridgehead in raw, damp weather.

Supplies were going to be a problem. The [18th](#) had come in loaded to the gunwales with extra ammunition, extra petrol and all the food it could carry, but that would not last long. For the first time since the dim distant days of [Terelle](#) and the Rapido valley all supplies would have to be run in by jeep convoys. Every possible jeep was pressed into service, and more were borrowed through [4 Brigade](#).

The night attack was to be made mainly by the infantry, with the tanks split up among 5 Brigade's units; half of Captain Passmore's A Squadron with the Maoris on the right flank and half with 22 Battalion on the left; B Squadron (now commanded by Major Laurie) with 23 Battalion in the centre, where the fighting was expected to be very heavy. The squadrons were not to be 'under command' of their battalions this



18 Regt at Celle and The Senio River, Dec. 1944

time, but 'in support', a change welcomed by squadron and troop commanders after their experiences at [Florence](#) and the [Rubicon](#). Lieutenant-Colonel [Thomas](#)² of 23 Battalion, in particular, was said to demand impossible feats from his tanks, forgetting that their crews were not superhuman, or the tanks lightweights like jeeps.

At dawn on 15 December Major Deans's C Squadron was to go through and charge the [Senio](#) alone, with infantry following up behind. This idea had a suicidal sound about it. 'What a prospect!' commented one man. 'Jerry tanks, S.P.s & bazookas to contend with. Lovely!' However, C Squadron could drag some comfort from the news that, as soon as it was light enough, the [Air Force](#) was to lay on a massive assault with all the planes it could produce.

There was barely time to get ready for the attack. Fuel and ammunition dumps had to be made in a hurry—two men from the Reconnaissance Troop, while clearing sites for these, had their feet mangled by those vile little wooden mines which were so hard to detect. Detailed orders took all 14 December to arrange, and even at zero hour the squadron and troop officers were still poring over maps and aerial photos by dim candlelight.

The plan of action revolved round a tiny village called [Celle](#), another of those wayside churches with a house or two clustered round it. Here several roads met in a knot, and it looked a potential bottleneck, for 28 and 23 Battalions' tanks would all have to go that way before fanning out to join the infantry. It was on C Squadron's road forward too. More than that, the whole regiment had only one road to move up, and a mere lane at that, winding up and over a ridge and diagonally down to the flat below, then coming out on to another road that ran dead straight for [Celle](#) church. Those who had been up to the top of the ridge for a cautious look reported that this lane (what they could see of it) looked churned up and exposed and generally undesirable.

Right on the dot of 11 p.m. the darkness cracked wide open as the guns spoke up. 'Colossal barrage,' said [18 Regiment](#)'s war diary admiringly. The clear frosty night was ablaze with searchlights, the gun flashes all melting into one another, the ominous answering flashes from over Jerry's way. As the barrage moved forward and the infantry slipped away into the dark, the B Squadron tanks on the ridge, and A

Squadron down in the [Lamone](#) valley, made ready to follow.

Both squadrons began badly. Lieutenant Harry Hodge's 5 Troop of B Squadron, farthest forward up the ridge, was at once caught in a torrent of shells, apparently ours. Second-Lieutenant Duff Hewett ³ was killed by a shellburst, one tank was hit in the radiator, and it was some time before the tanks could move at all. Another B Squadron troop took a wrong turning on the way up the ridge and had to reverse gingerly along the narrow road. In A Squadron, Captain Passmore was wounded within half an hour. Then the 17-pounder tank was hit and went over a bank, ending up with three of its crew dead—a real tragedy, for great things were expected from these 17-pounders. Halfway up the ridge a big crater gaped in the road, with just enough room for the Shermans to inch round the side of it. When they at last got under way it was at a dead slow pace, groping ahead in single file with long halts, the tank commanders braving our own and Jerry's shelling to walk ahead and point out the way, and sometimes to find out where the infantry had got to. The tanks had to keep strictly to the lane, for the fields, besides being chock-a-block with mines, were soft and soggy. From the top of the rise you could see everything being thrown round down below, shells and tracer and flares. A magnificent spectacle, if only you did not have to go down into it.

About 3 a.m. the head of B Squadron's procession was on the final straight leading to [Celle](#), first [Second-Lieutenant Angus McMaster's](#) ⁴ 6 Troop (now only one tank, the other two having been put out of action by the shelling), with Second-Lieutenant Graham Kendall's 8 Troop just behind. But now came the worst check yet. Not 200 yards from the church the road was lit up by blazing haystacks on both sides, right under the muzzles of a nest of German tanks or anti-tank guns that were pumping shells straight down the road, just clearing the Shermans. Up in [Celle](#) 23 Battalion was calling over the wireless for help, and away in the rear 5 Brigade and even [Divisional Headquarters](#) were urging the Shermans to get on; but as matters stood this just could not be done. Second-Lieutenant McMaster says:

I did a foot recce up the road and was firmly convinced that once my tanks got between the haystacks I would be potted like a sitting duck and still block the road with a brewed up tank. My Sergeant Johnny [Boys](#) ⁵ now joined me.... Together we explored the ground to left and right of the road but ... it was not possible for tanks to negotiate it.

Then Second-Lieutenant Kendall takes up the story:

Towards first light the stacks had burned down somewhat and in we went at intervals and fast, meeting no opposition or fire that I remember.

By this time, according to report, [Celle](#) was ours; but the infantry seemed to be milling round uneasily, some had come back out of the village earlier and now went in again with the tanks. McMaster's tank pulled in behind the church. Kendall's headed past it, but round the far corner of the church came suddenly face to face with a big Mark IV. It is hard to tell who got the bigger shock. The Mark IV fired a round or two into the air, then, before the Shermans could bring their guns round, it took off in haste along a side road out of [Celle](#) and vanished behind a row of trees. Kendall's troop went in behind a ruined house on the left of the road, and after this brief spurt of activity [Celle](#) quietened down again, while the tankies nosed round trying to find out what the infantry proposed to do. This was one of those particularly shaggy shows where nobody knew where anyone was or what was happening.

The next move was Jerry's. All this time he had been hovering just past the outskirts of [Celle](#). Now the 23 Battalion boys in the village were thrown into some confusion as two Mark IV tanks, with infantry in attendance, came towards [Celle](#) and milled round firing into the houses.

The Sherman crews knew nothing of this until it was all over, which was typical of this [Celle](#) mix-up. Our guns were still thundering, wireless reception was bad, there were build- ings in the way, German shells were dropping, battle smoke hung over [Celle](#). The report that German infantry were around finally came back to Second-Lieutenant McMaster, who moved his tank round the church and knocked big chunks off a house at the far end of the village, striking some panic into the enemy, who left smartly. About the same time the Mark IV tanks went too, urged on by a huge artillery 'stonk' that fell just in the right place.

But this event brought to an angry head the feud between the senior officers of [18 Regiment](#) and 23 Battalion that had been simmering since [Florence](#). The 23 Battalion company commanders, reporting what had happened, accused the [18th](#) of reluctance to get out and face Jerry. Colonel Thomas was outspoken about it; if B

Squadron had been under his command, he said, this would never have happened. Colonel Ferguson and Major Laurie hotly disputed this. The 18th, they asserted, had never been afraid to go after any German tank—a statement which the regiment's record fully bore out.

However, Jerry evidently realised that there was little future in his counter-attacks, for he pulled back a little and tried to pulverise Celle with artillery instead. Early in the day a direct hit immobilised McMaster's tank and wounded Sergeant Boys. All day the Celle crossroads was a perilous and unpleasant spot. Towards midday Lieutenant Hodge came through with the three tanks of 5 Troop, as it was now high time to get some tanks past Celle so that 23 Battalion might not be left high and dry.

Hodge's troop, moving on downhill after its bad luck at the opening of the attack, had spent a confused, infuriating night, held up by the delay in Celle and unable to find out what was happening ahead. At one stage it had helped to pass back some of 23 Battalion's prisoners, already efficiently stripped of their valuables by the infantry. Towards dawn Hodge had tried to bypass Celle by going up and over a rise on the left, but this was hopeless, and the only result was a bogged-down tank. Now the troop came up through Celle and on to a small cemetery 200 yards ahead, by a road that ran straight forward into unknown country. In the afternoon B Squadron's 17-pounder tank came through too, and moved out along a side road to join 23 Battalion's leading platoons.

There was not much for the tanks to do except just to be there. The Air Force was all over the sky, swooping on any movement in the enemy lines. A house 500 yards past the cemetery, which had been the headquarters for Jerry's counter-attacks, was 'done over' by the 17-pounder tank, and the Kittybombers came down and bombed it almost to the ground. This support was a bit close for the boys' liking, but they appreciated it later, when a self-propelled gun, burnt out and still smoking, was found in the ruins.

In the early morning hours, when B Squadron was held up at Celle, A Squadron was extended in single file over the crest of the lane and down the hill, half frozen, in the thick of Jerry's shelling, not knowing what was likely to happen the next minute. To A Squadron the attack seemed a washout. Besides the 17-pounder it had

already lost another tank on a mine. Eventually Maori guides turned up and tried to direct their half-squadron forward, but it was clear that [28 Battalion](#) would be lucky if it got any tanks. Its companies were away to the right across the fields. In turn Second-Lieutenant Speakman's 2 Troop and [Second-Lieutenant Wood's](#) ⁶ 4 Troop tried the paddocks, but they might as well have saved their fuel. Once off the lane they could not move five yards. One tank bogged down hopelessly, the rest gave up trying. They could only wait till the way through [Celle](#) was open.

It was 10 a.m. before 2 and 4 Troops could go forward. They went up through [Celle](#) and doubled back towards 28 Battalion, but too late, for the Maoris had already been counter-attacked and had lost most of their hard-won stretch of mud. But they were very glad to see the Shermans, which always kept Jerry more respectful. The Maoris, like 23 Battalion, were full of stories of Tigers ahead, and very worried about them.

The next hour or two, according to Speakman, were 'rather hectic as we positioned ourselves behind whatever cover we could get'. Both troops gave the ground in front a good shelling, for Jerry was skulking about nearby. No Tigers came in sight; the only German tank to show its nose was a Mark IV which insisted on making a nuisance of itself from a crossroads in front. No. 2 Troop tackled this tank and scored a few hits, but the Mark IV stood its ground and hit one Sherman, killing Corporal Sammy O'Donnell. ⁷ The 'Long Toms' had a go at it; its crew baled out and the Maoris chased them to cover with machine guns; and Captain Brosnan moved in with a 17-pounder tank and finished off the Mark IV.

This was an encouraging beginning, but the rest of the day did not live up to this promise. Two Shermans stuck fast on the lawn of the [Villa Palermo](#), the biggest house in the area, which sheltered nearly a whole Maori company. When the initial fireworks quietened down 2 Troop went forward, combed the ground carefully, and fired at anything suspicious, but Jerry kept out of sight and gave no more targets away until dusk, when he sallied out from [Faenza](#) with a tank or two. Two Shermans moved out against him, but with no result, except that one was bogged and had to be abandoned away out in no-man's land. Jerry's counter-attack (if it was one at all) seemed to have no enthusiasm or drive behind it, and eventually faded away into the dark, helped along by salvos from our artillery.

Over on the left, with 22 Battalion, Captain Wright's half of A Squadron had quite a satisfactory and interesting day. It was able to dodge [Celle](#), for the road to 22 Battalion turned off well short of the village, and climbed another ridge running back at an angle, straight away from [Faenza](#). This was a road only by courtesy, narrow and nasty like all the others, sown with mines along the edges, but farther from the storm centre, and not such a favoured target for Jerry's shells. By dawn both 1 and 3 Troops were well out to the left along the ridge, 'married up' with 22 Battalion and sitting quite comfortably in farmyards. Hard on their heels came Second-Lieutenant Shillito's 10 Troop of C Squadron, groping its way up alone in the dark to reinforce the position and add extra fire power— for this ridge was a commanding position above the valley floor, giving a view into Jerry's territory behind [Celle](#) and right down to the [Senio River](#).

The attack on this side had not been so keenly contested, and Jerry did not seem so well under control here, for quite a number of stray Germans were wandering round, evidently happily unaware that there were any Kiwis so near. During the morning a few of them were scooped up. One or two snipers out beyond the ridge developed a nasty habit of shooting round the houses whenever there was too much movement, but they were a long way off and were only a minor nuisance. No. 1 Troop, the farthest out along the ridge, moved farther out to the left with its infantry and tackled some houses on the flank.

As the day progressed, the tankies up on the ridge had a rare view of the activity in enemy territory, which rose to fever pitch in the afternoon as he tried to get his tanks and transport away to the north, hampered all the time by the watchful [Air Force](#). A Mark IV tank that popped up on a low rise ahead of 1 Troop was promptly put out of action by the Shermans, and (so the local civilians said) had to be towed away after dark. From time to time 3 and 10 Troops had a crack at vehicles out beyond [Celle](#), which B Squadron from its lower viewpoint probably could not see, though it was much closer. No. 10 Troop scored a valuable trophy, a self-propelled gun. Second-Lieutenant Shillito remembers the day:

Our friend in the S/P gun hove into sight.... He made for a house & the crew evacuated smartly & we were able to give the vehicle a good pasting. Soon after a small car came along the same road & the A Squadron troop got a direct hit. We had

great pleasure in seeing the occupants take a dive into what we hoped was a very cold wet ditch. An ambulance made a suspiciously large number of trips along the same road but was not engaged.

Next day, when the war moved forward again, the corpse of the self-propelled gun was still there by the farmhouse.

The attack, which from a worm's-eye view looked an awful mess, had in fact been a brilliant infantry feat. In the morning long lines of prisoners, most of them stupefied by the crushing weight of the barrage, plodded back through the tanks. The barrage seemed to have caught a lot of Germans out in the open, judging by the number of dead that littered the lanes— one chronicler laconically remarks in his diary, 'Ran over some. Couldn't be helped.' The attack had bashed a great dent in a heavily defended line. But only a dent, not a hole. Before dawn it was clear that C Squadron would not be able to burst through on its dash to the [Senio](#); so the squadron, after moving up through all the shellfire, had nothing to do but wait in reserve all day.

Punching the dent into a hole was largely the task of the Air Force on 15 December. In clear weather that just suited them, our planes flew overhead, pouncing whenever a target appeared. That night, after enduring a day's air and artillery hammering such as he could seldom have struck anywhere, Jerry fell back again, and the danger of counter-attack was practically over. By this time the Shermans at [Celle](#) had been relieved by anti-tank guns towed up by Honey tanks, and the tired crews were able to relax.

After all that, the advance to the [Senio](#) on 16 December was like a country stroll. On the left, Wright's half of A Squadron set off as soon as it was light enough to see, following its only road out to the left, through territory occupied by the Indians, then back on its tracks into 22 Battalion's area again. In the centre, B Squadron pushed on from [Celle](#) close behind 23 Battalion, making for the bridge where Route 9 crossed the [Senio](#). By midday both battalions, with the tanks in close attendance, were up to the river. A Squadron had picked up a dozen prisoners, more or less by accident, and a series of little demolitions and mines had slowed the tanks up, but only at the [Senio](#) crossing did Jerry offer any active resistance. There some of the B Squadron tanks came into action and shelled a little group of buildings and a

prominent church where Jerry was holding on stubbornly. The Route 9 bridge, of course, was blown before any Kiwis came within reach.

The main centre of action had now swung over to the right wing, where Jerry, though he had given up [Faenza](#), was still holding fast to a mile or two of ground north of Route 9. The Maoris, easing their way forward at right angles to the rest of 5 Brigade, reached Route 9, their half of A Squadron (now under Captain Nelson) up with the leading platoons. Jerry, resenting this threat to his positions north of the road, brought down some heavy 'stonks' on to infantry and tanks; the Shermans blew holes in a few houses as they went forward, more as a precaution than anything else, and 2 Troop tackled a German tank that appeared briefly a long way ahead, but it vanished without waiting to fight it out. Both troops had quite a struggle to get through thick minefields that barred the approach to Route 9.

For 17 and 18 December the story was much the same. Beyond Route 9, [6 Brigade](#) took up the running, and had a very bloody little battle to clear out those awkward Germans who did not want to go; C Squadron and [Nelson's](#) half of A Squadron fired many shells on to Jerry north of [Faenza](#) and knocked down several more houses. Lieutenant McLean's troop of C Squadron went up on the heels of a bombardment, with a Maori platoon, to occupy a house just across Route 9, and found that Jerry had left in a hurry, but he gave the house a regular pounding all that night. From 23 Battalion's foremost posts on Route 9, some 500 yards short of the [Senio](#), Lieutenant Barber's troop shot up the houses by the bridge, where German infantry was still moving round occasionally. But by and large, cleaning up the country between [Faenza](#) and the [Senio](#) was an infantry job, and the Shermans found nothing in it of more than passing interest.

Looking back on this big attack later, there seemed to be an unreal quality about it that had not been there in earlier shows. Perhaps it was that desperately difficult night move along the lanes, worse than anything since [Sfasciata Ridge](#) a year earlier. Perhaps it was the incredible barrage, the biggest and noisiest (so the old hands said) in all [Italy](#), which churned up the ground like the [Somme](#) battlefields of the Great War, which left behind it more dead Germans than the boys had ever seen, and some of the most heart-rending sights they could ever expect to see, five dead nuns in a little roadside convent, the bodies of a whole Italian family huddled together in a barn.

However, here they were now, after ploughing through all that mud and water, facing one more river. A miserable little creek, this [Senio](#), not half the size of the [Lamone](#) or the [Savio](#) or many others they could remember. A couple of days should see them across it, and then the whole business could begin all over again.

¹ Tpr W. R. Dodds; born NZ 18 Jul 1922; farm labourer; killed in action 7 Dec 1944.

² Lt-Col W. B. Thomas, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d., Silver Star (US); [London](#); born [Nelson](#), 29 Jun 1918; bank officer; CO 23 Bn Jun-Aug 1944, Oct 1944-May 1945; 22 Bn ([Japan](#)) Oct 1945-Nov 1946; wounded and p.w. 25 May 1941; escaped Nov 1941; returned to unit May 1942; twice wounded; Hampshire Regt 1947-.

³ 2 Lt B. D. Hewett; born NZ 9 Aug 1906; farmer; killed in action 14 Dec 1944.

⁴ Capt H. A. McMaster, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born NZ 6 Feb 1909; salesman.

⁵ Sgt J. H. Boys; [Dargaville](#); born Kirikopuni, 10 May 1921; chainman; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

⁶ Lt E. C. Wood; [Ranfurly](#); born Clyde, 13 Jul 1911; carpenter.

⁷ Cpl D. A. O'Donnell; born NZ 15 Nov 1918; labourer; wounded 31 May 1944; killed in action 15 Dec 1944.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 41 – DARK WINTER

CHAPTER 41

Dark Winter

Three and a half months later 2 NZ Division, with a dull, frozen, profitless winter behind it, was still sitting behind the [Senio River](#).

These months saw the Kiwis at a pretty low ebb—not only [18 Regiment](#), but all of them. As at [Orsogna](#), so here at this wretched little [Senio](#), real winter came down with a swoop, and everyone had to bow to it. In the cheerless farmhouses, or in their billets in [Faenza](#) or [Forli](#), the boys spent an uninspiring Christmas and New Year, forcing their spirits up with lots of food and drink and as much gaiety as they could muster; then came the snow, and thousands of trucks and tanks and jeeps and boots churned it into slush, and the mud and the gloom deepened. It was worse than at [Orsogna](#), for instead of the clear mountain air you had the foggy damp of the plains that got into your throat and your lungs and your very bones. Everyone had perpetual colds, and nobody had enough to do. Even up in the front line time hung heavily; back out of action it was worse. It was a long, long winter.

After ushering the infantry forward to the [Senio](#) on 16 December the regiment did not linger long in the front line, but went back to [Faenza](#) rather untidily, troop by troop or even tank by tank. The war diary on 20 December records: 'Squadron remnants drifting into the town and "acquiring" accommodation.' Only C Squadron stayed forward on Route 9, amusing itself from time to time by shooting at the towers in the little town of [Castel Bolognese](#) just across the [Senio](#)—'bowling' towers had become quite a pastime in the regiment, and a matter of rivalry between gunners. On Boxing Day B Squadron went up, hangover and all, and took over from C, which came back to [Faenza](#) for a delayed Christmas dinner and its quota of sore heads, while B Squadron finished off the unfortunate Bolognese towers.

Comfortable as the [Faenza](#) billets were (and they were as good as the [18th](#) had struck) nobody really liked the place. At the best of times it was a flat, unattractive town. Now, oppressed by the bitter dead cold, deserted by most of its citizens, it had lost what little beauty it might have had. And Jerry had a habit of tossing just one shell, or perhaps two, into its streets every now and then, and about Christmas time he took to sending lone planes over at night to drop a bomb or two among the

houses, all this amounting to nothing very lethal, but enough to keep [Faenza](#) a little on edge.

So the regiment was quite glad to hand over its light front-line duties to the 19th on the morning of 30 December, collect up all its spare parts, and go back to the greater peace of [Forli](#), the B Echelon town. A freezing trip, this, with passing skiffs of snow, presaging the main winter fall a week later.

But [Forli](#), half ruined and bulging at the seams with a very mixed collection of soldiers, was no more attractive than [Faenza](#). It was the same flat, ugly industrial town. Certainly there were more ways of killing time there. There were a [NAAFI](#) canteen and a picture theatre, both always overcrowded with Tommies and Kiwis. There were the unit's own [YMCA](#) and messrooms and cookhouses, for the whole regiment now had one of its rare spells together. There were New Year parties, farewell parties for the 'old hands' leaving for New Zealand, and parties to celebrate nothing in particular except the existence of a big wine factory up the road, full of stocks that needed drinking up before they got too old or someone else beat you to them. There were occasional dances turned on by the squadrons—for, unlike [Faenza](#), this place was full of civilians. But all these pleasures had no sparkle. Outwardly and inwardly, this was the depth of winter indeed. Even football palled. More and more you tended to slip into a universal lassitude, and the only remedy that suggested itself was to toast your feet over a blazing earthenware stove acquired from a factory in the town, or a smoky, home-made diesel drip burner made from a 17-pounder shellcase, play cards and guzzle 'plonk'.

As usual, the less the boys had to do, the less they wanted to do anything. Of course they automatically looked after their tanks and trucks and kept them in good trim, for this was as much a matter of course as washing and shaving; but it was not all smooth sailing just now, for spare parts for the tanks were scarcer than they had ever been, and for jeeps you just could not get any. What other training had to be done—route-marching, grenade throwing, rifle and Tommy-gun shooting on the range—was done grudgingly, and you were apt to grab the flimsiest excuse for dodging it. Discipline was well down from its usual level. Luckily, good-sized parties of men were able to get away on leave to the saner atmosphere of [Rome](#), [Florence](#), [Riccione](#), [Fabriano](#) (a private arrangement, this last, and very much appreciated); even to a [YMCA](#) rest camp in [Forli](#) itself, just round the corner. This one raised a

laugh when it was offered, but men went there just the same, if only for the comfort of hot baths and a night or two in real beds with sheets.

Then February came, and the regiment, listlessly and without excitement, put its gear together for another spell by the [Senio](#). On successive nights A, C and B Squadrons went up, all the tanks on transporters which splashed their ponderous way through the soft, thawing snow. And so into position with [6 Brigade](#) on the right of Route 9—A Squadron with 24 and 25 Battalions nearly three miles farther north than the [18th](#) had been before, C Squadron into a gun line just off Route 9, B Squadron into reserve, A Echelon to [Faenza](#), B Echelon still in [Forli](#).

In the bleak white [Senio](#) fields the war had degenerated into a lifeless casa campaign dominated by the [Senio](#) stopbank which loomed through the willows just ahead. Both sides had immured themselves in heavily fortified houses or the remains of houses, and there was nothing over the river to shoot at except more houses, which you could not see, but picked out from the map. On bright days the 'shufti' planes would be up, and perhaps pass a target or two back to the tanks, but all too often the country was wrapped in thick wet fog.

Up with A Squadron's foremost tanks, only two or three hundred yards from the stopbank, you could not avoid the '[Senio](#) jitters' at night, jumping at shadows and strange noises, always half expecting a whiteclad raiding party to come stealing over the snow; for Jerry still commanded the stopbank on our side of the river. Ghosts walked the [Senio](#) fields in that February of 1945. It was the era of the 'ghost train', that queer, unexplained freak of sound which brought to your ears, night after night, the unmistakable noise of a train arriving, shunting and going away again, apparently just a stone's throw across the river, though everyone knew that the only line was torn up for miles back. It was a weird, frightening place, this [Senio](#).

There were flesh-and-blood enemies, too, which A Squadron knew better how to deal with. Occasionally a few random Spandau bursts would come round the houses from dugouts in the stopbank; every now and then some of the tanks would let fly at these dugouts in the hope of discouraging Jerry from using them, but it seemed to make no difference. There was, too, an objectionable self-propelled gun which had for some time popped up periodically on the far stopbank and shot up a house or two on our side before vanishing again. A 17-pounder Sherman set an ambush for

this nasty fellow, but some watcher on the stopbank must have seen what was going on, for he never came to take what was coming to him.

C Squadron in its gun line led a busier life than A Squadron, but less disastrous on the nerves. Here, with the help of artillery surveyors and equipment borrowed from [4 Field Regiment](#), plus an occasional 'shufti' plane, the [18th's](#) boasted accuracy in indirect fire was brought up to a remarkable pitch. Most of the effort was directed at Jerry's pestilent mortars, which abounded in this part of the world, and the results seemed first-class. They could have been better still, but ammunition, like so many other things, was in very short supply and strictly rationed, and the boys could not let themselves go and loose off quantities as in happier times. Every round had to count. Even the church tower game had to stop, but not before a 17-pounder tank from B Squadron, wearing 'platypus grousers', had gone up through the slush to the stopbank by A Squadron and brought down the last remaining tower in three rounds.

These platypus grousers were about the only thing that could raise much interest among the tankies about this time. The reaction to them was 'Why the hell did nobody think of these before?' For a long time they had had ordinary grousers, metal bars that bolted on to the tank tracks to give a better grip, but these had been no help in soft mud. Now came the platypus grousers, which were fixed on in the same way, but stuck out several inches on the outside of the tracks to give a snow-shoe effect. Their performance, as proved in demonstrations in the first half of January, was astonishing. With these things on, a Sherman or Honey could go almost anywhere, even across a swamp. How many hours of toil and sweat would they have saved us, said the boys, if we had had them at [Orsogna](#) or the [Rubicon](#) or [Celle](#)! Now the [4 Brigade](#) workshops set to work to make them so that as many tanks as possible could have them as soon as possible. A belated gift, but very welcome even at this eleventh hour.

That it was the eleventh hour nobody doubted, even in the middle of this dismal winter. Once spring came, the river scramble would be on again, there was nothing surer. The Division was trying out all sorts of ideas to cope with the succession of rivers and ditches that followed the [Senio](#)—a 'ditch-filling' tank turned on a display of what it could do; the infantry practised river crossings in assault boats; the engineers blew up floodbanks with big explosive charges and vied with one another in building

bridges; the Shermans drove over these bridges the moment they were ready, learning after many accidents that their platypus grousers were a very tight fit on a Bailey bridge, and that an error of only an inch or two meant a ruined bridge. In the training areas round [Forli](#) flame-throwers made their first appearance, gruesome, horrible weapons lumbering round on tank or carrier chassis. All this was doubtless leading up to a grand assault some time in the future. Meanwhile you could only hang on and pray for the winter to end.

The soulless, desultory, shell-and-mortar warfare of February and early March provided few highlights. About the nearest approach were two mock attacks ('Chinese attacks' the Kiwis called them), with all the trimmings, artillery, tanks, Vickers, Bofors and Bren guns all along the front, fake wireless messages, in fact everything except an infantry advance. They were good shows from a distance, the nights sparkling with tracer and lit up in great white and red patches by flares and flame-throwers, but to the boys in the tanks, who could see none of this, they were just so much good ammunition wasted. Apart from firing a few extra shells over our way, Jerry did not seem impressed.

The idea behind these, in theory, was to provoke reply from Jerry and discover the pattern of his defensive fire, or to divert his attention from minor attacks on the stopbank on other parts of the front; but they were largely born of boredom, and the need to create something to do. For the cold and the monotony weighed more and more on the spirits. The C Squadron tank crews were kept more or less sane by circulating briskly between [Faenza](#) and the gun line, changing over every evening. A Squadron, after an eternal fortnight, was relieved by B, and went back to take its turn in the [Faenza](#) billets, where at any rate you could be bored in comfort, and could sit by a stove and thaw out. From 26 February there were football matches in the [Faenza](#) stadium, surely as close to the front line as football has ever been played. Jerry, thank goodness, had given up his shelling of [Faenza](#), and the last German plane had been weeks ago.

But the worst of times comes to an end at last, and with the coming of March it seemed as if winter was on the way out. Its legacy of water and mud was still everywhere, the nights still froze, [Forli](#) and [Faenza](#) and the front were as dull as ever, but there were not many traces of snow now, and there were bright days with a little warmth creeping back into the sun. And brightness began to ooze back into

the Kiwis' lives, too, for suddenly hordes of Poles began to descend on the [Senio](#) from nowhere and relieve the New Zealand infantry. The Poles, fine soldiers but dour and suspicious and unapproachable, had never been comfortable bedfellows with the light-hearted Kiwis, but here they were welcomed as angels from Heaven. Some of the boys had begun to despair of ever getting away from that hated [Senio](#).

Now they were really going to have a rest from it, at any rate for a while. By 6 March there was no New Zealand infantry left on the front. For a few days B and C Squadrons were forward with the Polish infantry, living in battered houses built up into young fortresses, shooting up the far side of the river from time to time, doing their best to understand what the Poles were trying to say, and eating Polish meals, which were huge. On 8 March Polish tanks, heavy with camouflage, moved in and took over from B Squadron. On the 14th C Squadron thankfully handed over its gun line, and the [Senio](#) could look after itself now. The [18th](#), last of all the New Zealand units, was on its way back for a rest.

When C Squadron came back the rest of the unit had already left [Faenza](#) and [Forli](#), the A and B Squadron tanks the previous night, everyone else that same morning. Late that evening the C Squadron tanks took the road, driving under their own power, the drivers very disgruntled because A and B Squadrons had pinched all the transporters there were.

The lucky ones were those who went with the soft-skinned convoy in daylight, for they had a bit of sunshine to help them on the way, and it was not unbearably cold. But the tank crews who went at night had never, they said, had such an icy ride. Some of the tanks had a little 'anti-freeze' aboard, some rum perhaps, or the remains of a bottle of whisky thoughtfully brought along by an officer or a sergeant. But at the end of the four-hour trip everyone was chilled through, and very ready to crawl between all the blankets that could be found, leaving the tanks to picket themselves. One or two tanks had the usual breakdowns on the way, and two of C Squadron's Shermans had a nasty collision and had to be left till the LAD came along; and the plight of the crews marooned on the roadside, with no houses to shelter in, was rather pitiable.

The regiment ended up with the rest of [4 Brigade](#) at Cesenatico, a little way north of [Rimini](#), not far from those horrible [Romagna](#) battlefields. As a billet for rest

and training it was only fair. Everyone was in houses beside the Adriatic beach, which would have been ideal at a different time of year, but was not much advantage at present. The houses were but draughty shells of their former comfort, without furniture, without a whole pane of glass, even without doors, which had no doubt gone for firewood during the winter. The beach was ruined by barbed wire and little forts and rows of ugly concrete 'dragons' teeth'. There were mines everywhere, even in the water. There was a busy airfield almost next door, which seemed to spawn planes by the dozen all day and most of the night; they passed overhead just above the rooftops, and their roar shook the whole place, particularly when some American Thunderbolts came on the scene towards the end of March. One Thunderbolt crashed clean into a New Zealand unit not far from the 18th and made an awful mess. No, Cesenatico was no haven of peace, even now with the war far away. The boys, thinking back with longing to the friendly quiet of their last rest area at Fabriano, and hearing that the whole Division except 4 Brigade was back again enjoying those same mountain retreats, were sour with envy. The weekly leave trucks to and from Rome always made a point of stopping overnight at Fabriano, and it was not uncommon for men to help themselves to two or three days' unauthorised leave just to go back there and see the good friends they had made.

Keeness and morale had to be dragged up little by little out of their winter depths. The baleful Senio had cast a general listlessness over the war-tired Division, and 18 Regiment had its share of that. And the old unit spirit, so strong always in the 18th, had sagged with the gradual loss of the older inhabitants who had built it up, including many of the senior officers and NCOs, the men who set the tone for the rest to follow. There was not even any continuity of command. Lieutenant-Colonel Ferguson, who left late in February, was succeeded by Lieutenant-Colonel Elliott ¹ and then by Lieutenant-Colonel Parata, ² both newcomers to the unit. To name only a few others, Majors Deans, Playle, Pyatt and Stanford and Padre Gourdie were not there, and something of the traditional 18th had gone with all of them.

Yet the 18th turned the corner, and morale began to flicker again. A series of warm summery days helped enormously. The afternoons were given over to sports, the flat land round Cesenatico sprouted goalposts, football competitions were hurried along. The regiment's hockey team, quite a new institution, rocketed to fame

late in March by winning a divisional competition. Truckloads of spectators went here and there to watch the matches. Other trucks took sightseers north to [Ravenna](#) and south to [San Marino](#), both within easy reach.

Enthusiasm for work was not so marked, and grew more gradually. With indifference the tank crews took over some new Shermans, a few with big 105-millimetre guns, others with 17-pounders, among them some petrol-driven tanks, the first the regiment had owned. They were looked on with suspicion—'not bad,' one driver remarked, 'but we were used to the old diesel bus'. Mechanically and without zest the boys put the tanks, new and old, through their paces, cleaned and maintained and repaired them. But by the end of March even the tanks were once more being regarded with affection. The crews had 'T & A'd' the guns again and again, firing from the beach at smoke bombs dropped into the sea by planes. They had peppered a derelict Tiger tank from all angles and learnt a lot about how to deal with them. The Tiger had lost much of its terror now.

But the most effective step towards restoring the old spirit was the one which, at the time, vexed the boys most. Beyond doubt formal discipline had grown pretty slack, attire round the camps had become startlingly informal, parade smartness had gone out of fashion. Now an organised effort was made to straighten up the whole of [4 Brigade](#). Brigade orders at [Cesenatico](#) said uncompromisingly that 'a high standard of dress and discipline would be set and maintained'. There was, for the first time in [Italy](#), a formal guard, rehearsed and well turned-out, on [18 Regiment's](#) lines. There was a good deal of drill, and hours of practice for big parades for Colonel [Campbell](#)³ of [4 Brigade](#) and [General Freyberg](#), both late in March. The boys grumbled and muttered, of course, but even the grumbling was a healthy sign. The second parade was a marathon which lasted a good four hours and left everyone jaded; but [General Freyberg](#) was heard to murmur approval again and again, and everyone felt a little proud of himself, though nobody would have admitted it.

Then, this parade scarcely over, came momentous news. Another move, a very secret one, destination unknown, all New Zealand signs and badges out of sight, A Squadron to set out that very evening. This, everyone knew, could only be up to the front again, probably back to the [Senio](#), and the grand assault must be imminent. Well, it had to come, and probably better now than later when the battlefield had got too hot and dusty.

The A Squadron crews had to work as they had not done for months to get themselves, their gear and their steeds ready on time, but somehow they managed to get away just after dark, and in the early hours of Easter Day, 1 April, they arrived back within sound of the guns and bedded down near [Forli](#), everyone begrimed with dust, for the mud of months had now dried to powder on Route 9.

Yes, the big day, put off perforce for three and a half months, was close now. Everyone round [Forli](#) was talking about it, there was an atmosphere of bustle and anticipation very different from the black, fed-up mood of February. The enervating 'casa war' was ending, too, for nearly all the way up to the front there were forests of bivvy tents, though up within reach of the [Senio](#) the infantry was still cooped up in its fortified houses.

After A Squadron went away the rest of the regiment had three full days to get ready, but a lot had to be done, everything up to battle pitch, guns 'T & A'd' for the umpteenth time. The biggest and nastiest job was changing all the tanks over from steel to rubber tracks, which involved nearly a whole night's work and a big crop of blistered, swollen hands. On the night of 4 April, quietly and without fuss, the regiment took the road, and by daybreak was up by [Forli](#). thence on 6 April to 5 Brigade's reserve area some six miles north of [Faenza](#) and three miles short of the [Senio](#). A Echelon was in [Faenza](#), B Echelon in [Forli](#). Still the strictest secrecy, nobody to leave the area without orders, no New Zealand signs to be shown anywhere. Most of the boys were in bivves, and not sorry, for farmhouse life was not popular in the warmer weather. The whole countryside was amazingly quiet, so quiet that few bothered to dig slitties, and those who did had to take some barracking from the rest. One troop each from B and C Squadrons went forward and took over from 2 and 4 Troops of A Squadron, which had been having a little quiet fun for the past three days.

These two troops, under Second-Lieutenants Barney Lenihan ⁴ and Bob Booth, ⁵ had been the first to come once more within sight of the [Senio](#) stopbank. On the afternoon of 2 April they had gone up to 21 Battalion, which had an important job on hand.

All through the winter the stopbank on our side of the [Senio](#) had been common

ground. It was honeycombed with holes. Both sides had dugouts in it, with tunnels and peepholes giving narrow, restricted views into opposing territory. Nobody had tried very seriously to get Jerry off this bank; now he had to come off, for we could not have him overlooking all our preliminaries for the big attack. The fire that came down on our side of the river, particularly the mortaring, was obviously directed from this near bank.

The tankies wasted no time. On 3 and 4 April they hammered the stopbanks with 'delayed action' high-explosive shells. These brought some interesting results; sometimes the gunners bounced them off the top of the bank to burst in mid-air, at other times they buried them in the bank, where they penetrated deep before exploding, so that the inside was fairly ripped out of the dugouts. A Squadron's brand-new 105-millimetre tank, on its first airing, proved just the thing for this sort of work. By evening Jerry had been frightened off the bank, except at one awkward place on 21 Battalion's right boundary, where a shallow ramp carrying the remains of a railway line rose to meet the stopbank at right angles. Here Jerry was firmly dug in and did not want to leave, and a surprise was planned for him next day.

The surprise was short, sharp and intense. Artillery and mortars pounded the other side of the river; fighter-bombers dropped their bombs so close that our side was showered with earth. The Shermans blasted the bank with more delayed-action shells. Twenty minutes of this, and then, right on top of the last shell, three stalwart men of 21 Battalion charged the bank to finish the job. Soon the only Germans left on that bank were dead ones. A few were captured, badly shaken up by the concussion of the 105-millimetre shells; all the rest had departed earlier. The wounded were taken away under a Red Cross flag, which was rare enough to cause comment among the Kiwis. Jerry gave back what he could while the show was on, mainly mortars and Spandau bursts, but our only casualty was Sergeant Clem Derrett's ⁶ tank, which went up on a mine while coming away at the finish.

Their job now carried out to everyone's satisfaction, 2 and 4 Troops went back when the B and C Squadron tanks arrived up, and rejoined the rest of A Squadron in its bivvy area.

That same evening, about eleven o'clock, when nearly everyone was fast asleep, occurred one of those startling events that happen when you least expect

them. Since [18 Regiment](#) came back to the Senio Jerry had hardly fired a shot except a scattered salvo or two round the front lines. Now, without any warning, he began to shell the whole New Zealand area with everything he possessed, from light mortars to great 210-millimetre earth-movers. There was a scatter as men evacuated bivvies and sought urgent shelter in houses or tanks or ditches. Those who had been cautious enough to dig slitties had the last laugh—though they did not feel like laughing for the next two hours. There was no sleep for anyone all that time, only a nightmare of noise and acrid smoke and hunks of metal flying through the vines. The damage was surprisingly small, but in Regimental Headquarters a truck and a Honey tank were badly bent, Sergeant Owen Donaldson ⁷ was killed and four men wounded. Up by the stopbank everyone was on edge in case Jerry was crazy enough to try an attack. Next day there was unusual activity all over the place, as everyone went underground for fear the same thing would happen again.

But it did not. Evidently Jerry had no thought in his mind of attacking, for the front lapsed into its customary quiet for two more days, idle days for the tankies, but busy days of preparation for other people; huge truckloads of all kinds of ammunition going up, convoys carrying bits of Bailey bridge, the great ugly flame-throwers; jeeps and despatch riders charging round; the mounting fever in the air that always presages a big attack. This was far removed from the dull, spiritless Division of two or three months earlier.

Then it was 9 April 1945, and the big day had come. A bright, sunny, optimistic day. In the morning the fighting squadrons moved out to their battalions, Major Nelson's B Squadron to the Maoris and Major Passmore's C Squadron to 21 Battalion in the forefront of 5 Brigade, Major Ryan's A Squadron to 23 Battalion in reserve. And after lunch the watchers by the [Senio](#) saw a sight to remember all their lives.

The weight of air and artillery that hit the unfortunate Germans that afternoon had never been equalled in any show the Kiwis had seen. For two hours the air was alive with planes—you could not count them—carpeting Jerry's territory with small bombs, the bursts so continuous that they merged one into another. And fighters diving vertically with their guns rattling, making you giddy to look at them. Great fires raging across the river, the smoke growing thicker and thicker as the afternoon went on. Then the artillery, a solid wall of noise, till your ears rang and the air was white with dust; and those fighters coming back and back when the guns paused for

breath; and the artillery once more. Then the whole thing over again, and yet again. Then the sun went down, and suddenly the thin evening dark was stabbed with red streaks all along the front as the flame-throwers from the top of the stopbank sent their searing jets licking over the [Senio](#). And then, two minutes later, the infantry was off, over the stopbank, over the river, all in a minute or two; and the Division was off on the great adventure for which it had waited so long.

¹ Lt-Col J. M. Elliott, m.i.d.; [Malaya](#); born [Wellington](#), 28 Aug 1912; bank officer; Adjt [19 Bn](#) 1940; BM 4 Armd Bde 1943-44; CO [18 Regt](#) Feb-Mar 1945.

² Lt-Col H. H. Parata, DSO, ED; [Dunedin](#); born [Riverton](#), 9 Jun 1915; public accountant; 27 (MG) Bn 1939-40; CO [19 Armd Regt](#) Nov 1944-Mar 1945; [18 Regt](#) Mar-May 1945.

³ Brig T. C. Campbell, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Colombo](#), 20 Dec 1911; farm appraiser; CO 22 Bn Sep 1942-Apr 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Jan-Dec 1945; Commander of Army Schools, 1951-53; Commander Fiji Military Forces, 1953-56; Commander, Northern Military District, 1958-.

⁴ 2 Lt J. B. M. Lenihan; [Darfield](#); born [Bluff](#), 20 Aug 1921; cadet; wounded 20 Apr 1945.

⁵ Lt R.J. Booth, MM; [Opotiki](#); born NZ 13 Feb 1921; clerk; wounded 24 Sep 1944.

⁶ Sgt C. L. Derrett, m.i.d.; [Darfield](#); born [Whitecliffs](#), 15 Mar 1920; farmer.

⁷ Sgt O. J. Donaldson; born NZ 21 Nov 1920; telephonist, P & T Dept; killed in action 6 Apr 1945.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 42 – THE SURGING WAVE

CHAPTER 42

The Surging Wave

Perhaps the unluckiest men of 2 NZ Division were the 5th Reinforcements. They saw longer service and more fighting than even the old originals, they suffered through the miserable Rimini campaign, they finished their service in the bitter, depressing Senio winter line—then they went home, and missed the reward of being in the last exhilarating battle.

For it was exhilarating, that surge forward from the Senio, from river to river, from map sheet to map sheet, driving Jerry back and back till finally he broke and the Allied flood swept through. Even in the first days, fighting for every stopbank, desperately short of sleep, nagged by shells and mortars, the beginning of that exhilaration was there. Morale and fighting spirit jumped, so quickly that it did not seem real, from the depths to the summit. Suddenly the regiment was itself again. Tankies and infantry, who had been calling each other names for too long, once more developed a proper mutual respect.

The first breath of change came to the waiting 18 Regiment on that first night, under the searchlights' broad beams, while the barrage receded beyond the Senio. At first the atmosphere was tense and restless. Then, as reports trickled back—light casualties, lots of prisoners, almost no opposition—this tension almost visibly lifted, giving place to an unaccustomed exaltation. The Senio ghosts were laid for good.

Then, as early as 2 a.m., the long-bridgeless Senio was bridged at last, and the squadrons began to take the road. It was an impressive procession. Two armoured bulldozers in the lead, self-propelled 'Priests' of the Royal Horse Artillery in support, 'tank-busters', bridging tanks—the 18th had never had so much.

It was a slow dusty road, jammed tight with trucks. Trucks carrying mortars and Vickers guns, trucks full of supplies, trucks piled with bridging gear and decking; here and there trucks on fire or in the ditches. Jeeps and motor-bikes threaded their way as best they could through the jam. Then a narrow bulldozed track across a field between ominous white tapes. Then a jagged gap in the stopbank, a rattling Bailey bridge, and there you were, the Senio behind you, all the miles of northern Italy in front.

There was no more sleep that night. By the time the squadrons had teamed up with their infantry day was breaking, a lovely warm dawn with a promise of hot sunshine later.

The other side of the [Senio](#) was an utter wreck. The ground looked as if it had been ploughed. Trees were splintered, houses



Senio River to Zaniolo Canal, 9-13 April 1945

razed, or at best reduced to a few fragments of wall and roof. There were corpses scattered in the fields. That anyone could have lived through such a barrage seemed incredible, yet there were a lot of live Germans here and there, in little groups, shocked and dazed and with the night's horror still in their eyes. Luckily the boys had little time to think of what must have happened in the night, for it was time to move on.

This first advance on 10 April set a pattern for much of the next twelve days. It was no victorious cross-country dash, but a painstaking advance, infantry in its best battle formation, tanks following ready to join in at any moment, the guns pounding incessantly and always at call. At first there were only Italians to contend with, smiling, cheering Italians who appeared from everywhere with white flags, offering eggs and throwing flowers. There was not the smell of a German anywhere, and this war was pretty good. It was fine to be on the winning side.

The Division was leaving nothing to chance. At the [Lugo Canal](#), an unmistakable

landmark two and a half miles ahead, everyone was to stop and get straightened out. C Squadron and 21 Battalion were to go straight across the canal, but not more than 200 yards. B Squadron and the Maoris were to stop short of the canal. Our planes and artillery would have a go at the country farther ahead before the tanks and infantry ventured into it.

The [Lugo Canal](#), running on a big embankment above the level of the plain, but almost bone dry, was no problem. The whole of C Squadron, tank after tank, crossed with no difficulty. But just beyond it Jerry suddenly showed his teeth. As the Shermans were dispersing under the trees by the road, 88-millimetre shells began to come in thick and fast from in front of the right flank.

It was only a minute or two before the [Royal Horse Artillery's](#) mobile 25-pounders were in action, but before they were well into their stride they suffered a bad loss when their OP tank, directing the fire from a rather foolhardy position in the open, was knocked out, its commander killed and all the crew wounded. Sergeant Brook's ¹ tank, the foremost of C Squadron, was ordered up to deal with this, and Brook reports:

We moved up using tree cover & sighted where firing was coming from & opened up & poured in our heavy stuff, also calling on artillery fire.... All went quiet at that point & we had no more trouble with A. P. while in that area.

Both 25-pounders and 'Long Toms' joined in from farther back. Later, after Jerry had gone, a Tiger tank was found abandoned not far ahead, its track broken by a lucky shell.

The advance was not held up for long. C Squadron had crossed the [Lugo](#) about midday. By 2 p.m. A Squadron and 23 Battalion were passing through. Jerry's self-propelled guns and mortars, a little pocket of them, invisible among the trees, were still in action, and A Squadron got its share, but it dodged the bulk of the opposition by swinging slightly to the left, while C Squadron continued to distract Jerry's attention.

A Squadron had its own troubles. At the [Lugo Canal](#) Second-Lieutenant Booth's 2 Troop lost a tank with a broken track, and at the [Tratturo Canal](#), half a mile farther on, a tank of Second-Lieutenant Lenihan's 4 Troop slipped off the narrow bridge and

ended up on its side in the canal. The rest of these two troops inched over the Tratturo safely, then set out, leaving the German pocket behind on the right, to catch 23 Battalion's leading companies. This was not easy country, mostly thick vines strung on wires and trees cutting across the line of advance, and the tank commanders, advancing blind, had a terrible job keeping in touch with the infantry. On the other hand, it was just as hard for Jerry to see A Squadron as it pushed on past his flank.

At Lugo the [Ravenna- Bologna](#) railway swung into 5 Brigade's sector from the right, and then followed the direction of the advance towards the [Santerno River](#), a mile and a half past the Tratturo. Having pushed their way out into slightly more open country behind the German pocket, 23 Battalion and A Squadron turned north to the railway, hoping to cut off Jerry's retreat. But by now the self-propelled guns had dodged the net and gone, and only some demoralised infantry was left to be cleaned up by 23 Battalion that night.

All this brought A Squadron up to the [Santerno](#), where B Squadron and the Maoris, on the left, had already arrived after a brief fight on the Tratturo. Up to there B Squadron had found little to worry it. Coming up to the Tratturo, with Second-Lieutenant Brennan's 7 Troop and [Second-Lieutenant Deans's](#) ² 8 Troop in the lead, it found Jerry dug in on the canal banks, with a hundred yards of cleared ground in front, and the Maoris unable to move out of the shelter of the trees for the Spandau fire. Once the Shermans moved into position on the edge of the cleared ground there was not much delay. Both troops opened up with everything they had, the Maoris closed in, and Jerry departed with very little more discussion. The Shermans then crossed with the help of an 'Ark' (a turretless Churchill tank driven bodily into the canal to serve as a bridge), and could now move on to the [Santerno](#) after the Maoris.

This Santerno was just the [Senio](#) all over again, its water little more than ankle deep, but with towering stopbanks. Here the whole of 5 Brigade paused again, and the tanks and infantry, which had inevitably lost each other to some extent, got together to work out their next moves. Twenty-third and 28th Battalions were to cross the river that night, 23 Battalion on the right and the Maoris on the left of the [Ravenna- Bologna](#) railway. Then the tanks, starting off early in the morning, would catch up again, and on would roll the tide.

Everyone was very ready for a night's rest, for it had been a testing day; the tank crews had been on the go all day, with never enough time even to stop and boil up a cup of tea. This, with the dust, reminded you all too much of the [Florence](#) show, where one of the worst hardships had been the perpetual thirst that there was never time to slake properly.

But there was little rest that night. The tankies 'stood to', listening to the fighting just across the [Santerno](#); big parties had to go back and manhandle ammunition and fuel over the Tratturo embankment; the 25-pounders moved up, dug in among the tanks, and opened up their usual shattering din. Morning found nobody feeling very refreshed.

But there was no early start on 11 April, nor any late start either. The night attack was only partly successful—the Maoris got over the river, but 23 Battalion, in face of heavy resistance from the village of [Sant' Agata](#) on the far bank, could not get over, and not till evening did the engineers build a single bridge in the Maoris' sector. So the tankies could only sit and wait all day, except for two troops of A Squadron, which went close up to the stopbank in the afternoon and turned their guns on the very active enemy ahead of [28 Battalion](#). All through the day Jerry landed shells persistently along the [Santerno's](#) eastern bank, and B Squadron had four wounded.

But 12 April more than made up for the inaction of the 11th.

It began at 2 a.m. when A and B Squadrons crossed the bridge into Maori territory, to the great relief of the infantry, who had been badly in need of support. Just across the river B Squadron fanned out, troop by troop, and linked up with the Maori companies, ready to push on at 5 a.m. A Squadron moved out to the right, where a sticky situation was developing.

Here 23 Battalion, still held up at [Sant' Agata](#), had sent two companies round through the Maoris to cross the river, wheel right, and attack [Sant' Agata](#) from the flank over the railway embankment. The A Squadron tanks were to find 23 Battalion somewhere about this embankment, and help it forward into the village.

Dawn came with a heavy ground fog but with the promise of another fine hot

day. The far side of the [Santerno](#), though it was not pounded to dust like the [Senio](#) fields, showed plenty of evidence of the [Air Force](#) having been there. There were unroofed houses, sheds still smouldering, dead animals lying here and there.

At the railway a brisk action was going on between 23 Battalion and an invisible enemy over the other side. Mortars were falling thickly and Jerry was sweeping the embankment with Spandaus. This embankment was too steep for tanks, but a bulldozer came right forward in its lee and began to make a diagonal track up its side for the Shermans.

There was more trouble ahead. As B Squadron was still fanning out a tank of 8 Troop went through a road underpass in the embankment, but on the other side was immediately drilled by a small armour-piercing shell from straight ahead. On this northern side of the railway there were wide Tiger tracks all over the place, and the infantry reported a group of big tanks not far ahead. It looked as if A Squadron, once across the railway, would run into something tough.

The half-made track up the embankment was now abandoned, as it would have brought the Shermans out on top where they would be sitting shots. Indeed, 88-millimetre shells were whistling low overhead just in that place. Several hundred yards nearer the [Santerno](#) the bulldozer made a fresh track; about 10 a.m. 2 Troop of A Squadron crossed the embankment and took cover among vines and trees on the outskirts of [Sant' Agata](#) beyond. By this time the rest of 23 Battalion had crossed the river at [Sant' Agata](#), presumably while Jerry was distracted by the flank attack at the railway. So the position was now much clearer. Tanks and infantry consolidated in and round [Sant' Agata](#). A little later Typhoon fighters, appearing from nowhere, swooped down with their rockets on the houses just ahead, and no more was heard from the Tigers, or whatever had been lurking there.

Early that morning 5 and 6 Troops of B Squadron, pushing on with the Maoris towards the good-sized town of Massa Lombarda, had been stopped after a bare half mile by mortar and Spandau fire from a thick grove of trees ahead, and from a spot where another road passed under the railway embankment. Judging by the tracks and the noise of big tanks in [Massa Lombarda](#), there seemed to be Tigers there, but for the moment they were not active. The mortaring was bad enough. Two more men were wounded, the leading tanks were forced to stop and fight it out, and the

[Royal Horse Artillery](#) went into action too. The Maoris had been driven to shelter in whatever buildings were handy. Later in the morning the firing died down a little, and C Squadron moved up behind in support, but Jerry was still in [Massa Lombarda](#), and a frontal attack there seemed likely to be a dead loss. One C Squadron tank was hit by a light anti-tank shell, but there was little damage and no casualties.

Planning now veered to the right again, and at 2 p.m., at little more than a minute's notice, 23 and 28 Battalions, with A and B Squadrons following, set out on a fresh attack north of the railway to bypass [Massa Lombarda](#). C Squadron stayed back to give supporting fire, and the artillery joined in too. Before the attack the [Air Force](#) was there again, diving and strafing round [Massa Lombarda](#) in a most satisfying way. If Jerry was to be dug out without blood-letting, there was nothing like the [Air Force](#) to do it.

The B Squadron tanks really had to move fast to get into position for this fresh attack, as they could cross the railway only by the [Santerno](#) a mile back. However, the huge bombardment beforehand had done the trick. Resistance had faded away except for a little scattered Spandau fire. The Air Force, too, had played havoc with the Tiger tanks that everyone had been so unhappy about. One, sitting out in the open and probably derelict, was set on fire by Sergeant McNutt's ³ tank of 5 Troop; another, camouflaged in a wooden shed, was reported by the Maoris and 'brewed up' by Second-Lieutenant Keith Williams's ⁴ tank of 6 Troop. A little way ahead, near a big high-walled cemetery, another Tiger or Panther tank was seen sitting in the roadway, but the afternoon was wearing on by this time, it would have been hard to engage accurately, so the Shermans did nothing about it. It eventually moved away into [Massa Lombarda](#), from where, Williams says, 'it fired a lot of shots at us without getting anywhere near anyone'.

By nightfall the whole of B Squadron was at the cemetery. The afternoon's advance had not been very eventful; the worst part of it was the thick vines that always seemed in league with Jerry to hold the show up. Now 21 Battalion and C Squadron came through ready to push the attack home first thing in the morning, and B Squadron thankfully went into reserve.

Unfortunately, the [Air Force](#) had not been so thorough in getting rid of the Tigers on A Squadron's front. As 23 Battalion and A Squadron moved off on their

afternoon's advance, along a road from the right came those deadly 'eighty-eights', and to cross the line of fire the Shermans would have had to expose themselves as sitting shots. Just a little way ahead the infantry was held up by another of those troublesome pockets with a few Spandaus and a light mortar or two. Booth's 2 Troop and Sergeant Alex Mowat's ⁵ 1 Troop were now leading the squadron. The tanks manoeuvred carefully up behind buildings and trees to get near the Tiger; finally one Sherman bounced a 75-millimetre shell off its hide, and the Tiger, unwilling to take any more, made off at top speed in a cloud of dust. A few hundred yards farther on another big tank held its ground for a while, but pulled out after swapping shots with Mowat's tanks, and was seen no more. Infantry and Shermans then had a clear run to their objective.

Fighting stopped for the night with both 23 and 28 Battalions on a fairly tidy line running out to the right of Massa Lombarda, but with the town still in Jerry's hands. The Shermans were right up with the foremost infantry, and the position seemed reasonably secure.

This had been a day of up-and-down fortunes, but the final balance had been all on our side. Early in the morning, before the first advance, the forward squadrons had received a few more lovely 17-pounder tanks, which had given the morale another fillip—not that this was really necessary now. A good bag of prisoners had come in, mostly only a few at a time, but adding up to quite a lot. Better still, a lot of guns, vehicles, stores and ammunition dumps had been overrun after Jerry had pulled out in haste. And to round off the day's trophies, [Lieutenant-Colonel Parata](#), who had worked hard to urge and aid the tanks forward through all obstacles, later gained for the unit one of its rare DSOs.

The worst aspect of the day had nothing directly to do with Jerry. East of the [Santerno](#) all the civilians had long been evacuated from their homes. Now, on the other side of the river, they were still there, sticking to their farms while the battle rolled over them; some killed and wounded by the huge air and artillery bombardment; some bereaved or homeless or terrified, sobbing, clinging to the soldiers and pouring out their souls in torrents of words; all bewildered and shaken. Not a Kiwi but had some pitiful tale to tell, at the end of this day, of suffering or panic or hardship among the people. There was nothing that you could do about it. You felt a great pity, but you could not stop the war to take any relief measures.

As there seemed to be no Germans just ahead of 23 Battalion in the evening, the sudden decision was taken to push on a little farther at midnight, so the forward infantry companies and their tankies, dragged from their hard-earned sleep, set out again and advanced more than half a mile, the infantry mostly riding on the tanks. All was quiet, and the show then stopped, having seen or heard nothing of Jerry. But it was only a pause of two hours or so. At the first glimmer of grey in the sky they were off again, still with the infantry perched on the tanks, forward over open, coverless country towards the trees that marked the next canal. Ahead of this the map showed nothing but miles of blank, flat fields, with a maze of canals criss-crossing them every few hundred yards.

Here A Squadron had its hardest fight of the campaign so far. On the Molini Canal German infantry camouflaged among the trees opened fire. The infantry hit the ground, the tanks opened up in return, and the 23 Battalion boys began to work their way forward in a real copybook attack under the tanks' covering fire. Sergeant Mowat was killed very early in the action; Corporal Tom [Wilson](#)⁶ took over 1 Troop and led it forward against the bank of the [Zaniolo Canal](#), a few hundred yards past the [Molini](#), in a real tank charge such as had been visualised when 4 Armoured Brigade was formed, but which had very rarely been on the cards in [Italy](#). At the same time Lenihan's troop on the left made the same kind of charge, tanks in line abreast blazing away at the enemy on the Zaniolo, who stayed and fought it out to the end. They had no chance. All were either killed or scooped up. At the Zaniolo one tank was damaged by a bazooka, but it was back in action within a day or two.

This was a fine piece of co-operation, and 23 Battalion had never praised its tanks so highly. Everyone was very pleased with the performance. For the first time in several months, too, the tankies got in among the loot—Lugers, binoculars, and desirable things like that were there in abundance.

While this was going on, 21 Battalion and C Squadron had come forward on the left, through [Massa Lombarda](#) (where even at 2 a.m. the civilians were in the streets cheering them till the town echoed), and on to the [Zaniolo Canal](#). It was no simple move. The way was cut by deep ditches with sides almost too steep for the tanks; several of them stuck and had to be towed out. Near the Zaniolo 21 Battalion got into difficulty with the Germans on the canal bank. Sergeant Brook tells of another

incident:

While some of our tanks went out to retrieve the infantry ... one of our planes disintegrated above us, & his co-pilot apparently blamed us for it for he turned & let us have his egg, but it was a miss & the only damage was burnt fingers getting our yellow identification flares lit.

The Air Force was doing wonderful work, but accidents like that were always liable to happen.

Jerry seemed to be caught napping by the speed of this advance, for when he pulled back from the Zaniolo he left two bridges intact, an almost unknown windfall. C Squadron's leading tanks lost no time in crossing, shot up all the houses within reach on the far side, and took more prisoners.

Orders were to stop short at the Zaniolo—the [Air Force](#) still had open authority to bomb beyond it, and it would be unsafe to go on. Tanks and infantry halted there, quite reluctantly, for they felt they had Jerry on the run. It was a pity, for after an hour or two Jerry's guns and mortars got the range of the canal, and made life there lively and dangerous for some time. But nothing could be done about it until, later on 13 April, 9 Brigade and 19 Regiment came through and took over the running, and the [18th](#) retired into reserve with 5 Brigade, quite thankfully, for nobody had had much sleep the past few nights.

The [18th](#) now had a couple of days at [Massa Lombarda](#), away from the thick of the fighting, but not altogether out of danger, for the odd long-range shell still came over, and the soft-skinned convoy, which came up to join the squadrons, was shelled at the [Santerno](#) crossing. These were busy days, getting the tanks back into shape for the next time in. On the evening of 15 April C Squadron spread its tanks out into a gun line, and for two noisy hours joined in an enormous artillery barrage as the New Zealand infantry stormed the [Sillaro River](#) four miles ahead.

Next afternoon the [18th](#) was off again to join 5 Brigade and take the lead once more. Only a five-mile run, but it took a long time, over congested roads and through blinding dust, both of which got worse beyond the Sillaro. Just about dusk the next advance began, A Squadron with 23 Battalion on the right, C with 21

Battalion on the left, infantry first, tanks following, some of the infantry riding on the Shermans. There was almost no opposition here. A few odd prisoners were picked up as they went along (the Division's old friend 4 Parachute Division was in front of it now), and here and there, to gladden every heart, were abandoned German guns and equipment, some of it stacked in dumps, some just lying round where it had been thrown. Until late evening the squadrons pushed on, partly along dusty lanes, partly over fields, some ploughed, some swampy, cut with more of those maddening irrigation ditches. Occasionally the tanks had to stop while canals were bridged or filled, somehow, with whatever was handy; then the infantry would go on and the tanks would catch up later. At midnight everyone stopped for a rest. On the way the [18th](#) had passed two Shermans of 20 Regiment on fire after a brush with self-propelled guns, but luckily these destructive monsters had gone.

In a clammy dawn mist on 17 April A and C Squadrons again pushed on with the infantry. At present the war was only a country ride with no enemy to impede it. At the Medicina Canal, some three-quarters of a mile ahead, all hands had to stop and work, for, as everywhere else, the bridges were blown, and everything available had to be thrown in to get the tanks across. But there was no immediate haste. Here 43 Gurkha Brigade had come across the front to join the next New Zealand push, and [18 Regiment](#) had another day or two to polish up its tanks, recover some more lost sleep, and admire the [Air Force](#) turning on another of its special displays ahead at the [Gaiana River](#).

The night of 18 April was restless, for there was a fearful racket as 9 Brigade and the [Gurkhas](#) attacked across the Gaiana under a huge barrage. But [18 Regiment](#) was quite comfortable. B Echelon, cookhouses and all, closed up behind, and bivvies were erected for the first time since leaving the [Senio](#). Once again there were plenty of German guns to admire, including a couple of 210-millimetre monsters; damaged gear was strewn everywhere, dead horses were lying all over the place. There was even a Mark IV tank derelict in a field. The progress of the war was most satisfying these days. Jerry's resistance seemed to be feebler day by day, and still our planes harried him mercilessly, our guns kept up their continual roar, our tanks and infantry were going forward faster with fewer casualties.

Midday of 19 April saw the squadrons off once more, across the Gaiana in the wake of the attack. Here, as nowhere else, the boys were glad they had been in

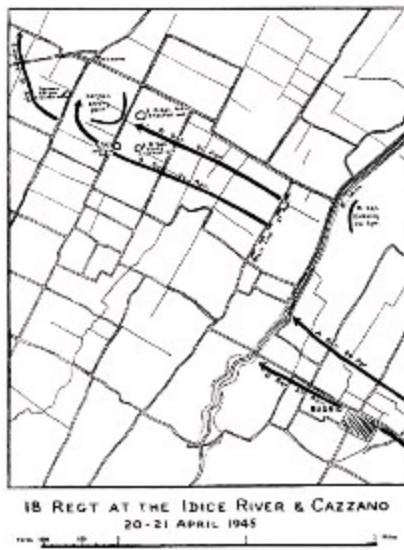
reserve and not up in the forefront, for the sights on the Gaiana bank were ghastly, dead Germans lying thick beside the river, some of them horribly charred, for the flame-throwers had caught them here and made fearful carnage. The very smell of the place made you feel sick.

Beyond it was the wettest country since the [Senio](#), one canal after another, some with Bailey bridges over them, some with makeshift bridges or ramps. In the middle of this semi-swamp the tanks met their battalions again and prepared to push on, 23 and 21 Battalions leading with A and C Squadrons. It cost sweat and toil and bad language to get the tanks over some of the ditches, but by midnight they were up level with the infantry. A few hours' quick sleep, then away at dawn once more. The artillery, which had been thundering all night, was still going at full stretch.

After the open, waterlogged meadows of the Gaiana the Kiwis now came to close country again, hedge-lined roads and fields, the all too familiar vines and willows and dust clouds. Ahead loomed the big town of [Budrio](#). So far only the canals had impeded the advance; round [Budrio](#) a German rearguard held it up for a while, and Spandau fire flew round the C Squadron tanks, which quickly went into action, shelled a troublesome infantry post out of existence, and cleared the road for 21 Battalion to enter the town. Then the battle moved on to the Idice River a mile farther west.

This was the biggest river yet, but still not too big to wade. Before Jerry realised what was happening 23 Battalion gatecrashed the river and put two companies quickly across. A Squadron's leading troops went right up to the stopbank with the infantry, chasing away one or two tiny rearguards, including a handful of brave Germans who held on till the last minute in a church, departing only when the tanks were shelling the place to bits and the infantry almost coming in the

door. For about half an hour after 23 Battalion's crossing the Shermans kept up steady supporting fire; then suddenly Jerry found the range, and for the rest of the afternoon there were shell and mortar and Nebelwerfer 'stonks' along both sides of the river and back to [Budrio](#). The tanks were forced back from the stopbank, with one A Squadron tank out of the fight with a direct hit. The infantry over the river, badgered by the



18 Regt at the Idice River & Cazzano 20–21 April 1945

shelling and expecting to be counter-attacked, had a bad time. Towards evening, when our 25-pounders pulled in round the tanks and opened fire, the shelling thickened up unpleasantly, and A Squadron had four wounded. Until the tanks could cross the [Idice](#) they were powerless to help the infantry.

By this time B Squadron was up with the battle too. That morning it had come to [Budrio](#) to lie handy; at 2 p.m. it had moved out to the right to support [28 Battalion](#), which was tidying up the flank. At dusk all three squadrons went up nearly to the stopbank ready to cross as soon as they could. During the day the roads and lanes leading forward to the river had become highways for vast convoys of all kinds of vehicles, and the dust had been indescribable.

To cross the river the tanks had to go some way upstream, for there was no possible crossing on 5 Brigade's front. Traffic at the one available ford was so congested that none of the [18th](#) got over till well after daylight next day. There was no undue delay after that; all three squadrons linked up with their battalions, and B and A Squadrons, with the Maoris and 23 Battalion, set out on the advance again. At first it looked like being another country jaunt. Part of the time the infantry rode on the tanks, at other times the tanks were out in front. There was even a bridge or two left intact over some of the canals. For a mile there was only the odd German or two waiting to be picked up, plus a few Italians raising a thin cheer.

Then a sudden fight flared up at [Cazzano](#), another of those tiny villages where a knot of roads comes together. Here Jerry had planted a little rearguard—as it turned

out later, one Tiger tank, one Panther and one self-propelled gun—to hold us up for the precious few hours that would let his main force slip away. Nos. 7 and 8 Troops ran head-on into this ambush, carefully camouflaged in the farms round [Cazzano](#). Suddenly the joyride turned to tragedy. Within ten minutes Sergeant Jack Elkis ⁷ and Corporals Warren and Walmsley ⁸ were dead, six others wounded, and four Shermans knocked out, one of them in flames. The 'Priests' following along behind went into action at once and smothered the farm buildings with shellbursts, while a 'shufti' plane hovering overhead reported targets back to the guns.

On the left 2 and 3 Troops of A Squadron were a little better off, as they came up slightly on Jerry's flank, but still 2 Troop lost a tank to the German self-propelled gun. Second-Lieutenant Booth tells how the action began:

Considerable enemy movement was observed ... about 400 yards up the road to our right. Owing to the background, in which these enemy were obviously digging in, it was most difficult for us to confirm their identity as they took no notice of us whatsoever and continued unconcernedly; a rough estimate of 40 men.... When we had satisfied ourselves ... we opened up with HE and small arms. The area was well done over and we ceased fire only to observe the enemy immediately get up and continue their digging.

This was all most disconcerting so I ordered my Sjt to cross the road ... where he could get better observation and ... shooting. It was during the execution of this that my tank was 'brewed up' with one casualty.... The German impressed us at this stage with his excellent gunning. We were behind a hedge and he could not get good clear outline observation although he had our range accurately.

Jerry, of course, could not keep the upper hand for long. Once recovered from their opening shock, the tankies fought back hard. B Squadron, straight out in front of the enemy in the open, could not do much after losing so many tanks, particularly as its right flank was wide open and more trouble could have come from there at any time. A little later it lost a fifth Sherman when our own artillery landed a 'stonk' on top of it—the kind of accident that always resulted in much bitterness. But A Squadron had more freedom of movement. No. 3 Troop and the one tank left in 2 Troop (the third had lost a track at the [Idice](#)) manoeuvred forward on Jerry's flank and saw his self-propelled gun hidden in a hedge, and a 17-pounder tank, with

Trooper George England⁹ at the gun, hit it and set it on fire. The boys, going to inspect the remains later, found its whole crew dead. Booth comments:

The camouflage of this S.P. was most complete, a bracket support was welded on the turret, and a large tree complete with three feet of trunk placed in the brackets so that when he drove up to a hedge all that was to be seen was a tree seemingly growing in the hedge.

Air Force and artillery both hammered Cazzano, but this rearguard, the last and staunchest of all, held firm against terrible punishment, and was still there at nightfall. Fifth Brigade could wait no longer and hold up the whole advance—for Cazzano was about the only spot where Jerry was still fighting. At the same time, 18 Regiment had had its worst day for months and wanted no more casualties. So after dark B Squadron and the Maoris simply side-stepped left into A Squadron's territory, leaving Jerry in Cazzano high and dry with nobody to fight. All was clear now in front of A Squadron, and for another mile tanks and infantry moved on peacefully, stopping at 1.30 a.m. for what was left of the night. A few more lonely, lost Germans were gathered up on this advance, and another big canal bridge was taken intact.

So ended the twelfth day of this great advance. They had not been easy days. For the tanks the general story had been repeated again and again at almost every river and canal—a vexing delay while the gaps were bridged, a careful move over rickety bridges or ramps, a race to catch the infantry, sometimes a fight to reach the next canal line, then the same thing over again. It had been hard work, and everyone was feeling the strain. The senior officers in particular had had next to no rest. Skilful, conscientious leadership culminating years of service gained the DSO for Major Nelson of B Squadron, but this did not mean that his squadron had done more than others. They had all been in, boots and all.

But what of Jerry, reeling back, battered, with no hope of relief from the onslaught? Though outnumbered, outgunned and given no rest, his little rearguards had put up a brave fight. He had blown roads and bridges wholesale, he had done all possible damage to our troops at every opportunity. Now, suddenly, he broke. On the morning of 22 April 5 Brigade, waking up ready to go again, could see or hear no sign of him ahead. The infantrymen climbed jubilantly on to their tanks, and at long last the grand climax of the Italian campaign had come. Eighteenth Regiment and 5

¹ WO II J. W. Brook, MM; Papakura; born Wanganui, 4 Dec 1917; farmhand.

² Lt S. S. Deans; Darfield; born Christchurch, 23 Jul 1922; farmhand; wounded 11 Apr 1945.

³ Sgt D. J. McNutt; Waitepeka; born Gore, 3 Mar 1922; farmer.

⁴ 2 Lt K. M. Williams; Te Kuiti; born NZ 1 Apr 1917; farmer.

⁵ Sgt W. A. Mowat, m.i.d.; born NZ 26 Jun 1922; shepherd; killed in action 13 Apr 1945.

⁶ S-Sgt T. Wilson; Te Awamutu; born Ireland, 22 Dec 1912; carpenter.

⁷ Sgt J. Elkis; born Palmerston North, 17 Oct 1919; traveller; killed in action 21 Apr 1945.

⁸ Cpl R. H. F. Walmsley; born Christchurch, 6 Oct 1919; iron moulder; wounded 30 Sep 1944; killed in action 21 Apr 1945.

⁹ Tpr G. A. England; born Christchurch, 22 Sep 1919; tractor driver.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 43 – FLOOD TIDE

CHAPTER 43

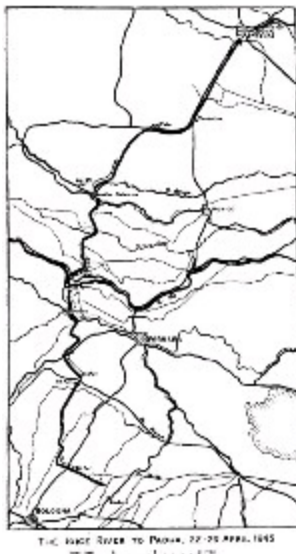
Flood Tide

Never yet had the 18th, either as infantry or armour, known the real thrill of the chase.

True, there had been fleeting hours in Italy—over the Melfa and Liri hills to Veroli, and forward from the Pisciatello River—when the tanks had whipped up some pace. And three and a half years before, from Bardia to Belhamed, 18 Battalion had chased Jerry hard for three days. But then Jerry had been stepping back in good order, and nobody had expected the fun to last long. Now it was quite different. The war, everyone was quite certain, was won. Jerry was in full flight, he was not likely to rally again, and where the 18th would end up was anyone's guess. No wonder spirits were high.

After the Idice, the Reno River—19 miles all in one day. Infantry clinging to the jolting tanks, singing as they rode. Every Italian a partisan, cheering the boys on with more flowers and eggs. A few holes in the road at one village, a few buildings blown down across it at another, a mine or two hastily and crudely planted here and there, a ruined bridge to hold things up for an hour or two. But no sign of Jerry in the flesh, except for an odd straggler eager to surrender. Better still, the countryside was suddenly almost intact again, the farms no longer flattened by bomb and shell, the civilians no longer afraid.

Then the Reno at four o' clock on a warm summer morning, miles of traffic jammed up on the one approach road, nothing to see ahead except a huge stopbank looming against the sky—for the Reno was the first of the big rivers, no mere glorified creek like the Senio and all the rest of them. Then a day of hanging round waiting for your turn to cross, and then a sudden call, a rush to get moving, another traffic jam, and finally the crossing, some tanks by a Bailey bridge, some by a steep-sided ford. Then, early next morning, away for the Po, that mighty river that for eighteen months had been spoken of with bated breath in 2 NZ Division.



The Idice River to **Padua**, 22–29 April 1945

On from the **Reno** the story was much the same, but fewer demolitions, fewer stragglers, no mines. From the lanes north of the river, lined with piles of German ammunition all abandoned intact, it was a clear fast run to the **Po**, with hardly a sign of war, except German equipment left lying, German horses surprisingly left alive and well, German vehicles bombed out on the roadside. At the village of **Bondeno** some British Staghounds were perched up on an embankment firing shells into the town, for no reason that anyone could see. Anyway, nobody stopped to inquire. On they went to the south bank of the **Po**, and there they stopped, eyeing that great sheet of water, 250 yards wide, with straggly trees on the far side. What was under those trees was only guesswork.

That first afternoon C Squadron's leading tank crews watched from the stopbank as the first handful of men from 21 Battalion set out over the **Po** in a cockleshell boat, sharing the general anxiety as they neared the far shore and the almost audible relief up and down the bank as they came back without a shot fired. There was not much beneath those trees. Just enough to fire a few scattered shells up and down the roads on our side of the river that afternoon, but not enough to make a stand when 23 and 21 Battalions crossed in force that night. The tankies, or most of them, slept through it all. Only two troops of A Squadron from the top of the stopbank fired hard for a quarter of an hour as the assault boats were on their way across. By morning, when the boys woke up, the conquest of the **Po** was all over, the biggest, grandest anticlimax in the Division's history.

Just how much of an anticlimax the tankies realised when they had to kick their heels on the south bank, waiting their turn to get in the queue to cross. The morning after the assault—the 30th anniversary of Anzac—everyone went up to the stopbank to watch the 'Po Regatta', the collection of small craft of all shapes, with incongruous names like Ducks and Fantails, chugging to and fro, ferrying men and jeeps and mortars and anti-tank guns over, and swarms of engineers laboriously building the beginnings of a pontoon bridge, and other swarms putting up landing stages for the Shermans and whatever else wanted to cross. During the morning C Squadron moved up to lead the 18th over the river, but the Bailey pontoon raft that was to ferry the tanks was slow, and most of the crews still had hours to wait. The first Sherman touched the north shore just after 11 a.m.; by dusk that evening only seven were over. The ferry, working on through the night, had C Squadron across by 5 a.m. on 26 April, and then proceeded to take A Squadron (now under Major Greenfield) at about the same pace. The pontoon bridge was completed and working now, but evidently Shermans were beyond its capacity.

After the Po, the Adige, Italy's second biggest river. On 25 April, before the first tanks were over the Po, 23 and 21 Battalions were off in that direction. That evening the few C Squadron tanks that crossed before dark set off after them, but only as far as the Tartaro Canal, nine miles ahead, where Jerry had been at his old game of bridge-blowing. Next morning the rest of the squadron arrived, and, after wandering round for a bit to find its way over a series of canals, won out into drier country with a clear run to the Adige. On the way the leading tanks overtook some of the infantry, and finished the run, as at so many other places, with infantrymen all over them. By the roadsides were dozens of German vehicles, some wrecked, some perfectly good. At the little crossroads village of Crocetta there was a big dump of German guns in the yard of the local school. All along the way there were more eggs and wine pressed on the boys by the enthusiastic civilians. At the Adige the head of the column found the last Germans still straggling across, but there were no fireworks except a few brief Spandau bursts, for Jerry seemed more intent on getting away than on fighting the Kiwis.

That evening nine C Squadron tanks manned the Adige stopbank and fired over the river as the infantry prepared to cross. That was a spectacular ten-minute display in the dark, streams of tracer pouring across the water, then suddenly

stopping as the assault boats pushed out from the shore. Then tense silence all along the river until the success signals appeared from the far bank. Apart from a shell or two that did no damage, Jerry had offered no more opposition here than at the [Reno](#) or the [Po](#).

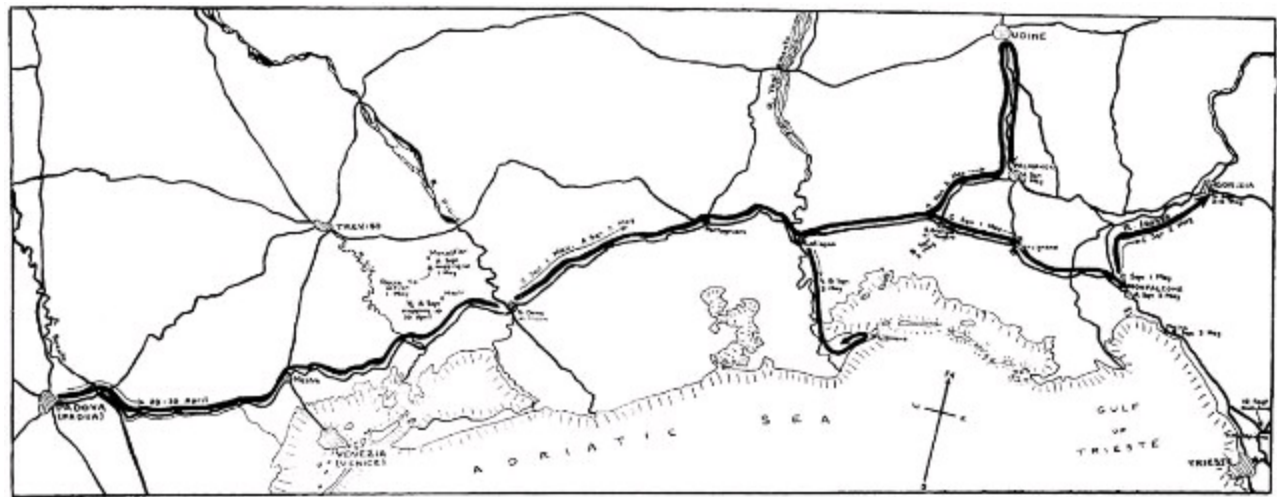
For two days now A and C Squadrons, with the infantry battalions, took things easy by the [Adige](#), billeted in magnificent houses in the village of Badia Polesine. While 9 Brigade and the [Gurkhas](#) forged ahead northwards, and the engineers toiled to bridge the [Adige](#) and a series of smaller streams beyond, the tankies took the opportunity to catch up on a bit of maintenance and sleep, both overdue.

Meanwhile the rest of the regiment was still having its troubles back by the [Po](#). Getting across that great river, even with Jerry miles away, was not so simple. There were still continuous traffic jams. Heavy rain on 27 April made the position worse. Regimental Headquarters had crossed before the rain began, and the soft-skinned echelons, which had been following up behind, moving a few miles every day or two, managed to get in the queues and made their way across piecemeal. B Squadron was right out of luck. On the evening of the 27th all tank movement over the river was stopped, giving place to all the urgent soft-skinned convoys that had been piling up on the south bank. Not till 1 May, after four more days of fretful idleness, did B Squadron get across the [Po](#) and set out to rejoin the regiment, now many miles away.

These were amazing days. The news that streamed in was of such magnitude that it numbed the mind. [Germany](#) was almost overrun; all her allies had deserted her; the war in [Europe](#) could not be a matter of more than a few days now. Here in [Italy](#) the way across the northern plains was wide open, and the Allied flood was pouring over them, the reward for a year and a half of sweat and blood.

On the evening of 28 April, its brief holiday by the [Adige](#) over, the regiment was off again as fast as the night and the traffic would let it. C Squadron first, A Squadron and Regimental Headquarters an hour or two behind, mixed up with infantry and engineer traffic and all sorts of bits and pieces, all heading north. That was a drive to remember, everyone charging on helter-skelter, then sitting impatiently in the cold while traffic jammed up ahead, then on again, units all over the place, convoy discipline for once almost disregarded. Twelve miles by narrow roads to the neat

little town of [Este](#), where some of C Squadron got briefly tangled up with a group of local partisans strutting round and doing a lot of loud talking, and then on to a lovely wide paved road, all intact and unblown, circling round north-east along the base of the



PADUA TO TRIESTE, APRIL - JUNE 1945

Padua to Trieste, April-June 1945

hills, beautiful in the moonlight, and so to [Padua](#) 18 miles farther on. There was no sleep for anyone, but in the excitement of the chase nobody cared.

It was not C Squadron's luck to be first into [Padua](#). By 4 a.m. the head of the squadron was just on the southern outskirts, and there it stopped, everyone highly disgruntled to see the stream of traffic barging past into the town. Later in the morning Regimental Headquarters and A Squadron caught up, and in the afternoon on went the chase again. Through dignified old [Padua](#), today struck by mad excitement, the citizens crowding every corner to cheer the convoys on their way; then out on the highway again, with [6 Brigade](#) this time, and off eastwards towards [Venice](#) and the head of the Adriatic Sea, just as daylight began to fade.

More than anything else the name of [Venice](#) brought home to the boys the realisation that they were really 'going places'. Everyone, even the most unlearned, knew all about [Venice](#), but it had always seemed one of those half-legendary places that you would never really see. But now they were on their way there, only twenty miles away, going hell for leather in that direction, with nothing to stop them. Another beautiful moonlit night, the countryside visible for miles. It was worth

looking at, too. The road ran along a big canal, sparkling in the moonlight and flanked by big opulent mansions, with statues and trees and fountains clearly visible; truly the [Italy](#) you had imagined from books, nothing like the poverty-ridden, backward, insanitary [Italy](#) that you had seen too much of in the past eighteen months. There was something magic in this night, despite the earthy touch provided by big bomb holes in the road, which slowed up the rush and made temporary traffic jams.

However, these were of no consequence. On the tide went, past the end of the causeway out over the lagoon to [Venice](#)— you could not see the city in the dark, no matter how you strained your eyes seaward—and on without a pause along Route 14, following the swing of the coast eastwards towards the Yugoslav frontier and the partisan soldiers of Marshal Tito, who were said to have chased Jerry out of their country and to be advancing west to meet the [Eighth Army](#). Another 20 miles to the Piave River before C Squadron stopped, pulled up short by a very efficiently wrecked bridge. A Squadron, Regimental Headquarters and the soft-skinned vehicles stopped too, some seven miles past the [Venice](#) turnoff, for a little hard-earned sleep and respite from this ceaseless driving.

But tired as they were, swarms of the boys found their way back on 30 April, hitch-hiking on anything and everything that came along, and out across the causeway for a brief inspection of [Venice](#). Quite illegal, but winked at by the authorities, who could not help knowing what was going on, as Route 14 was lined with Kiwis with one idea in mind, and [Venice's](#) main 'streets' were full of gondolas laden with lounging Kiwis who already looked as if they owned the place.

But only a comparative few of [18 Regiment](#) could do this. C Squadron was away ahead of all the rest, and tied to its bivvy area, on notice to move on again any time. B Squadron was still over 70 miles back at the [Po](#). And half of A Squadron spent a profitable day with companies of 23 Battalion, 'liberating' villages north of Route 14. Each tank, with a few infantrymen on board, worked independently. They were fêted by the Italians wherever they went; one found a German quartermaster's store, complete with safe well stuffed with money, and piles of boots and other necessaries which commanded a ready sale to the Italians; they helped the infantry round up some fifty assorted prisoners, who seemed mighty relieved to be in New Zealand hands rather than in the village partisans'. These partisans were everywhere, all

bristling with arms, full of patriotic fire, volubly eager to welcome the liberators, talking vastly about rounding up local Fascists and putting them up against walls. A comic opera touch was creeping into the war round these parts, and the Kiwis were quick to enter into the spirit of anything like this.

But this cleaning up was more or less a sideline. The main problem was to get C Squadron over the [Piave](#) and on round the coast as quickly as possible. Three Honeys of the Reconnaissance Troop, under Sergeant Jock Black, spent 30 April hunting up and down the river for a ford, or another bridge, or anything that would get Shermans across. Ten miles north of Route 14 they found a ford, but not a very good one; while looking for a better place, Black's tank went into a bomb hole and foundered in ten feet of water, and his little force then came back for the night to the village of [Meolo](#), three miles off the main road. C Squadron, desperate to get on, was already crossing the first ford, and all the Shermans made the far bank without accident.

Then came 1 May, and with it [18 Regiment's](#) last tragedy, which would never have happened if Jerry had not succeeded in blowing the [Piave](#) bridge.

All north [Italy](#) was now full of wandering bands of Germans, most of them with no fight left in them and quite ready to lay down their arms. But up from the coast on 30 April came a big party of odds and ends from all sorts of army and navy units, with all its arms and gear stacked in a great column of horse- and bullock-drawn waggons, and evidently commanded by an officer with more grit than most, determined to fight his way home out of [Italy](#) if he could. This column stumbled on a New Zealand engineer camp on the night of 30 April, attacked it desperately in passing, then made off in the dark with some prisoners before the sleepy Kiwis could collect their wits. Morning found the Germans at [Monastier](#), near [Meolo](#), a spot where the Kiwis had been roaming to and fro unmolested, and where nobody dreamt of trouble. Now it was almost empty of our troops, except for Sergeant Black's two Honeys and their crews busy fraternising with the [Meolo](#) partisans.

Hearing from the partisans that this enemy was so near, Black at once led his party up towards [Monastier](#), with three partisans riding on the tanks, eager to be in at the kill. At a road fork two miles outside [Meolo](#) the two tanks took different routes, hoping to outflank and overtake an armoured car that had retired in haste

from the junction; but instead of an easy victim they met serious trouble. Only about 200 yards past the fork Black's tank ran into a group of Germans with bazookas and rifles and grenades. It was taken quite by surprise, hit and capsized before it could take any countermeasures. Trooper Savage ¹ was killed, everyone else on board wounded and trapped in the tank. The other tank, coming up behind to help, struck the same opposition. Its commander, Corporal Bob McPartlin, ² takes up the story:

Straight away we came under heavy fire and ... the Italian guide accounted for two bazooka men. The enemy by this time was too numerous to handle, and I gave instructions to pull back out of range of the bazooka men. However we did not succeed, and we received a direct hit by a bazooka.... Trooper Williams ³ was killed while getting out of the tank and Trooper Wells ⁴ ... while making for the ditch. Trooper Marfell ⁵ and myself were also wounded.... We had to abandon the tank as it was starting to brew up. We came under machine gun fire, and were bombarded with grenades, but eventually got clear, and returned to the village by bicycle.

This short little action made quite a stir in the regiment, first because of the casualties—three killed and five wounded was heavy for the armour any time, and especially now when the war was supposed to be all over but the washing up; second because of the exploit of Sergeant Black, one of the oldest and best-known soldiers in the [18th](#), who, himself wounded, hauled all the survivors out of his tank while surrounded by very hostile Germans, who refused all help and threatened to shoot the whole crew; third because of the staunch and effective help given by the [Meolo](#) partisan leader. These partisans, the boys had begun to decide, were full of talk, but this was the first time any of them seemed to have backed up the words with deeds.

It was as well for the Germans that they had not carried out their threat to shoot Black and his men, for their hours of freedom were numbered. Word of their presence near [Meolo](#) had already reached [Divisional Headquarters](#), and even before the fight began half of 21 Battalion was on its way there with three troops of A Squadron. Not far past the scene of the action this column caught the Germans, who now surrendered in a body, some 1500 of them, with all their waggons full of gear, and the engineer prisoners from the previous night. 'I was with the troops,' says Major Greenfield, 'and I was greatly angered by the arrogance of some of the

German officers but I suppose it was that same spirit which had kept them going.' A Squadron handed prisoners and gear over to 21 Battalion, then went back as soon as it could to rejoin the main column of [18 Regiment](#), which was moving off across the new pontoon bridge over the [Piave](#).

It seemed fair enough now to expect an easy move; but the column spent a miserable cold night sitting on the road. Heavy rain that day had soaked everything, including the approaches to the bridge, so that the traffic moving up to cross jammed up for miles back. It rained again, too, a nasty driving rain, and the men huddled together in their vehicles, trying to keep dry and unfrozen. This Piave River was the one black spot on the regiment's victorious run round the head of the Adriatic. After their long day most of the tankies, drivers and all, were so tired they could not keep awake; then they would wake with a jerk, cramped and stiff. But before daylight on 2 May the whole convoy was across, and on its way again at full speed, in the wake of C Squadron.

The adventures of [18 Regiment](#) since leaving the [Idice](#) River had been on a grand scale; east of the [Piave](#) they bordered on the cosmic.

C Squadron began it on 1 May, while the rest of the regiment was mopping up and waiting with little patience west of the [Piave](#). After fording the river on the afternoon of 30 April the C Squadron tanks stayed the night at [Santa Dona di Piave](#) on the far bank. Early in the morning they were off, racing eastwards, 40 miles at full speed with never a sign of war, not even a blown bridge. Through towns and across big rivers without even stopping to find out their names. At [San Giorgio](#), at the end of the 40 miles, the leading troop found itself unexpectedly surrounded by Germans, but they were disorganised and unwarlike, and wanted only to surrender and get this confusing business over and done with. An hour or two to stop and draw breath, then on again in the afternoon, 20 more miles, away ahead of the Allied forces, to the Isonzo River and the ship-building port of [Monfalcone](#) just beyond. Two troops, under Second-Lieutenants Barrance and Tatton,⁶ were diverted a few miles north to [Palmanova](#), where they came in for the usual loud welcome and were presented with some German prisoners by the partisans; but they did not know what on earth to do with these prisoners, and lost no time in passing them on to the first-comers and rushing back to rejoin C Squadron.

At [Monfalcone](#), without any warning, C Squadron found itself face to face with Marshal Tito's partisans, and mixed up in a [Balkan](#) political turmoil, which was one situation for which none of the Kiwis' training had prepared them.

Tito's troops were not like any other soldiers the Kiwis had ever seen before, even the Greeks. Wild-looking, harsh, obviously strangers to soft living; down-at-heel, clad in old greeny-blue uniforms, some armed with queer old rifles, others with Spandaus and German rifles, all with great bandoliers of ammunition slung round them. No trucks or jeeps or cars, only mules patiently pulling carts or carrying great loads of gear. What impressed the boys most was the women, who marched with the men, lugged the same weapons and the same loads, and obviously shared every part of the men's life, asking and receiving no better treatment than anyone. Their repute had come before them, but until now nobody had quite believed it.

These partisan throngs, pouring over the border from [Yugoslavia](#), had undoubtedly made the way easier for the [Eighth Army](#) by throwing Jerry into a panic and making him comparatively ready to surrender to the more civilised Kiwis coming from the west. But co-operation with the British was not in their scheme of things at all. They were the conquerors here, and the [Eighth Army](#) was intruding and had no right to be there. So C Squadron found on the evening of 1 May, when, wet through from the day's rain, tired out from hours of driving, it pulled into [Monfalcone](#). The town was full of arrogant partisans, Yugoslav flags, big electric signs lauding Tito. The Kiwis, accustomed to the cheers of the crowds as they swept across the country, found themselves almost totally ignored.

What good C Squadron could do in [Monfalcone](#) was not quite clear. But next morning fresh orders arrived—go 14 miles inland to [Gorizia](#) to keep the peace, for there was trouble brewing there with the Yugoslavs.

[Gorizia](#), standing on a plateau above the Isonzo River, was a graceful old town very different from the ugly, industrial [Monfalcone](#), but when C Squadron arrived it was seething. Tito's troops were there, and were bulldozing their way round the place, with headquarters in the Town Hall, forcibly recruiting all the local men into their forces, dealing harshly with any who tried to protest, any who did not seem to be on their side, or indeed any they did not like the look of. Not far outside the town fairly heavy gunfire was going on; the boys seemed to have struck a little civil war,

for in the hills, they learnt, was a band of Chetniks, irregular Yugoslav troops in violent opposition to Tito's forces. Already in the town was 26 Battalion, which had already done much to quieten the opposing sides; but it could not hope to maintain its attitude alone, hence the call for tanks to back it up. Something big and fierce was needed to tone down the rowdy demonstrations, both Titoist and Italian, which seemed likely to break out into open street fighting any time.

The Shermans were just the thing for this. Round the town they lumbered, sirens blaring and turrets swinging from side to side. They lined up outside the Titoist headquarters in the Town Hall, guns pointing politely but firmly in that direction. This undoubtedly went a long way towards keeping the peace that night. But next morning the situation was bad again— Tito's troops had rounded up Italians wholesale overnight, and feeling was running high again. The New Zealanders' bluff had been called, and there was nothing much they could do about it, short of opening fire in earnest, which they were forbidden to do. So the four days that the squadron spent in [Gorizia](#) were disturbed ones, and everyone was very pleased to pull out of the town on 6 May.

A Squadron also had its adventures on a big scale on 2 May.

Just as C Squadron had done twenty-four hours earlier, it raced east from the [Piave](#), passing small groups of Germans here and there along the road, all eager to surrender but finding nobody interested. Regimental Headquarters and the rear echelons were left to camp at [San Giorgio](#); A Squadron swung off Route 14 and up nine miles inland to [Palmanova](#), where the Maoris were mopping up the last few Germans still at large.

This was a better place than [Gorizia](#), for the Yugoslavs had not penetrated here, and so the Italians could indulge their enthusiasm for the Kiwis without restraint. It was nice to be heroes, even temporarily; while it lasted you could make a good thing out of it. It was an interesting town, too, this [Palmanova](#)—a queer-shaped place on the map, like a round flower with spiky petals sticking out all round it. The petals were huge old fortifications, moats and earthworks, and at all the entrances to the town were massive gates. Obviously [Palmanova](#)'s history had not been all peaceful.

As soon as the tanks arrived 1 and 2 Troops, under Captain Dudley West,⁷ were

sent on northwards with the Maoris, another 13 miles at speed, to Udine, the biggest town between Venice and Trieste. There was nothing to do there, for 6 British Armoured Division and the Staghounds of 12 Lancers had already arrived from the west and stolen the Kiwis' thunder. But, as Second-Lieutenant Evans⁸ relates, 'we still had a pleasant hour or two at the hands of the enthusiastic populace'. Then back to Palmanova for the night. Next morning, rather regretfully, both A Squadron and the Maoris had to move on in the rain to Monfalcone, as the growing tension with Tito's forces was dragging the whole of 2 NZ Division eastwards past the Isonzo towards the disputed port of Trieste, to be ready for anything.

After having seen little except dead flat country since Christmas, 18 Regiment was now back in the hills again. Poor, bare hills, thickly strewn with stones, scantily clothed with small scrubby trees and bushes; poor people in the villages, more like the peasants of southern Italy than the more favoured northerners that the 18th had met in the last ten months. But here it seemed that the local partisans had really done something more than talk, for the signs of Jerry's vengeance could be seen, here a farmhouse destroyed, there a humble village with every house unroofed and gutted.

Regimental Headquarters, out on the coast near Monfalcone, had a different kind of place again. A bad, swampy area, more suited for the frogs and mosquitoes that swarmed there than for human beings. But just by the camp was an elaborate system of fortifications, all built by Jerry and never used. Big guns intact in holes in the rock, caves crammed with ammunition, electric power still working, living quarters tunnelled out of solid rock, all beautifully fitted up, with air conditioning and all. These Germans might have had their bad points, but they were certainly thorough.

A and B Echelons were there too, very relieved to find the squadrons more or less stationary again. Since crossing the Po it had been a problem to keep the show going, for, as one man says, 'the tanks were emptying their fuel tanks in just about the time it was taking for the trucks to shuttle to and fro'. There had been even less sleep for the truck drivers than for the tank crews.

Back now to B Squadron, which, after cooling its heels south of the Po for so long, finally crossed early on the morning of 1 May and set out on the long trek to

catch the regiment. The miles of traffic jams had long dispersed, so that the squadron had a fairly clear run, apart from the mud at the [Piave](#) crossing, and provosts at the Tagliamento River who had had no instructions about B Squadron and did not want to let it through. The squadron, vexed at having been left out of all the fun, was in no mood to knuckle under to mud or provosts. On the evening of 2 May it rejoined Regimental Headquarters at [San Giorgio](#), and 7 and 8 Troops went to 23 Battalion at the village of [Malisana](#), two miles farther on.

It was the other two troops, 5 and 6, that had all the fun. On 3 May they were ordered out to the coast with two companies of 21 Battalion; nobody knew what this was all about, but Rumour said that there was a handful of Germans waiting to be picked up.

This was quite an understatement. Arriving at [Lignano](#), a bleak spot on a sand spit covered with pines at the mouth of the Tagliamento River, they found the place swarming with Germans. There were thousands of them. On the beach or just off shore were several ships and boats from which the Germans had landed, and there were dozens of trucks, and 88-millimetre and smaller guns—it was a young army that they had caught.

The negotiations took several hours, but the tankies had nothing very active to do. While the commander of 21 Battalion talked terms to the senior German officer the tanks were there waiting with guns ready. Not till well on in the afternoon, after the Shermans had moved round a little and taken up threatening attitudes to hurry them up, did the Germans accept their hopeless position and meekly but sullenly lay down their arms. They marched away, all 5000 of them, the tanks shepherding them as far as Route 14. There they were taken off westward, and [18 Regiment](#) saw them no more.

The same day B Squadron moved on with 23 Battalion to [Duino](#), six miles past [Monfalcone](#), on top of a high cliff overlooking the deep blue Gulf of [Trieste](#), and now the whole of the regiment was beyond the Isonzo River after its 300-mile push from the [Senio](#), with one war behind it at last, and what looked like another in front of it.

Amid all the adventures of those days, so fantastic that they seemed like a dream when you thought back on them later, the official end of the war against

Germany, first in Italy on 2 May, then throughout Europe on the 7th, made strangely little impression on the Kiwis' minds. They had long grown used to the idea that the tide was running out for Jerry. Most of the boys were quite unexcited about it, even a trifle flat, as if their occupation had suddenly been taken from them. In any case, the new situation with Tito's hordes east of the Isonzo had driven Jerry right into the background.

These partisans of Tito's were throwing their weight about. They had beaten the British to the Isonzo, certainly, and according to their ideas they, and they alone, had a right to the place. They claimed the port of Trieste, which they now shared with the Kiwis, 9 NZ Brigade having reached it before Jerry officially tossed it in his hand. However, the New Zealand orders were to stand firm and take no nonsense; and these found full support in the Division, for the attitude the partisans took up, swaggering round the place, holding long processions with flags wagging, using the strong arm against the civilians, very soon got the Kiwis' backs up. If Tito wants to fight us for this place, all right, we'll take him up on it—this state of mind quickly became general. Not that the Yugoslavs went out of their way to pick quarrels with the Kiwis, but even without that there were nasty little incidents which sometimes threatened to break out into shooting. The New Zealanders were ordered to carry arms wherever they went, and plans were laid for action in case there was an explosion.

But there was no explosion, though for a whole month the Division sat on a live bomb. Fifth Brigade moved up from Monfalcone to the coast just outside Trieste, all ready for trouble over the port, and A and B Squadrons went too; but this occupation of 'tactical positions' turned into a lovely summer holiday, with swimming, sports, parties, dances, and next to no work, even though, now that Jerry was out of the way and there was little else to do, disciplinary 'red tape' and spit and polish suddenly appeared in 18 Regiment again, to the loud disgust of the individualists. Then, in mid-June, when Tito agreed to leave Trieste and the danger of an outbreak receded, the 18th concentrated at Villa Opicina, on the plateau above Trieste. B Squadron spent a few days out beyond Trieste with 23 Battalion, manning road blocks on the hot dusty highlands at the new boundary between Kiwis and Yugoslavs; then it, too, moved back to Opicina, and the holiday continued. Week after week of hot sunshine, the Gulf of Trieste sparkling with that unrivalled

Mediterranean blue, the city and its beaches thronged with shapely, vivacious girls, the citizens full of hospitable gratitude to these men from the other side of the world who had saved them from Tito's tyranny. What a way to spend a summer! If all wars end this way, said the boys, then lead us to another one any time.

But all summers and all holidays come to an end. Late in July 18 Regiment said goodbye to its faithful tanks, destined now probably for a shameful end on the scrap heap. Then away from Trieste with many regrets, leaving many wet eyes behind; down through northern Italy past the old battlefields at the Senio and the Lamone and Rimini, past Fabriano, back to Lake Trasimene, from where the regiment had set out on its advance towards Arezzo and Florence just over a year earlier.

And here, as the summer drew towards its end, the final slow dissolution of 18 NZ Armoured Regiment began.

¹ Tpr T. J. Savage; born Opotiki, 6 Oct 1922; farmer; killed in action 1 May 1945.

² Sgt R. McPartlin, MM; Kaiapoi; born Scotland, 16 Sep 1920; carpenter; wounded 1 May 1945.

³ Tpr P. H. Williams; born Auckland, 23 Jan 1923; sheet-metal worker; killed in action 1 May 1945.

⁴ Tpr R. A. Wells; born NZ 15 Sep 1920; orchard hand; killed in action 1 May 1945.

⁵ Tpr A. A. Marfell; Blenheim; born NZ 3 Apr 1922; farmhand; wounded 1 May 1945.

⁶ 2 Lt D. E. Tatton; Masterton; born Nelson, 16 Nov 1912; service-station proprietor.

⁷ Capt D. D. West, m.i.d.; Te Aroha; born Morrinsville, 12 Dec 1921; farmer.

⁸ Lt T. K. Evans; Marton; born Riverton, 14 Aug 1914; law clerk.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

CHAPTER 44 – RETROSPECT

CHAPTER 44

Retrospect

There isn't much more to tell.

As 1945 grew old, **18 Regiment** slowly faded out of existence. Men and vehicles and gear were taken away little by little, and not replaced. The **18th's** occupation was quite gone; the boys were impatient of this soldiering without a war and eager to be off home, for the present had nothing to offer, beyond a daily round of sports and more sports, a few parades, and a bit of sporadic training for variety. The only real interest was leave and sightseeing trips up and down **Italy**, visits to old haunts, official excursions to old battlefields, and, towards the end, leave to **Britain**. It was all an uphill fight against boredom. There is no gain in dwelling on those last days, for the decay of anything that has been alive and flourishing is a cheerless theme.

From **Trieste** onwards Lieutenant-Colonel Playle commanded the **18th**. A most appropriate appointment this, for he had been an officer of the old **18 Battalion** at its birth in 1939, and nobody could have been more intimately identified with the unit.

The end was not delayed very long. From 620 men, almost a full muster, at the beginning of June, the roll sank to 470 late in August, to 310 in early October....On 2 December all the units of 4 Armoured Brigade were given official 'authority to disband'. By the end of the year the last shipload had left **Italy**, and the **18th** was only a memory.

But what a memory!

Wherever in later years men of the **18th** have come together, memories have come crowding in thick and fast. Details more and more blurred with distance, perhaps, but still priceless memories of that life so strange and so remote from the year-in and year-out round of peacetime. Memories of those battles long past, of all those good men who did not come home, of all the little diverse human groups that together made up that complicated, efficient war machine, the **18th**.

The picture rises of the fighting men of the companies and squadrons, the central figures of the whole act. How often have their battles been fought over and

over again! How often have the first Stukas howled down on [Servia](#); the hundreds of parachutes sprung into flower above the Cretan hills; the hungry survivors linked arms against their own allies on [Sfakia](#) beach; the German tanks come charging out of the haze at [Belhamed](#); the parched soldiers lain sweating in their slitties at [Alamein](#). And how often have the Shermans stuck one after another in the Sfasciata mud; crawled up the vertical [Liri](#) hillsides; braved the Tigers at [Tavarnelle](#) and [Orsoleto](#) and [Celle](#); and, most memorable of all, swept over the plains in their last irresistible rush when victory was finally won. Such memories grow kinder as the years pass. The moments of elation and triumph remain, the moments of exasperation and despair and blind terror grow dim.

Now other pictures come crowding in. Pictures of leisure hours and peaceful days. Of tea brewing in billies over innumerable primus stoves, of footballs punted round in the open spaces between the tents, of sing-songs in the [YMCA](#), of parties where the 'plonk' flowed all too freely, of forests of hands eagerly reaching out for mail and parcels from home, of two-up and pontoon and five hundred played by the hour, of [Cairo](#) and [Trieste](#) and [Florence](#) and the wonderful Mediterranean water. Nostalgic memories these, bringing far-away looks to the eyes, until reluctantly we must jerk ourselves back to the present.

But yet more memories claim our thoughts. Memories of all those who worked so hard and so patiently, often with little thanks, not themselves fighting, but keeping the fighting men going, sometimes suffering the same hardships and running the same risks. How many there were, and how varied the jobs they had to do! Each little group fiercely jealous of its own good name, each one sometimes bitingly critical of the rest, but all essential in their places. How well they played their parts, when failure by any one of them could have brought the [18th](#) to a dead stop. None was ever found wanting.

We see the carriers and the Recce Troop, dashing here, there and everywhere, very much in the public eye, but no mere glamour boys—spies, policemen, postmen, general merchants, ambulances, a hundred different things when needed. And often thrust into the front of the battle, giving and taking their share of the knocks.

We see the signal linesmen working under fire hour after hour, with numb bleeding hands, mending their lines only to have them cut again and again. And the

despatch riders braving shells and mortars all in their day's work. And the Intercom Troop in its Dingo scout cars, running tirelessly between Regimental Headquarters and the squadrons, 'taxiing' commanders and OP officers. Specialists and important men, all of these, for without them the 18th would have floundered in a sea of perpetual misunderstanding and uncertainty.

We see the transport drivers, whose high quality was from the earliest days taken so much for granted. Vividly we remember them in Egypt and Libya, driving for long wakeful hours over pathless desert, carrying sleepy loads of men whose faith in them was never misplaced. And in Italy, slogging over the treacherous winding roads, sometimes working round the clock to keep supplies up to the hungry crews and their equally hungry tanks. And we see the mechanics, labouring day and night to keep the unit moving; highlighting their work, the picture rises of the long column of overloaded vehicles streaming down from Syria on that emergency move when it was so imperative that the unit reach the battlefield intact and on time. And along with these comes the later picture of the squadron fitters, sneaking up under Jerry's nose in the winter dark to repair and bring back disabled tanks. The LAD, too, not native sons of the 18th, but worthy adopted members of the family, toiling away behind the scenes so that the unit could fight well equipped, with tanks and trucks always in good condition, with guns and compasses and binoculars that would not let it down.

And the memory swings to those who tended the sick and wounded. Doctors, RAP men, stretcher bearers, men of understanding, who could be stern with malingerers and as tender as a woman towards real suffering, who themselves often took their chance of death or maiming to bring others to safety. The padres, too, servants of both the dead and the living, with ready ears for everyone's troubles, with encouraging words in their mouths and small but welcome gifts in their hands.

And the quartering staff and the cooks, and all who worked to ensure that the hundreds of hungry men were adequately fed and clothed. How often, when it was most needed, did a hot cup of tea or a dixie of stew appear, quite unexpectedly. These men could not do the impossible, and there were times when stomachs had to go empty; but this was never their fault. Clothes, too. They come swimming before the eyes, 'giggle suits' and shorts and battle dress, 'lemon squeezer' hats and silly little forage caps and berets, boots and socks and anklets, shirts and greatcoats and

belts and badges, all the dozens of little items that went to equip a man. How on earth, we may well ask, could anyone ever keep those grumbling men, all shapes and sizes, all clothed and fitted out, and not go mad?

And the clerks and the orderlies. The picture comes up of their unglamorous, unnoticed work, without which the 18th would have had no pay, no leave, no mail.... How these things lifted the morale, and how impossible life would have been without them!

And from here the pictures expand and move faster and faster as all the individual men of the 18th rise, a jumble of faces and names and voices, hundreds upon hundreds. To name them all would be quite impossible; to name a few, even the best, would be unjust. Far better to take leave of them here, nameless, their identities sunk in that magnificent collection of young men, the 18th.

All honour to the 18th, and to all who served in it!

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

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18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

ROLL OF HONOUR

Roll of Honour

killed in action
(including DIED OF WOUNDS)

Maj W. H. Evans	24 May 1941
Maj H. M. Green, m.i.d.	3 December 1943
Maj R. G. Parkinson	4 December 1943
Capt A. C. Beachen	21 July 1942
Capt G. K. Fussell	20 May 1941
Capt W. J. Lyon	26 May 1941
Capt P. A. Thorley	1 December 1943
Lt T. J. Cullinane	31 May 1944
Lt S. E. Foot, m.i.d.	25 May 1941
Lt J. K. Herdman	20 May 1941
Lt C. B. A. Jamison	27 July 1944
Lt E. F. Kent	1 December 1941
Lt R. A. McGurk	15 July 1942
Lt A. E. Taylor	4 September 1942
2 Lt D. R. Crump	7 August 1944
2 Lt R. G. De Costa	15 July 1942
2 Lt B. D. Hewett	14 December 1944
2 Lt R. A. Philips	4 September 1942
2 Lt D. L. Robinson	25 May 1941
2 Lt R. A. Ward	15 July 1942
WO II L. V. Bulford	25 May 1941
WO II N. I. Halcombe	15 July 1942
WO II E. J. McCormack	25 May 1941
WO II L. R. Preston	26 November 1941
Sgt A. I. Blow	4 December 1941
Sgt R. H. Bonish	27 November 1941
Sgt P. C. Burns	15 July 1942
Sgt O. J. Donaldson	6 April 1945
Sgt J. A. Edgar	26 July 1944

Sgt J. Elkis	21 April 1945
Sgt A. M. Findlay	23 July 1944
Sgt C. M. Jackman	21 July 1942
Sgt D. G. Laird	17 December 1943
Sgt W. D. McKinlay	8 May 1944
Sgt W. A. Mowat, m.i.d.	13 April 1945
Sgt J. P. Murtagh, m.i.d.	May 1941
Sgt E. Radich	25 May 1941
Sgt J. L. Roberts	15 December 1943
Sgt H. F. Scott	25 May 1941
Sgt D. Spinley	9 May 1941
Sgt R. G. Thompson	28 November 1941
Sgt C. D. Tullock, m.i.d.	4 September 1942
Sgt V. B. Wallace	21 July 1942
L-Sgt R. S. Aubin	9 April 1944
L-Sgt J. M. Brown	16 December 1943
L-Sgt A. Dean	9 December 1943
L-Sgt J. N. G. Flett	25 May 1944
L-Sgt F. G. Redfern, m.i.d.	25 May 1941
Cpl W. H. Alley	15 July 1942
Cpl I. N. Brown	23 July 1944
Cpl D. C. Gates	28 July 1944
Cpl T. G. Clarke	24 May 1941
Cpl S. F. Durant	25 November 1941
Cpl R. D. Gannon	15 July 1942
Cpl G. N. R. Griffiths	25 July 1944
Cpl E. A. Howard, MM	21 July 1942
Cpl J. S. Leith	25 May 1941
Cpl R. J. Ling, m.i.d.	25 May 1941
Cpl H. Longworth	18 April 1941
Cpl V. H. McPherson	15 July 1942
Cpl J. M. Mitchell	May 1941
Cpl F. Morrison	24 May 1941
Cpl D. A. O'Donnell	15 December 1943
Cpl S. H. Purchas	23 October 1944
Cpl R. A. Robinson	14 December 1944
Cpl W. M. Scott	24 July 1942

Cpl W. C. Somerville	26 May 1941
Cpl P. H. Yokes	23 May 1941
Cpl C. M. Wallen	May 1941
Cpl R. H. F. Walmsley	21 April 1945
Cpl W. M. Wards	1 December 1941
Cpl W. G. Warren	21 April 1945
Cpl L. W. Watson	15 December 1943
Cpl D. O. Windybank	2 June 1941
L-Cpl R. Bradley	2 December
L-Cpl W. V. Harrison	15 July 1942
L-Cpl A. E. Hayward	28 February 1945
L-Cpl J. B. Honan	1 December 191
L-Cpl A. G. Johnson	23 November 1941
L-Cpl R. H. Johnson	2 June 1941
L-Cpl A. L. Jordan	2 June 1941
L-Cpl F. J. Lawson	May 1941
L-Cpl H. E. Mulvihill	27 November 1941
L-Cpl G. K. Murdock	26 November 1941
L-Cpl R. H. Nairn	25 May 1941
L-Cpl D. R. Shaw	25 May 1941
L-Cpl N. J. A. Smyth	19 April 1941
L-Cpl J. Wemyss	24 May 1941
L-Cpl J. E. J. Westbrook	1 December 1941
L-Cpl R. F. Williams	8 May 1941
Pte R. Aikman	1 December 1941
Pte G. W. Alison	27 April 1941
Tpr A. H. Anderson	23 July 1944
Tpr C. K. B. Anderson	6 December 1943
Pte G. S. Anderson	27 May 1941
Pte F. J. Antunovich	25 May 1941
Pte L. T. Aplin	25 May 1941
Pte G. N. Armit	25 May 1941
Tpr F. T. Attwood	20 October 1944
Tpr D. Baillie	15 September 1944
Pte W. G. Bain	2 June 1941
Pte J. F. Barnett	20 May 1941

Pte A. Beaton	15 July 1941
Pte N. S. Beeche	20 May 1944
Tpr C. G. Beliski	2 October 1944
Pte A. H. N. Bell	27 April 1941
Pte W. E. Bennett	15 July 1942
Tpr D. Berryman	17 December 1943
Pte L. J. Birtles	25 May 1941
Pte S. Blackwell	15 July 1942
Tpr D. B. L. Bowker	15 September 1944
Pte J. A. Boyle	15 July 1942
Tpr M. J. Brady	21 October 1944
Pte W. Breeze	25 May 1941
Tpr A. Bridge	26 July 1944
Tpr A. D. Bronlund	4 October 1944
Tpr G. G. Brooke	28 April 1945
Pte K. R. Brown	25 November 1941
Pte T. M. Brown	25 May 1941
Pte V. L. Brownhill	21 July 1942
Pte A. G. Brunton	5 December 1941
Pte C. T. Campbell	26 November 1941
Pte V. J. Capill	25 May 1941
Tpr N. R. Carter	17 December 1944
Tpr O. H. R. Chambers	14 April 1944
Pte R. A. Chaplin	6 December 1941
Pte J. S. Chapman	27 June 1942
Pte F. F. Ching	20 May 1941
Pte G. W. Connell	2 June 1941
Pte C. R. Connors	28 November 1941
Pte E. F. L. Cooper	24 May 1941
Pte J. P. R. Cullen	4 December 1941
Pte T. M. Cunningham	21 July 1942
Pte J. L. Curtis	5 December 1941
Pte P. E. Daniels, m.i.d.	25 May 1941
Pte L. W. Davey	18 April 1941
Pte G. Davis	24 November 1941
Pte E. C. H. Dawson	26 May 1941
Pte W. R. Dean	27 April 1941
Pte L. P. Dinsdale	20 May 1941

Pte H. G. Dodd	18 April 1941
Tpr W. R. Dodds	7 December 1944
Tpr I. Donaldson	23 July 1944
Pte P. F. Donnelly	2 June 1941
Pte K. Donovan	25 May 1941
Pte T. M. Dwyer	24 May 1941
Pte J. East	18 April 1941
Pte V. East	21 December 1941
Tpr J. D. Eathorne	20 December 1944
Pte G. G. Ericksen	27 May 1941
Pte J. A. Eyes	May 1941
Pte E. N. Faulkner	27 May 1941
Pte C. F. Ferguson	27 April 1941
Pte E. J. Ferguson	2 June 1941
Pte A. G. Finch	15 April 1941
Pte C. D. Findlay	15 July 1942
Pte C. A. Fitchett	April 1941
Pte G. Fletcher	27 April 1941
Pte G. R. Flint	21 July 1942
Pte W. L. Ford	15 July 1942
Pte H. Fulcher, Greek Bronze Medal	1 December 1941
Pte E. E. C. Gardiner	14 July 1942
Pte J. R. Gear	24 May 1941
Pte M. H. Gedye	25 May 1941
Pte J. B. Gibson	21 July 1942
Pte K. D. Gillett	27 November 1941
Pte D. N. Godwin	27 November 1941
Pte R. I. Goldsmith, m.i.d.	21 July 1942
Pte C. K. Grainger	18 April 1941
Pte W. R. Green	22 July 1942
Pte B. Griffin	25 May 1941
Pte G. A. Griffith	25 May 1941
Pte H. D. Grimes	23 May 1941
Pte W. J. C. Guy	24 November 1941
Pte A. W. Hamilton	21 July 1942
Tpr A. J. Hamilton	9 December 1943
Pte D. F. Hancock	15 July 1942

Tpr R. C. Hancock	15 December 1943
Tpr E. M. Hanley	8 December 1943
Pte E. B. Harris	15 July 1942
Pte F. H. Hatcher	21 July 1942
Pte I. G. Hattaway	27 June 1942
Pte N. S. Hatton	4 September 1942
Pte C. S. Hemmingson	25 May 1941
Pte J. M. Henderson	15 July 1942
Pte J. L. Hetherington	28 June 1942
Pte G. J. Hewitt	15 July 1942
Tpr G. Hill	31 May 1944
Pte R. E. Hill	May 1941
Pte N. W. Hirst	25 May 1941
Pte G. A. Hogan	28 June 1942
Pte T. Hollis	26 May 1941
Tpr F. L. Howard	30 July 1944
Tpr R. W. Hughson	23 July 1944
Pte H. Irving	25 May 1941
Pte E. J. Irwin	20 April 1941
Pte N. E. Jackson	April 1941
Pte A. H. Jackways	25 May 1941
Pte E. James	21 July 1942
Pte J. A. Jamieson	May 1941
Pte A. H. Jarrett	21 July 1942
Tpr A. L. Jillings	15 December 1943
Pte V. T. Johnson	21 July 1942
Pte A. G. Johnston	25 May 1941
Pte F. G. Johnston	25 November 1941
Pte G. M. Johnstone	26 May 1941
Tpr F. D. Jones	14 December 1944
Pte L. H. Jones	28 June 1942
Pte M. G. Jones	May 1941
Pte H. G. D. Keane	May 1941
Pte R. T. Kelly	21 July 1942
Tpr W. H. Kelman	14 April 1944
Tpr J. J. Kingsford	23 July 1944

Pte I. T. W. Knox	17 July 1942
Pte J. Knox	4 September 1942
Pte G. D. Laing	25 May 1941
Pte B. G. E. Landman	25 May 1941
Pte H. G. Lanfear	21 July 1942
Pte W. J. Lanfear	May 1941
Pte T. E. Lauder	27 May 1941
Tpr A. C. Lawson	17 September 1944
Pte N. S. Leonard	18 April 1941
Pte W. G. Lindsay	2 June 1941
Pte A. J. Loft	21 July 1942
Pte G. N. Lowry	24 May 1941
Pte D. A. Lowther	2 December 1941
Pte J. A. McClements	3 September 1941
Pte S. A. S. McConnell	5 December 1941
Tpr G. R. Mclsaac	23 September 1944
Pte R. M. McKee	5 September 1942
Pte H. W. McKelvie	9 August 1942
Pte H. McKenzie	11 September 1942
Pte W. McNamara	5 December 1941
Pte D. N. McQuarrie, MM	2 December 1941
Pte C. D. MacRae	25 May 1941
Pte T. A. Manson, Greek Bronze Medal	25 November 1941
Pte L. S. Marshall	27 April 1941
Pte J. T. Martelli	4 September 1942
Pte R. L. Martin	25 May 1941
Tpr E. O. Meyer	27 July 1944
Pte R. J. H. Miller	25 May 1941
Pte L. Mischewski	21 July 1942
Pte S. L. Mooney, rn.i.d.	25 May 1941
Pte A. R. Morrison	26 May 1941
Pte M. Morrissey	5 December 1941
Pte R. E. Munford	15 July 1942
Pte T. M. Munro	May 1941
Pte C. Newdick	25 May 1941
Pte C. R. Newman	25 May 1941
Pte A. F. P. Nicholson	2 June 1941
Pte J. Ogilvy	9 May 1941

Pte H. Onyon	18 April 1941
Pte G. B. Osborne	1 December 1941
Pte L. G. Owens	15 July 1942
Pte I. A. Parkinson	25 may 1941
Tpr E. D. Parsons	13 April 1944
Pte I. H. Peek	2 June 1941
Pte N. G. Perkins	18 April 1941
Pte R. H. Plank	22 July 1942
Pte W. R. Preston	4 September 1942
Pte G. H. Ramsay	5 December 1941
Pte J. J. Reid	1 December 1941
Pte L. Reid	15 July 1942
Pte R. J. Reid	2 June 1941
Pte J. Reston	30 May 1941
Pte E. A. Richardson	25 May 1941
Pte M. H. Roberts	15 July 1942
Pte H. G. Robinson	3 December 1941
Pte H. E. Rodgers	1 December 1941
Pte W. Rodgers	26 November 1941
Pte G. S. Roper	4 September 1942
Pte J. R. Saunderson	25 November 1941
Tpr T. J. Savage	1 May 1945
Pte J. Scandle	2 June 1941
Pte H. C. Shand	25 November 1941
Pte A. E. Shepherd	4 Septemern 1942
Tpr R. J. Shirreffs	15 December 1943
Pte J. Simpson	2 May 1941
Pte F. W. Sirett	May 1941
Pte G. C. Sisterson	25 May 1941
Pte F. C. Smith	25 May 1941
Tpr R. G. Smith	15 December 1943
Pte R. Smith	15 July 1942
Tpr T. G. Somerville	5 December 1943
Pte R. A. Spain	25 November 1941
Pte W. Spring	2 June 1941
Tpr G. E. D. Stanley	16 December 1943
Pte H. Stephenson	5 December 1941

Pte R. D. Stephenson	May 1941
Pte A. A. Stockley	2 June 1941
Pte A. C. Stuart	25 May 1941
Pte V. O. Stuck	22 Julay 1942
Pte W. H. Sunley	5 December 1941
Pte A. Taylor	18 May 1941
Pte A. G. Taylor	26 November 1941
Pte B. Thomson	15 July 1942
Pte M. Thomson	April 1941
Pte C. C. Till	25 May 1941
Pte C. B. Timperley	15 JulY 1942
Pte E. Tunbridge	21 July 1942
Pte E. G. F. Turner	May 1941
Pte A. H. M. Vincent	25 May 1941
Pte T. R. Waddell	May 1941
Pte A. L. Walden	5 December 1941
Pte J. R. Walker	5 December 1941
Tpr W. Walker	7 April 1944
Pte J. B. Wallace	15 Julay 1942
Pte E. G. Warner	May 1941
Pte R. C. Waters	4 September 1942
Tpr R. A. Wells	1 May 1945
Pte A. G. West	May 1941
Pte J. S. Wilkins	May 1941
Pte L. Williams	April 1941
Tpr P. H. Williams	1 May 1945
Pte J. A. Wilson	21 July 1942
Pte F. J. Wilton	25 November 1941
Pte J. J. Wood	16 July 1942
Pte A. E. Wyatt	25 November 1941
Pte R. H. Yeoman	20 July 1942
Pte S. H. Yorke	25 May 1941
Tpr C. L. Zimmerman, MM	18 December 1944
killed or died while prisoner of war	
Lt-Col R. J. Lynch, MC	26 September 1942
Capt R. Davies	21 April 1945

Capt J. L. Harrison	21 January 1943
Sgt F. M. Schick	4 August 1941
Cpl M. Cocker	(Date unknown)
L-Cpl E. A. Allchurch	4 April 1945
L-Cpl J. L. Baker	4 December 1942
Pte H. W. Arthur	17 January 1942
Pte N. T. Cullum	11 June 1943
Pte G. M. Feaver	28 May 1942
Pte T. Fraser	27 August 1942
Pte J. Gilmore	16 August 1944
Pte W. Garnett	16 September 1942
Pte W. F. Hankins	8 July 1941
Pte E. Jones	30 September 1941
Pte C. G. Laird	(Date unknown)
Pte J. Melville	29 August 1944
Pte G. W. Neville	28 January 1944
Pte W. H. Nowland	8 April 1945
Pte R. Piercy	6 September 1941
Pte G. N. Taylor	17 August 1942

died on active service

Lt J. W. McGowan	11 August 1943
2 Lt F. F. Greer	24 November 1944
Sgt C. A. Graff	26 April 1945
Tpr R. L. Keith	14 May 1944
Tpr J. R. Kent	11 March 1944
Tpr M. F. O'Connor	25 December 1944
Tpr T. Riddell	1 June 1943
Pte A. V. Roycroft	28 January 1942s

Summary of Casualties

	Killed or Died of Wounds		Wounded		Prisoners of War		Died while Prisoners of War		Died on Active Service		TOTAL
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	ORs
Greece	-	23	3	39	5	104	-	-	-	-	174
Crete	6	99	3	111	4	106	-	-	-	-	329
Libya, 1941	1	49	5	105	-	30	-	-	-	-	109

Egypt, 1942	6	67	9	219	9	92	-	-	-	-	402
Italy	7	61	35	210	-	-	-	-	-	-	313
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	20	299	55	692	18	332	3	18	2	6	1445

Included in the prisoners of war are 5 officers and 85 other ranks who were wounded when captured.

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Honours and Awards

distinguished service order

Lt-Gol H. H. Parata

Lt-Col C. L. Pleasants, MC

Maj K. L. Brown, Greek MG

Maj J. B. Ferguson, MG

Maj G. B. Nelson

Rev. R. McL. Gourdie
(Chaplain attached)

Capt S. B. Thompson
(NZMG attached)

officer of the order of the british empire

Maj W. H. Ryan, Greek Silver Cross

military cross

Maj R. J. Lynch

Gapt J. R. Greenfield

Capt E. C. Laurie

Capt C. S. Passmore

Capt P. R. Pike

Lt P. L. Collins

Lt C. W. Hawkins

Lt J. H. Hodge

Rev. F. O. Dawson
(Chaplain attached)

member of the order of the british empire

Capt R. W. Dunbar

greek silver cross
(Order of King George I)

2 Lt W. H. Ryan

greek military cross

Lt K. L. Brown

distinguished conduct medal

WO I G. R. Andrews

WO II A. Fletcher

Cpl A. J. Voss

military medal

WO I J. L. Richards

WO II A. B. H. Naughton

Sgt G. J. Black

Sgt R. J. Booth

L-Sgt J. A. McCowatt

L-Sgt R. D. Martin

L-Sgt R. Thompson

L-Sgt C. L. Zimmerman

Sgt J. W. Brook

Sgt A. H. Empson

Sgt W. R. Goodmanson

Sgt A. C. Holgerson,

Greek Bronze Medal

Sgt C. Hunt,

Greek Bronze Medal

Sgt W. J. Kennedy

Sgt P. Murtagh

Sgt W. Pierce

Sgt R. A. Sweet

Cpl R. McPartlin

Cpl A. T. S. Rush

Tpr E. J. Brennan

Tpr E. W. Clarke

Pte E. A. Howard

Pte Angus McKenzie

Pte Arthur McKenzie

Pte D. N. McQuarrie

Pte H. Moors

Tpr N. B. Trye

british empire medal

S-Sgt F. Bowes

united states bronze star

Sgt G. J. Black, MM

greek gold medal

S-Sgt J. F. Seymour

Sgt L. V. Smith

greek silver medal

Cpl W. J. Pritt

Pte N. C. Dunn

Pte G. Fraser

Pte W. A. Smith

greek bronze medal

Pte V. R. Ball

Pte J. O. Bishop

Pte L. J. Franklin

Pte H. Fulcher

Pte F. W. Hislop

Pte A. C. Holgerson

Pte T. G. H. Howell

Pte C. Hunt

Pte T. A. Manson

Pte A. M. Meredith

Pte W. A. Pettit

Pte H. P. Sanders

Pte I. A. Sanders

Pte W. C. Saxon

Pte M. Vincent

Pte H. Ward

Pte R. Ward

18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

COMMANDING OFFICERS

Commanding Officers

Lt-Col J. R. Gray	26 Sep 1939-14 Jul 1941 *
Lt-Col J. N. Peart	14 Jul 1941-21 Aug 1941
Lt-Col J. R. Gray	21 Aug 1941- 8 Nov 1941
Lt-Col J. N. Peart	8 Nov 1941-27 Mar 1942
Lt-Col J. R. Gray	27 Mar 1942-25 Jun 1942
Lt-Col R. J. Lynch	25 Jun 1942-15 Jul 1942
Maj A. S. Playle	15 Jul 1942-19 Jul 1942
Lt-Col C. L. Pleasants	19 Jul 1942-1 Dec 1943
Maj H. M. Green	1 Dec 1943-3 Dec 1943
Maj J. B. Ferguson	3 Dec 1943-6 Dec 1943
Lt-Col C. L. Pleasants	6 Dec 1943-15 Dec 1943
Maj J. B. Ferguson	15 Dec 1943-26 Jan 1944
Lt-Col C. L. Pleasants	26 Jan 1944-4 Mar 1944
Lt-Col H. A. Robinson	4 Mar 1944-18 Jul 1944
Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson	18 Jul 1944-22 Feb 1945
Lt-Col J. M. Elliott	22 Feb 1945-31 Mar 1945
Lt-Col H. H. Parata	31 Mar 1945-22 May 1945
Maj E. C. Laurie	24 May 1945-3 Jun 1945
Lt-Col A. S. Playle	3 Jun 1945-23 Dec 1945

* *Major Peart commanded the battalion for a period in June 1941 while Lt-Col Gray was absent on special duty.

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18 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

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