

# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

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## ***Encoding***

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

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

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

## ***Revisions to the electronic version***

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Removed unwanted linebreaks and associated markup.

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Added full TEI header.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

[COVERS]



Official History of New Zealand  
in the Second World War

## 19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment

by  
D. W. STAGLAIR

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



**19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT**

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## [FRONTISPIECE]



The day Cassino fell

**The day Cassino fell**

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## [TITLE PAGE]

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19 Battalion and  
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D. W. SINCLAIR

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## FOREWORD



WINDSOR CASTLE

### *Foreword*

by lieutenant-general lord freyberg,  
vc, gcmg, kcb, kbe, dso

The publication of these unit histories gives me an opportunity of paying a well-earned tribute to the officers and men of the [2 NZEF](#) for their great services in the Middle East and [Italy](#).

You will find in this book a record of one of our most battleworthy infantry battalions, which later changed over to be an armoured regiment, and as such carried out its exacting role with skill and efficiency.

The 19th Battalion were fortunate in many ways, and particularly in the officers who were appointed to lead the battalion in action. [Colonel Varnham](#) organised and trained them in the early days in Egypt, and his work stood the test of time and battle. Colonel Blackburn commanded the battalion in [Greece](#) and Crete. Colonel Hartnell at Ed Duda, [Minqar Qaim](#) and at Ruweisat.

When the 19th Battalion became an armoured regiment, they came to [Italy](#) and fought right through the Italian campaign under Colonels McGaffin, [Parata](#) and Everist.

During the war they took their full share in our 'triumphs' and 'disasters'. They fought a brilliant action at [Servia Pass](#) in [Greece](#), and in [Crete](#) in the defence of

Galatas and the counter-attack at 42nd Street. Later in the Western Desert they formed the corridor at Tobruk, and took part in the brilliant attack at Minqar Qaim and the disaster at Ruweisat. They fought from the first battle in April 1941 in Greece, and finished in the final campaign which led to the capture of Trieste and final victory on the 2nd May 1945.

This is a wonderful story. I hope it will be widely read, so that New Zealand people will learn of the deeds of heroism of this great unit.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

Windsor Castle

# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## INTRODUCTION

### *Introduction*

'Tis the Cause makes all.

—Byron

Proudly taking its place among the units which composed the 2nd New Zealand Division, 19 New Zealand Battalion and Armoured Regiment served overseas in [Greece](#), [Crete](#), [Egypt](#) and [Italy](#). It was one of the first units to leave the Dominion, and it did not return home until the Axis powers had been defeated.

The final downfall of the Axis by the massed endeavour of the Allies has changed the face of the world. Great men, names which will be remembered and honoured for their inspiration and leadership, emerged from among the millions engaged in the struggle. On the home front and on the battlefield, groups and units united in common cause laid the foundation for future history. In the Middle East and Central Mediterranean theatres 2 NZ Division shared the actions and the honours with other equally famous formations in the Allied armies. The 19th Battalion, fighting first as infantry, then in tanks as an armoured regiment, served with distinction in both roles.

This book is a chronicle of some of the doings of the 19th and its members from 3 October 1939, when the unit was formed, until the end of 1945, when it was disbanded. Historians of the future will view the work of this generation through the perspective of the years, and set the values of their day against the events of the past to point the lesson. True, the unit played its full part in the events of those great days, but such an objective history is beyond the scope of a book of this kind, which is but a written record for those who served in the unit and for those who knew them.

It cannot hope to cover comprehensively the full range of the wartime experiences of even one individual soldier; much less can it attempt to set down everything of note that happened to the 19th in six years of service. The author has

tried to give, in chronological order, a fair cross-section of events of importance, incidents of general interest, and anecdotes which those who were in the unit at the time will have taken part in, witnessed, or heard about—and it is hoped will now 'remember with advantages'.

The reader who is able to do this will be indebted to many people: to the faithful scribes at Unit Headquarters who on active service kept up to date, despite every distraction, the unit war diary; to the staff of the [War History Branch](#) of the Internal Affairs Department, whose work on campaign narratives was made available and who offered helpful criticism and experienced advice; to the archivists who have so expertly co-ordinated the official files that searching is now both simple and rewarding; to the many 19th men who from their own private sources have added detail and colour to the broad official canvas; to those who have read, checked, and corrected the several drafts on which this narrative was based.

To all these the author gratefully acknowledges his indebtedness and tenders his thanks.

D. W. SINCLAIR

[WELLINGTON](#) March 1953

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He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,  
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd,  
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.  
He that shall live this day, and see old age,  
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,  
And say, "Tomorrow is Saint Crispian":  
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,  
And say, "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."  
Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,  
But he'll remember with advantages  
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,  
Familiar in his mouth as household words,—

—Shakespeare (King Henry V)

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT



# CHAPTER 1 – TRENTHAM

# CHAPTER 1

## Trentham

Hark to the call of war.

—Robert W. Service

Dormant beneath the encircling hills from which the winter snows were fast disappearing lay a great camp: [Trentham](#), haunted by spirits yet without a spirit. Twenty-five years of peacetime soldiering had little more than flickered the eyelids of a military camp which in the years 1914-18 had epitomised strength, purpose, and vigour.

But with the spring of 1939 the bugles sounded again and volunteers flocked to answer the call. The ranks of the Territorial units throughout the country all yielded their quotas to the first 6600 men wanted 'for active servic'. The recruits of 1939, however, were by no means confined to those who had already had some soldier training. Out of the cities and towns, off the farms, came men of all shades of opinion and from all walks of life.

From the chaos which marked the assembly of this 'Special Force' order slowly emerged. The citizen turned soldier, quickly adapting himself to the new way of life, became an integral part of the military machine which the old camp was designed to serve. As the shuffle of civilian shoes changed to the measured tread of iron-shod boots, the spirit of [Trentham Camp](#) awoke once more. In this atmosphere, charged with the memories of their fathers' prowess, young men were again trained for war.

On 27 September 1939 officers and NCOs commenced an intensive course prior to selection and posting to units. Theirs was a heavy responsibility, for the training and moulding of this new force was in their hands. Too few young men had responded to the appeals made since 1929 for volunteers to fill the ranks of Territorial Force units. NCOs, the backbone of any unit, had to be found quickly—we were fortunate in the leaven of ex-Territorials through- out the Special Force. They responded quickly to the brief intensive course and as instructors themselves undertook recruit training for their own small commands as soon as they were posted.

On 3 October 19 Wellington Rifle Battalion, with its headquarters at [Trentham](#), was born. The principal appointments in the unit were allocated to officers who had given stalwart service to their country for many years and whose energy and efficiency were well known. The Commanding Officer, [Lieutenant-Colonel F. S. Varnham](#), MC, ED, <sup>1</sup> had a distinguished record both as an officer in the New Zealand Division during the First World War and subsequently as a Territorial unit and brigade commander. His senior officers were:

Major C. A. D'A. Blackburn	Second-in-Command
Lieutenant E. W. S. Williams, NZSC	Adjutant
Lieutenant J. E. F. Vogel	Quartermaster
Major A. B. Ross	OC Wellington Company
Major R. K. Gordon	OC Wellington West Coast Company
Captain C. M. Williamson	OC Hawke's Bay Company
Captain S. F. Hartnell	OC Taranaki Company
Captain C. E. Webster	OC Headquarters Company

Life for the seven hundred-odd enthusiasts on the battalion roll soon shook down to an orderly routine. Neither the sweat of intensive training nor the vagaries of the spring weather dampened their ardour. The keenest rivalry sprang up between the companies, which retained the names and something of the high tradition of the famous regiments from which they had sprung. The response from all ranks was remarkable. Flags emblazoned with the badges of those regiments under whose colours many men now in the ranks of the 19th had previously served were presented by Territorial associations. These were proudly flown in company lines. Reveille each day was heralded by the Orderly Sergeant breaking out on the battalion flagpole the colours of his own company. This duty company also provided the guard, and the drill of mounting it was attended by all the traditional ceremonial.

Results were soon apparent; shoulders rounded by the office desk squared as the chests beneath them expanded with health. Appetites grew even keener than the inter-company competition. With the opening of the wet canteen the last faint call from civvy street faded. The evening intake could now be guaranteed to equal the day's sweat—thus the nice balance between work and recreation was maintained at a comfortable level and this added considerably to the general air of well-being.

As the programme progressed from individual training to section and platoon training, each small command developed a team spirit which conditioned every action of its members.

The Force had started behind scratch; it had no modern automatic weapons, few mortars, little specialist equipment, and the pool of transport which had to serve all units in the camp was woefully inadequate. Clothing, too, was of last-war vintage. The men worked in denim suits, and on ceremonial occasions and on leave dressed in heavy two-piece serge suits with stovepipe trousers, choker collars and brass buttons.

Deficiencies in modern equipment were overcome by improvisation and ingenuity. Two factors, teamwork and the faculty for improvisation, later became well-known characteristics of New Zealand troops, and whatever criticism may be levelled at the training methods of those early days, at least it was not lacking in those two essentials. The will to work never flagged, but an influenza epidemic took a toll of men and resulted in many gaps in the ranks between the end of October and mid-November. Collective keenness compensated to some degree for these enforced absences and progress was steady.

An announcement by the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon M. J. Savage, gave the first official intimation that the Special Force was destined to serve overseas. The news that a full division was to be raised and sent away in three echelons was the signal for a faster tempo in training. The 19th as part of the First Echelon would soon be on the way to [Waiouru](#) for a period of advanced work which the restricted confines of the Hutt Valley would not permit. The promise of a fortnight under the shadow of Ruapehu caused frenzied administrative activity.

For the first time the battalion was on the move. Military confusion was multiplied. Moving is a task which taxes any organisation, and the arrival at its destination of a complete unit, fully equipped and in good order, is an achievement which only careful drill and constant practice can ensure. In this first essay, only by many preliminary conferences, reams of detailed instructions, and much shepherding was intact arrival ensured. The miracle of transferring camp was completed amid sighs of relief from all ranks—there was some sadness, too, for the facilities at [Waiouru](#) did not compare with those of [Trentham](#). The wet canteen was absent and

town leave non-existent. Jack [Foster](#),<sup>2</sup> the dapper and efficient NCO in charge of the officers' mess, found no flowers upon the Desert Road, and bereft of its trimmings by an unfeeling edict from the Quartermaster, his mess fell far below previous standards.

Work in the wide open spaces of the Waiouru Plains was hard but enjoyable. The crisp mountain air added zest to all activities and piquancy to the first open-air efforts of the battalion cooks. Quantity rather than quality was demanded. Training was measured in similar terms; gusto rather than military science marked the manoeuvres.

The unit had its first experience of night operations here and in one night sent seventy thousand rounds of small-arms ammunition into the darkness; then, when the noise had died away, the men slept at the posts they had prepared. Battle practice, later to become so close to the real thing that neither participants nor onlookers enjoyed the show, was then as thrilling as any cinema interpretation. The visiting reporters did not neglect this first opportunity to use the jargon of war, and the battalion's battles were recorded in the press under bold headlines.

The sudden withdrawal from the unit of an advance party consisting of Lieutenant [Budd](#),<sup>3</sup> WO II [Wroth](#),<sup>4</sup> Staff-Sergeant [Golder](#),<sup>5</sup> Sergeant [Taylor](#),<sup>6</sup> Sergeant [Oram](#)<sup>7</sup> and Lance-Sergeant [Thomas](#)<sup>8</sup> caused much speculation. Rumour had it that they had been whisked away to a waiting ship and that embarkation for the First Echelon was imminent. [Major-General B. C. Freyberg](#), VC, then in the United Kingdom, had been appointed to command the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force and would soon arrive in New Zealand. The Waiouru interlude was cut short, and soon the battalion was on its way back to [Trentham](#). Excitement ran high.

Back to familiar fields, the 19th once more assiduously applied itself to achieving parade-ground excellence. On 10 December the whole of the Special Force was suddenly placed on active service, and final leave of two weeks began on the 14th.

Mixing again with civilian friends and with the public gave a strange feeling of unreality. The war was completely out of the orbit of the man in the street. He did not share the enthusiasm of the volunteer and was sceptical of the necessity for

overseas service. Public opinion seemed to be united in one premise only: that the war would be a short one. The defeat of [Hitler](#) was discussed in terms of weeks, and the 'cardboard tanks' of his last year's propaganda were pointed out as examples of clumsy Teutonic bluffing. The Graf Spee, too, meeting her fate while a breathless world-wide radio audience waited, created an oasis-like mirage in the grey sands of war. So Christmas passed, and with the gilt of enthusiasm somewhat tarnished, the soldiers of three months' standing returned to camp in [Trentham](#).

With embarkation in the air, the battalion took a little longer than it should have done to settle down. Busy with administrative details, officers saw less of their troops than previously, but by 31 December some of the hard-won smartness had been regained. The programme of daily route marches starting early each fine summer's morning will always remain as a pleasant memory of the last days at [Trentham](#). The green hills around Akatarawa and Haywards echoed to lusty singing as the platoons swung along. All civilian awkwardness was lost, the troops were fit, well fed and happy. The company was good, and though each man knew that his days in his homeland were getting fewer, the bearing of the battalion and of every soldier in it was one of confidence. [General Freyberg](#), making his initial inspection, commented favourably on the unit's bearing and turnout.

On that Sunday parade the General and the men he was to lead into battle met for the first time. An impressive church service, followed by an inspection and march past, then later by a lecture to selected groups, gave both parties time for something more than a cursory appraisal. The GOC's quick all-embracing glance, his incisive metallic voice and commanding presence made a lasting impression. The fact, too, that cooks and quartermasters were singled out for his special attention was not lost on the troops. In the lines, after the parade that afternoon, the only topic of conversation was '[Tiny](#)' [Freyberg](#), his legendary exploits and his actions that day. No leader could have inspired confidence more quickly.

On 3 January 1940 the battalion, led by its mascot '[Major](#)', the black-and-white bull terrier which was later to become famous as the No. 1 dog of the New Zealand Division, marched through the streets of [Wellington](#) to form up in front of the steps outside Parliament Buildings. Speeches from representatives of all sections of the community wished the troops 'God speed and good luck'.

In camp that same afternoon private farewells were said. Next-of-kin, friends, and wellwishers gathered to say goodbye. Leaving home had at last become a sad reality. The battalion lines, trim tented and subdued, will remain long in the memories of mothers, wives and sweethearts; for them the sorrow of parting did not ride buoyantly on a sea of excitement. Two days later [Trentham](#) was deserted.

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<sup>1</sup> [Brig F. S. Varnham](#), MC, \* ED, m.i.d.; [Gisborne](#); born [Wellington](#), 1 Nov 1888; newspaper manager; Wellington Regt 1915-19 (Staff Capt 1 NZIB); CO [19 Bn](#) 3 Oct 1939-15 Apr 1941, 9 Jun-20 Oct 1941; comd 7 Army Tank Bde (NZ) May 1942-May 1943; injured 15 Apr 1941.

<sup>2</sup> [Cpl J. P. Foster](#); [Wellington](#); born Wales, 21 Mar 1906; club steward.

<sup>3</sup> [Capt H. S. Budd](#); [Whangarei](#); born [Waihi](#), 20 Jun 1906; company representative; p.w. 2 Jun 1941.

<sup>4</sup> [Maj C. S. Wroth](#), m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 6 Mar 1915; Regular soldier; BM 6 Bde Oct-Nov 1944; Camp Commandant, Burnham MC, 1947-48.

<sup>5</sup> [WO II S. M. Golder](#); [Featherston](#); born [Beckenham, Kent](#), 23 Jun 1910; joiner; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

<sup>6</sup> [Maj C. W. Taylor](#), EM; [Gisborne](#); born [Gisborne](#), 19 Jan 1912; civil servant; company commander 25 Bn 1944-45; twice wounded.

<sup>7</sup> [Sgt W. J. H. F. Oram](#); [Auckland](#); born [Dartford, England](#), 9 Aug 1912; lorry diver; wounded May 1941.

<sup>8</sup> [Capt B. W. Thomas](#); born [Marton](#), 30 Jun 1914; research chemist; killed in action 26 Sep 1944.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT



## CHAPTER 2 – NEW ZEALAND TO EGYPT

## CHAPTER 2

### *New Zealand to Egypt*

To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.

—R. L. Stevenson

Dawn on 5 January 1940 saw the unit packed up and waiting, and just after sunrise the tightly crammed railway carriages began to move. The first stage of a journey which would last almost six years had begun. Waving groups stood at each small railway station in the Valley, and despite the early hour cars packed with friends sped along the Hutt Road. But the train did not stop until it stood beneath the towering decks of His Majesty's New Zealand Transport Z3.

Detraining on King's Wharf, a kit-laden stream of men scrambled up the gangway. As each man passed the embarkation officer his name was checked off the roll. Seven hundred and sixty-eight all ranks, collectively called 19 [Wellington](#) Battalion, individually answering to four-figure numbers and army ranks, passed the sentry at the foot of the narrow gangplank route which bore no destination signpost and from which there would be no turning back. With them too, surreptitiously, went one dog.

The cipher Z3 and a grey wartime cloak were poor disguises for the lovely lines of the P & O liner Strathaird. Her palatial appointments were still unaltered and undimmed. Dumping their incongruous kits in surroundings designed for luxury-loving tourists, the troops untrussed themselves from their khaki uniforms, wiped sweat and surprise from their brows, and prepared to enjoy the journey ahead.

Grim stories of last-war trooping from veterans who had found their way by stealth born of the love of adventure into the ranks of the battalion were soon dispelled. On the Strathaird officers travelled first class, warrant officers and sergeants second, and other ranks third class. The 1350 New Zealand troops on board were little more than the ship's normal passenger list. Accommodation problems were non-existent; never before or since have troops travelled in such comfort. The 19th Battalion, and the New Zealand Engineers who embarked with them, counted themselves most fortunate in their ship.

As soon as the last man was aboard, the ropes were cast off and the Strathaird moved slowly out into the stream to await the rest of the convoy. Anxious eyes of the thousands of friends on the Quay—denied closer contact with the ship—strained to catch the last glimpse of sons, husbands, and brothers among the waving, crowded figures lining her decks. On board, those fortunate enough to possess or borrow binoculars recognised briefly among the mass of upturned faces friends they were leaving behind.

While the ships were anchored in the still waters of [Wellington](#) harbour, the troops on board had time for reflection before sailing and many last letters went ashore on the small boats which cruised around the convoy. Brilliant sunshine and the promise of clear calm weather ahead were good omens for a perfect trip, but there was little sound sleep that night. At six o'clock next morning HMT Z3 sailed, and in the late afternoon [Egmont's](#) peak disappeared below the sunlit horizon.

Even the turbulent Tasman was kind to the Strathaird's cargo of landlubbers, who sailed in sunshine on flat calm seas. The second day, Sunday, was marked by a memorable church parade at which the spirited singing was in keeping with a virile service. The lesson was read by [Colonel Varnham](#), who had been appointed Officer Commanding Troops on the ship. The sermon by the Rev. C. E. Hyde, CF, <sup>1</sup> was a fitting message for a company of untried troops. 'Never hit softly—when you must hit, hit hard' was the theme. The Officer Commanding Troops followed it with an address on soldierly behaviour, pointing as an example to the reputation of the 1st NZEF, famed for its hard hitting in action and its gentlemanly conduct always.

On the morning of Wednesday the 10th land was first sighted and from the Sydney Heads the ships of the Australian convoy emerged. Joining up, they moved into line as if on parade, and the complete convoy presented a sight which seven weeks at sea could not rob of constant interest. Even the list of names was imposing; each ship represented the best of [Britain's](#) Royal and Merchant Navies. The grey battleship [Ramillies](#), with the cruisers [Canberra](#) and [Leander](#), <sup>2</sup> escorted the [Orion](#), [Rangitata](#), [Empress of Canada](#), [Dunera](#), [Strathaird](#), and [Sobieski](#) carrying New Zealand troops; the [Strathnaver](#), [Orcades](#), [Orford](#), [Otranto](#) and the [Empress of Japan](#) (later renamed [Empress of Scotland](#)) carried Australians. The two contingents exchanged signals of greeting and eight days later, on the 18th, they met at

[Fremantle](#), the first port of call for the convoy.

The warmth of the welcome from the residents of [Fremantle](#) and [Perth](#), extended to Aussie and Kiwi alike, will never be forgotten. The 19th went ashore at 6 p.m. with leave passes expiring at midnight. Their visit was marked by the generous hospitality of the citizens and by much fraternising between the troops; of this visit the voyage report records: 'The behaviour of the men was very fair taking into consideration the large number of naval ratings, Australian and New Zealand troops ashore and the fraternising this occasioned. None missed the ship.'

On 20 January the convoy sailed, heading north-west into the [Indian Ocean](#). The weather continued calm and the heat and the effects of vaccination combined to produce some lassitude. Training suffered, for the restricted space on board ship allowed little movement and many a martial lecture became nothing more than the preliminary lullaby to an afternoon's nap. Some few members of the battalion, however, had constant duties to perform and all had their share of routine fatigues. No. 1 Platoon (Signals) kept twenty-four hour watch on 'Monkey Island' above the bridge, handling by Morse lamp the military traffic for the ship. Others did duty on lookout and anti-aircraft watches. One particularly busy man was the Gifts Officer, Lieutenant [Danderson](#),<sup>3</sup> who daily distributed largesse from a store of good things provided by the [National Patriotic Fund Board](#).

So the days passed, with the convoy spread out across miles of blue unruffled ocean, headed no one knew where.

The first sign that the convoy was again approaching busy waters was the appearance of HMS [Sussex](#), adding a cruiser to the escort. Then, on 30 January, land was sighted and, the Strathaird leading, the convoy steamed into Colombo harbour and moored close to a Japanese liner. Spick and span, black-and-white paintwork gleaming, she betrayed no sign of the sinister role she and her sister ships were to play a few years later.

Shore leave in [Ceylon](#) next day had a tonic effect and was a most interesting experience. Lightered ashore, the troops landed on the quayside then marched through the streets to the British barracks, where they were paid. What curious things those rupees bought! The native markets were well stocked, their wares were

cheap, and bazaar shopping was a novelty to New Zealanders. With souvenirs of their first visit to the East tucked under their arms, the troops returned to the ship. The official ferries made the trip almost empty but the native boatmen reaped a harvest. Rickshaw to the quayside and bumboat to the ship were favoured modes of conveyance. Many overstayed their leave for an hour or so, but when the Strathaird sailed on 1 February 'All present and correct' was entered on each company parade state. Leaving the [Charing Cross](#) of the [Indian Ocean](#) the convoy headed out to sea, and the many eyes turned shorewards watched with regret Colombo's famed sign 'Ceylon for good tea' fade into the distance.

The Arabian Sea crossing proved to be the hottest leg of the journey but all were becoming acclimatised to shipboard life in the tropics. With reviving spirits competition became keener. Some willing tournaments were staged: boxing, wrestling, tug-o'-war, even running, attracted teams from each company. The ship's recreational facilities were in constant use and queues for quoits and deck tennis began to form at daybreak.

On 'the first Saturday after Colombo (at CB plus 4 hrs)' as the official programme put it, the officers, trained and directed by John Ledgerwood, <sup>4</sup> [YMCA](#) representative with the battalion, staged a non-stop variety concert. The show kept the audience convulsed with mirth and proved to be the entertainment highlight of the trip. Ballets, clad in nondescript feminine apparel, made up in energy what they lacked in timing, and one member of the 'Casara Sagrada' troupe yet bears scars sustained in a too enthusiastic rehearsal.

The days passed pleasantly. Drawing nearer to the final destination new escort ships joined the convoy, the aircraft carrier Eagle and the destroyer Westcott each doing a turn. In the [Red Sea](#) land-based aircraft appeared. From the comfort of the decks groups viewed the grim, barren shores with secret, shocked speculation. This was no white man's country, and as the waves of heat from the Arabian Desert enveloped the ship there were some forebodings. The troops were neither clad nor equipped for life on those singeing sands. Through the years which followed the unit was to make its home in the desert on many occasions, and despite these early misgivings life in North Africa, once the men were acclimatised, was to prove not unpleasant.

Near Aden the Eagle left the convoy; passing slowly through the lines of ships she made farewell signals, the white-clad figures lining her flight decks answering the cheers from the troopships. She made a fine picture and each ship wished her well. Once abreast of [Aden](#) preparations for disembarkation began.

Mr Anthony Eden, bearing a special message from the King, accompanied by Sir Miles Lampson and the GOC, boarded the Strathaird on arrival at Port Tewfik, and in the early hours of 12 February the first lighters, each carrying two hundred troops, left the ship's side. To quote from the cyclostyled newspaper published on board, The Z3 Frontliner: 'What is before us none can foretell but all will remember forever the days when we were a self-contained community aboard one of His Majesty's transports —well quartered, well fed and well protected.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. C. E. Hyde; [Napier](#); born Stratford, 8 Sep 1902; Church of [England](#) clergyman.

<sup>2</sup> The Leander left the escort off [Sydney](#) and was replaced by HMAS [Australia](#); further changes in the escort were made during the voyage.

<sup>3</sup> [Capt J. H. Danderson](#); born [Wellington](#), 7 Jun 1907; accountant; killed in action 26 May 1941.

<sup>4</sup> [Mr J. H. Ledgerwood](#), MBE, m.i.d.; [Hamilton](#); born Dunedin, 14 Apr 1908; YMCA secretary; p.w. Jun 1941.

<sup>5</sup> The P & O liner Strathaird, 22, 281 tons, was built by Vickers Armstrong Ltd. and launched in 1931. The Master, Captain R. C. Dene, during his service with the P & O Company had previously commanded their well-known mail ships Rawalpindi, Naldera, and Majola. Captain Dene retired in 1941 and took an appointment with the Ministry of War Transport.

Staff appointments aboard the Strathaird for the voyage were: Officer Commanding Troops, [Lt-Col F. S. Varnham](#); Senior Medical Officer, [Capt H. T. Jennings](#), NZMC; Ship's Adjutant, [Capt G. P. Sanders](#), NZSC; Assistant Adjutant, [Lt J. M. Elliott](#); Ship's Quartermaster, [Capt T. G. Bedding](#); Messing Officer, [Capt C. L. Pleasants](#); Baggage-master, 2 Lt S. W. Chapman; Gifts Officer, Lt J. H. Danderson; Ship's Sergeant-Major, WO I J. Malcolm, NZPS.

Other units and detachments on the Strathaird in addition to 19 Battalion included NZANS, NZMC, Divisional Postal, 10 and 11 LAD, Provost Company, HQ Divisional Engineers, 6 Field Company NZE, 5 Field Park Company NZE, Base Records, Base Pay, Base Post Office.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT



## CHAPTER 3 – EGYPT

## CHAPTER 3

### Egypt

We travel not for trafficking alone  
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned.

—James Elroy Flecker

Disembarkation at [Tewfik](#) as 'Dawn's left hand was in the sky' allowed no pause for idle dreaming, and with the sunrise over [Sinai](#) came a morning cry new to most of us. Soon the [Suez- Cairo](#) train took up the theme. Iggery-iggery-iggery-iggery went the wheels while the train sped out into the desolate desert. That rhythm of the rails was to be repeated again and again during the days which followed until service in [Egypt](#) and 'Iggery' became synonymous. Train to get fighting fit—iggery. Dig anti-tank defences in the [Western Desert](#)—iggery. Move to the [Balkans](#)—iggery. Go to the relief of [Tobruk](#)—iggery. Take up a defence line in [Syria](#)—iggery. Race back to the Western Desert—iggery. Hurry, hurry, hurry; for [19 Battalion](#) it all began that morning, 12 February 1940.

The drabness of the sun-scorched desert, unrolling on each side of the railway, did not dismay the troops. Each carriage window framed a crowd of eager faces anxious that they should miss nothing of this new land. At the small stations en route stood ragged crowds of natives with 'Oringees verree sweet', 'Eggs-a-cook', 'Limonade', but trade was poor. A series of talks on the dire diseases of the East given by the unit medical officer, [Lieutenant Boyd, NZMC](#),<sup>1</sup> were too recent to be disregarded. Those who may have been tempted lacked the money to buy, for pay in piastres had not yet been drawn. The insistent cry for 'Baksheesh' could be answered only with coins in New Zealand currency which the natives received with suspicion rather than gratitude.

That four-hour journey was full of interest; for the first time all were under the magic spell of the East. The train passed through [Heliopolis](#), site of the New Zealand camp in the last war, and soon the spires and minarets of [Cairo](#) came in sight. Round the [Abbassia](#) loop and through the Dead City it went. When all the wonders had been left well behind and the scenery was desert again, the train stopped. The battalion had arrived.

A reception committee including members of the advance party, sun-tanned and smiling, was there to meet the battalion, which detrained and, forming up behind the pipers of 2 Battalion Cameron Highlanders, marched to its new camp, guided en route by men of the Rifle Brigade.

It was the skirl of the pipes which carried the unit in good order over the short but excessively tiring distance. Soft from seven weeks of luxury living, trussed up in hot New Zealand serge, loaded with obsolescent impedimenta—for the troops that march across the soft sand seemed interminably long. When the order to halt was given and arms and equipment piled, sweaty brows were mopped and each man took stock of his surroundings. A few tents, a mud-walled wooden building, miles and miles of drab, sandy ground without a trace of vegetation—this was our new camp. To the north-west the Pyramids squatted immobile and massive on the horizon. To the north the slender minarets of the Mahomet Ali mosque poked their fingers into the sky. To the east a rocky, flat-topped escarpment frowned, while some three miles away the green oasis of [Maadi](#) village was set like a jewel in the sandy waste.

The outlook was not as dismal as it might have been, for the Rifle Brigade had acted as hosts to the 19th, preparing a much-needed meal and erecting a few tents for preliminary accommodation. Some years later the battalion was able to return their kindness. This introduction to the men of that famous unit was a forerunner to a very happy association. The 19th settled in: 41 officers, 48 warrant officers and sergeants, and 678 other ranks, crowding together, bedded themselves down for their first night in [Egypt](#).

Next day, 13 February, camp layout and company lines were fixed and soon the desert all around was sprouting tents. The 19th Battalion area was sandwiched between that of 18 and 20 Battalions, while [4 Infantry Brigade](#) headquarters was set on the small rise just across the road. The rest of the units of the First Echelon lined both sides of the road beyond [18 Battalion](#). The battalion's advance party rejoined, and never were six men more in demand as they were plied with questions on their experiences.

Their answers were full of warning. The native dealers were adept at roguery and deception. The filth and degradation in certain areas of the city were

indescribable. Official confirmation soon followed; routine orders that day carried several paragraphs on such matters. Rifles and other arms, it was laid down, must never be left unattended; at night they must be chained to tent poles and locked, the bolt removed and placed for safety under the owner's pillow. A caution was given regarding spurious coinage, notably twenty-piastre pieces, which the natives were wont to palm off on unsuspecting soldiers. In camp and on leave it was necessary to walk and talk circumspectly. Health, wealth, and security were all at stake. Few disregarded the warnings.

Running concurrently with camp construction, training courses for officers and non-commissioned officers began. Mortar, Bren, Bren carrier, anti-tank rifle, and Intelligence courses all started during the first week. Throughout the months which followed the battalion strength states showed a large total of men away on courses of instruction.

There was little organised company training at this time. Camp duties, courses, and lack of equipment made a co-ordinated programme impossible and all energies were directed to completing camp and quarters to give maximum efficiency and comfort.

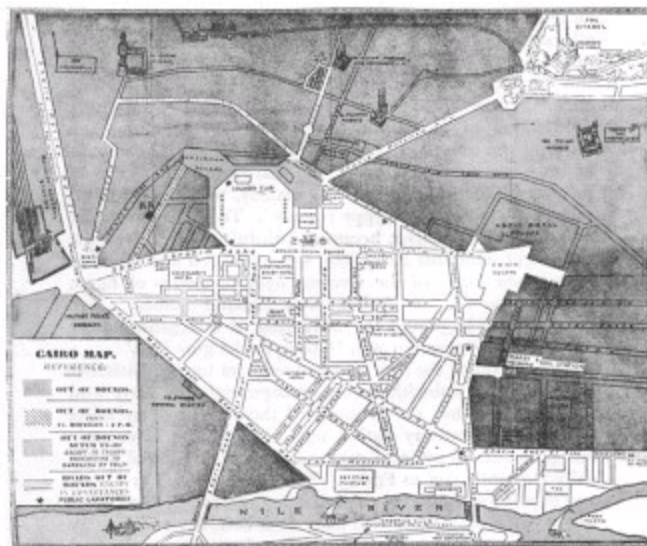
As in New Zealand in the early days of mobilisation, now in [Egypt](#) the units of the First Echelon were doing the spade work for the units which would follow. [Maadi](#) Camp, no longer an empty desert, would house some 75,000 of our countrymen before the war finished. The collection of tents and the few wooden buildings would in a few years' time grow to a camp the size of a large town. Huts would replace the RD tents. Tracks would become paved roads, and trade, entertainment, and comfort would be catered for on a scale never thought possible in 1940.

The hot days and the cool nights made the institution of precautions against chills and pneumonia imperative. Serge jackets were worn until after breakfast and at 4.30 p.m. all ranks changed into full serge uniform. Much to the disgust of the troops the wearing of shorts was not permitted, and denim slacks and shirts constituted daytime working dress. Other health precautions included compulsory disinfection of hands on leaving the latrine and when queuing for meals. Despite all efforts to prevent it, however, a severe outbreak of diarrhoea set in on 19 February. Many fell ill of this malady, which was known among the troops as 'Gypsy tummy'.

To the sufferers the fabled plagues of [Egypt](#) became a painful reality. Even the most rigid standards of hygiene and sanitation had failed to prevent the entry of the virulent flyborne germs of [Egypt](#) into healthy but susceptible New Zealand bodies. Sick parades were large and the unvarying, if inelegant, answer to the routine question was, 'Crook in the guts Doc.'

The arrival of the first fourteen vehicles for the battalion transport pool coincided with arrangements for leave and sightseeing. Thus the problem of those three dusty miles to the [Maadi](#) railway station was solved. The leave scale was generous, 20 per cent per company being allowed passes daily from Monday to Friday. The passes opened at 5 p.m. and expired at 1.30 a.m. the following morning. One third of the battalion was allowed leave each Saturday and Sunday from noon to 1.30 a.m. the following day. Companies had no difficulty in filling their quotas. Fares were cheap, one piastre being paid for the eight-mile trip to [Cairo](#), which was made in fast time by modern diesel railcars running a twenty-minute timetable to and from Bab-el-Louk station.

Much of [Cairo](#) was officially out of bounds, but with appetites whetted with old diggers' tales, many spent their first leave following the touting infants who promised public exhibitions of the unspeakable and unexpurgated real life versions of the Arabian Nights. One visit was usually sufficient, for salacious anticipation soon gave place to squalid queasiness, and thereafter most men were content to avoid those areas colored red in the guide maps issued by Headquarters [2 NZEF](#).



**CAIRO MAP**

The members of the First Echelon were fortunate to have seen the city before the entry of [Italy](#) into the war robbed it of many of its most attractive divertissements. The Egyptian museum, a veritable Ali Baba's treasure house, attracted many, and most members of the battalion took the opportunity to see its unique and wonderful collection.

Amusement, too, was well catered for and the continental style bars and cabarets were ideal spots for a night's entertainment. 'Stella', the locally brewed beer, was palatable and reasonably cheap, while in those early days food was plentiful and menus varied and exciting.

Though the food in town was satisfying and plentiful, there was discontent in the New Zealand camps because of the inadequacy of the ration. Always used to a lavish scale, it was found difficult to satisfy healthy colonial appetites on the British Army allowance. The unit cooks, without reserves upon which they could draw to supplement meals, found that their quotas did not go far. Men began to complain of hunger. After a series of conferences at high levels a special cash allowance was made for New Zealand troops in the [Middle East](#). The grant was to be spent by the battalion messing officers in purchasing supplementary stores from the [Naafi](#), at that time a well-stocked emporium which placed no limits on purchases.

Once the food situation was in hand again there were few growls, and with the opening of a camp cinema and a [Naafi](#) canteen in the battalion lines, life in [Maadi](#) became very pleasant. Laundry arrangements, too, were completed and another ever-present problem, that of personal washing, was ended. This 'dhobi' establishment was run entirely by natives, and visitors were intrigued by the methods of the man with the flat-iron. He dampened the garments before pressing by squirting a mouthful of water over them. After a visit from the medical officer this method was abandoned in favour of a sprinkler-topped bottle.

Whatever the shortcomings of the Egyptian laundryman's methods when compared with New Zealand standards, the results he attained were nothing short of miraculous. The vast amount of clean, crisp drill which was washed and pressed for a few piastres made it possible for the poorest private to turn out freshly starched and smart for occasions official and unofficial. The dhobi business must have been a major industry in [Egypt](#) at this time, and at least one enterprising tradesman had a

printed business card which he would produce with the appropriate flourish on the slenderest excuse.



A general order that all officers must master the intricacies of the motor-cycle, and the arrival of fourteen Nortons from Ordnance, enabled a school of mechanical equitation to be set up. Company Sergeant-Major Wroth was the ringmaster and the course he ran was popular. The desert provided plenty of hazards and the runs were exhilarating. Though there were a few spills there were many thrills for both rider and spectator. The Padre was a distinguished performer and caused havoc in the tent lines before he got his mount under control.

All troops in camp carried out daily route marches across the sand to harden feet and keep up the general standard of fitness. Night training, too, was a regular feature and despite carefully plotted compass bearings many parties managed to get lost. One platoon commander arrived back in camp with his bunch of disgruntled and sarcastic soldiers at 2 a.m.—only five hours late. It was as well that the desert surrounding the camp was not as featureless as parts of the [Western Desert](#) the unit was to encounter later. This preliminary training in keeping direction was later turned to good account and every effort made to attain proficiency was worth while.

A knowledge of the stars was necessary for night work and in an attempt to locate instructors in that sphere Routine Order No. 93 featured the following notice: 'Companies will forward to Battalion Headquarters by 0900 hrs Saturday the 2nd March a return of men capable of giving instruction in elementary astrology.' This was maliciously interpreted as a forlorn attempt to throw some light on the battalion's future, but no soothsayers were forthcoming and the following day the

order was amended to read 'astronomy'.

Despite a natural anxiety for a more active role, the unit's shortcomings as trained soldiers were admitted by even the most eager. The Highland Light Infantry and 2nd Cameron's, troops seasoned to tropical service and as efficient as tradition and training could make them, staged many demonstrations for our instruction. The New Zealanders were interested spectators and assiduous students. The company sergeants-major of the battalion did a special course under a warrant officer from the [Scots Guards](#), while other officers and NCOs were sent on attachment to neighbouring British units. British Army schools of instruction each took their quotas of New Zealanders, and selected representatives from the battalion did specialist courses. Senior and junior tactics, weapon training, signals, motor transport and cooking were all taught at separate establishments, and the successful candidates on return to the unit became instructors for the subjects in which they had qualified.

March 1940 was a big month for [19 Battalion](#)—it marked its official 'coming out'. Careful drilling and coaching by the Adjutant, [Lieutenant Errol Williams](#),<sup>2</sup> prepared it for its first public appearance overseas. On successive Saturdays units of [2 NZEF](#) in [Egypt](#) were reviewed in turn by [General Freyberg](#), the GOC-in-C British Troops in [Egypt](#) (Lieutenant-General H. Maitland Wilson), and the British Ambassador in [Egypt](#) (Sir Miles Lampson). A ceremonial parade under the hot Egyptian sun proved a trying and uncomfortable performance, yet probably no other military function imparted to the individual soldier that shoulder squaring feeling of pride which suffused the whole unit as each man felt himself to be part of 'a good show'. The battalion acquitted itself well on every occasion.

With the approach of spring, the temperature was steadily rising, but in spite of this a Rugby football competition had been established and midweek matches were now played regularly. In the ranks of the 19th were some fine players. Coached by [Captain Geoff Bedding](#),<sup>3</sup> the battalion team with ex-All Black [Jack Griffiths](#)<sup>4</sup> as captain won the Freyberg Cup with an unbeaten record for the season. The final game was played at a shade temperature of 95 degrees F.<sup>5</sup> Probably the most outstanding match, certainly the game which created most interest, was that against 1 Battalion [Welch Regiment](#) on 6 April. A tremendous crowd of British and Dominion troops lined the field and a description was broadcast to [England](#) and New Zealand.



Our team that day was: forwards, Crawford, Hart, Riley, Robertson, Aitken, Coull, Phillips, Fleming; half-back, Littler; backs, L. Arnold, N. Hunter, Griffiths, R. Arnold, R. Hunter; full-back, Vernon. A hard, willing match was won by 19 Battalion 11—9.

Sport was allotted an important part in the unit programme and almost every platoon had representatives in one of the battalion teams. Football, cricket, and hockey were all played on the sandy fields. On the Nile 19 Battalion oarsmen competed with those from other units and with the members of Cairo clubs who had so generously made their facilities available to the New Zealand troops. Swimming, a necessary relaxation in the hot weather, was catered for by the opening on 7 April of the divisional swimming baths. The baths became the most popular rendezvous in the camp, and with the Maadi Tent adjacent there was no more pleasant place to spend short leave hours. The tent was run by a stalwart band of Englishwomen, residents of Maadi township. Their generous and arduous efforts were typical of the British hospitality enjoyed by the 2 NZEF overseas.

By this time the battalion had settled in well and, due largely to the efforts of the Pioneer Platoon commanded by Lieutenant Latimer,<sup>6</sup> everybody was fairly comfortable. Messes had been constructed and the battalion orderly room was housed in a wooden building. After the first few dust-laden breezes, each man mastered the art of pitching a tent on the sand in a manner that ensured it would remain standing. Maadi Camp was slowly taking shape.

In addition to normal war equipment which was coming to hand in exasperatingly small quantities, some other items not on the G1098 (war equipment) table also came into the possession of the unit. Perhaps the most famous of these unofficial but greatly prized trophies was the large sheet-iron tourist poster bearing the slogan 'Germany for Holidays'. This sign had been filched from its hoarding on Bab-el-Louk station and placed secretly, in the dead of night, in the officers' mess. It remained with the unit for many years, and the flaxen haired fraulein it depicted smiled invitingly down on many a hilarious mess gathering. Those who did the souveniring kept their secret well. At this late date it can also be revealed that only a concrete base weighing several tons kept the huge bottle which is a landmark on the Mena Road from joining the poster as a 19 Battalion possession.

The Easter leave period 22-25 March provided an excellent opportunity for the tourists among the troops to see [Egypt](#), and the generous leave arrangements were greatly appreciated. Organised tours covered both Palestine and [Egypt](#). The more adventurous, however, preferred to make their own arrangements and one small party hiring a felucca and crew took a three-day trip up the [Nile](#). The battalion lines were empty except for some few on duty and others who stayed at home and spent the days pottering round the bazaars and shops of [Cairo](#). At this stage goods were cheap and plentiful, and 'George' the native stallholder, always a sportsman, was quite prepared when the bargaining had come to an end to toss, his price or yours, and abide by the result.

Training had by now progressed steadily through the stages from individual soldier instruction to section, platoon, and company training. Battalion operations had welded the work together; the Easter leave had evaporated any signs of staleness, and all were eager for work once more.

April opened with a tactical exercise, the first of several to follow during the next two months. These exercises, involving the whole brigade, were a thorough test of training. Despite hard work and honest effort this first five-day stunt revealed many weaknesses. Leaving camp in the early morning, a march of 21 miles in front of them, the units of 4 Brigade learned quickly the necessity for rigid water discipline. The 19th left thirty-two march casualties on the roadside, for the gruelling heat took its toll. On arrival at the destination, the most popular institution was undoubtedly the water truck, and the least popular the despatch rider who brought orders for the continuation of the exercise at an early hour next morning. An unpleasant sandstorm clouded the operations of the next day when the unit provided the advanced guard for the brigade. The exercise finished on the third day with an attack, then back once more to [Maadi](#) where results were analysed. The battalion lost some equipment, gained experience, and made ready for a more ambitious scheme when divisional troops, too, would be involved.

The week which followed was marked by another outbreak of 'Gypsy tummy' and the issue of the long-awaited tropical kit. Thereafter, clad in Wolseley helmets, shirts and shorts, we felt more in tune with our surroundings.

On 22 April the Division moved by motor transport to Nag Hassan for another

four days' exercise in the desert behind [El Saff](#). This operation, which has since become almost legendary, was known as 'Milesia versus Puttigonina', the names given to the forces commanded by Brigadiers [Miles](#)<sup>7</sup> and [Puttick](#)<sup>8</sup> respectively. A good time was had by all, and in the main the mistakes made on previous exercises were not repeated, though a few new ones cropped up. During these exercises it was evident that some important sub-units had not yet received sufficient equipment to permit them to function properly. The 'signals' suffered badly in this regard and there were difficulties through lack of adequate communication; the consequent loss of control was serious. Taken all in all, however, the unit gave a convincing display. A highlight of this exercise, which finished on Anzac Day, was the impressive service held in the Wadi Wirag. Led by the GOC and attended by almost the whole of the [2 NZEF](#) in [Egypt](#), this service was broadcast to New Zealand.

Back in camp the following evening the troops, as a protest against inferior programmes, constant film breakages and high prices, wrecked the flimsy camp theatre. Despite vociferous protests from the owner—[Shafto](#)—and the official displeasure which this action incurred, the desired result was attained. Quickly rebuilt on better lines, the cinema thereafter put on improved programmes. A levy to pay for the damage which, it had been decreed, would be collected from every man in the Division was vetoed by the GOC.

A sudden order received during the month put the battalion on its toes: anti-aircraft and gas defence for [Maadi](#) Camp were to be hurriedly prepared. It was evident that [Italy](#) would soon declare openly for the Axis, and from her bases in North Africa [Cairo](#) was vulnerable to air attack. On the last day of the month General [Wavell](#), the GOC-in-C Middle East Forces, visited the battalion to inspect its work. All now felt that at last things were moving.

The 1st May 1940 added to the excitement: suddenly the 19th was allotted an operational role and placed on twelve hours' notice to move. Anti-aircraft LMG posts were hurriedly completed, the camp dispersed against air attack, and thereafter, on tenterhooks the whole time, the battalion awaited further exciting events.

The Division's role as part of the [Cairo](#) internal security scheme was designed, in the event of war with [Italy](#), to checkmate possible fifth column activities in the capital. It was also thought that in [Libya](#) [Mussolini](#) had a parachute unit as well as

aircraft capable of lifting 2500 troops. The protection of [Cairo](#) became the responsibility of 4 NZ Brigade, which was required to prevent sabotage and to deal with airborne attack. Tasks were secretly assigned and quietly carried out. Ball ammunition was issued when, in turn with 18 and 20 Battalions, the 19th moved to Kasr-el-Nil Barracks as inlying picket.

On 10 May [Germany](#) invaded [Holland](#), [Belgium](#) and Luxembourg, while in [England](#) Winston Churchill succeeded Mr Chamberlain as Prime Minister. Three days later [Egypt](#) severed diplomatic relations with [Italy](#), the blackout came into force, and practice air-raid warnings kept everyone constantly on the alert.

While the battalion stood by, waiting tense and uncomfortable in the hot khamsin, events in [Europe](#) were swiftly moving towards their climax. General Weygand hurriedly left the [Middle East](#) to take over from Gamelin the tottering armies of the French. [Holland](#) capitulated, [Belgium](#) followed, and as the Allies limped from one 'prepared position' to the next, the 19th too were put to work digging defensive posts. Red Mound in the Wadi Tih, outside [Cairo](#), excavated, wired and sandbagged, became the New Zealand Division's first prepared defensive position. In the early morning hours of the 25th, 26th and 27th, sudden orders to 'stand to' kept excitement at fever heat.

A new twist to training was an exercise in assault bridging, Headquarters Company establishing a battalion record by constructing one hundred feet of bridge, and sending fifty-six men across one of the irrigation canals in seven and a half minutes. This and a tactical exercise without troops for officers were signs that the situation was easing, and on 31 May, all indications of belligerence left behind, the battalion went to [Helwan](#) to prepare camp for the [York](#) and Lancaster Regiment.

The hot uneasy month of June was memorable for by the 5th the situation in the [Middle East](#) had again deteriorated. The unit moved into [Cairo](#) to Kasr-el-Nil Barracks, relieving [18 Battalion](#) and sharing quarters with 2 Battalion Scots Guards. Trouble was expected in the weekend and, true to prediction, on the 10th [Italy](#) declared war on Great Britain and [France](#). At 2 a.m. on the morning of the 11th the 19th 'stood to', while in the city the [Cairo](#) police rounded up Italian residents. The expected trouble, however, failed to materialise and on the 12th the battalion returned to [Maadi](#). In [Libya](#) the [Royal Air Force](#) opened hostilities by bombing Italian

aerodromes but Mussolini's eagles kept clear of [Cairo](#).

News of the evacuation of the BEF from [Dunkirk](#) was a welcome relief but the future presented no reassuring prospect. [Hitler](#) and his latest ally were already boasting of their future conquests and it was believed that the invasion of the Nile Valley by Axis forces was well up on the agenda. All ranks waited impatiently. Then came a sudden warning order on 17 June, and the following day, amid much rejoicing, the battalion moved to the Western Desert. Gone, no address.

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<sup>1</sup> [Lt-Col W. J. Boyd](#); [Wanganui](#); born [Dunedin](#), 31 Jul 1913; medical practitioner; RMO [19 Bn](#) Dec 1939-Apr 1941; OC [4 Fd Hyg Sec](#) Feb-Oct 1942; DADMS Army HQ (NZ) Aug 1944-Apr 1945.

<sup>2</sup> [Maj E. W. S. Williams](#), m.i.d.; born [Wellington](#), 23 Sep 1915; Regular soldier; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

<sup>3</sup> [Maj T. G. Bedding](#), ED, m.i.d., MC (Greek); [Pauatahanui](#); born [Eketahuna](#), 18 Nov 1909; secondary school physical instructor; p.w. 24 May 1941.

<sup>4</sup> [Maj J. L. Griffiths](#), MC, m.i.d.; [Feilding](#); born NZ, 9 Apr 1912; bank officer; ADC to GOC 1941-45.

<sup>5</sup> The battalion's Rugby record in 1940 while at [Maadi](#) was as follows:

2 March v Divisional Cavalry	Won 8-nil
6 March v <a href="#">Divisional Headquarters</a>	Won 18-3
9 March v <a href="#">4 Field Regiment</a>	Won 12-nil
13 March v <a href="#">20 Battalion</a>	Won 30-nil
16 March v Signals and Engineers	Won 26-nil
20 March v <a href="#">Army Service Corps</a>	Won 9-3
27 March v <a href="#">18 Battalion</a>	Won 5-3
30 March v <a href="#">27 (Machine Gun) Battalion</a>	Won 11-nil

<sup>6</sup> [Maj C. A. Latimer](#), m.i.d.; [Hawera](#); born [Napier](#), 14 Oct 1910; electrician; company commander [19 Bn](#) 1941-43.

<sup>7</sup> Brig R. Miles, CBE, DSO \* and bar, MC, \* m.i.d.; born Springston, 10 Dec 1892; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1914-19 (Bty Comd and BM); CRA 2 NZ Div 1940-41; comd 2 NZEF ( UK) 1940; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Mar 1943; died in Spain 20 Oct 1943.

<sup>8</sup> Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO \* and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Timaru, 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Brigade 1914-19 (CO 3 Bn); comd 4 Bde Jan 1940-Aug 1941; 2 NZ Div ( Crete) 29 Apr-27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941-Dec 1945.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 4 – THE WESTERN DESERT



## CHAPTER 4

### *The Western Desert*

... singing in the Wilderness

—Omar Khayyam

The mood of the troops was merry. Each truck, crowded with singing, shouting soldiers, swung into place in the column and the convoy headed away from [Maadi](#). Inactivity had irked, and when [Italy](#) entered the war a more active role seemed certain; at last the wheels were turning. The destination, unknown at present, would at least be nearer the battle zone. Spirits were high that morning.

As the convoy passed through the outskirts of crowded [Cairo](#), a chorus of shrill Saeedas and broad black grins greeted the good-natured sallies from the three-tonners. Across the Khedive Ismail bridge, past the Pyramids and on to the [Cairo-Alexandria](#) road, a black ribbon of bitumen disappearing into the distance, the trucks sped. A halt on the desert roadside at ten minutes to each hour, with an hour for lunch, broke the journey; then at Bahig, hot, cramped and dusty, the column stopped to bivouac for the night. Next day, 19 June, the battalion arrived at [Garawla](#) in the [Western Desert](#).

Halting on the seashore, about 12 miles short of Mersa [Matruh](#), camp was set up. The new surroundings were found to be almost obscured by a heavy pall of sand. A khamsin blowing up from the south-west cast a cloud over the arrival. The area, too, had not long before been vacated by Indian troops and, in addition to the sand, a plague of flies infested the site. A change in the wind brought relief from the first of these troubles, and rigid hygiene and sanitation gradually brought the second within controllable proportions.

Passive air defence measures came into action immediately and tents were dug in and camouflaged with mud and water —no easy target was to be presented to the Duce's aircraft. The steady unhindered bombing of Mersa Matruh by the Italian Air Force was then in full swing. The precautions received spontaneous support from all ranks for the peculiar throbbing note of the enemy night bombers passing overhead was regularly heard; though dropped some distance away, their cargoes shook the

earth.

On 21 June [19 Battalion](#) received news of its operational role. Dreams of offensive action against the Italians suffered a rude awakening. The task was a defensive one: armed only with picks and shovels, it was ordered to dig a tank obstacle. This mighty moat would stretch from the sea to a terminal away on the far horizon somewhere at the head of Wadi Naghamish. On the 22nd 18 and [19 Battalions](#) moved out as labour battalions and began to scoop a twelve-foot-wide ditch across the face of the desert. The work was hard. The solid limestone pan, overlaid with stones and loose sand, presented a problem calling for methods more modern than bare hands and sweat. Explosives and power tools are not found on infantry equipment tables and the Engineers, who glibly reckoned the unit's quota of ditch in man-hours, were singularly deficient in items of more practical assistance. All hands dug, and dug, and dug. By pitting company against company and platoon against platoon good progress was made. But from that five-foot-deep channel the desert contested every shovelful. The heat was terrific and the temperature, plus the solid toil, took a toll of men at first; the majority hardened up quickly however. The sea was close and there was little else to do but work, swim, and sleep. Toughening, the men revelled in the work, and enjoyed the relaxation the white sands and blue water of the [Mediterranean](#) offered afterwards.

The bathing was wonderful but the coast in parts could be treacherous, and one afternoon several swimmers would have drowned but for the action of Lance-Corporal [Stuckey](#) <sup>1</sup> and Private [Currie](#), <sup>2</sup> whose lifesaving efforts assisted by some of the less strong swimmers enabled each man in difficulties to be finally brought ashore.

Sentries and patrols were kept on the q.v. with promises of trouble both from the sea and the air. Warning was received of a possible enemy landing, and one night when an unidentified motor vessel was reported moving east along the coast, excitement ran high. But the only battle was the daily wrestle with the dirt as the anti-tank ditch took shape. The job progressed steadily, though the withdrawal of the Wellington West Coast Company to [Matruh](#), for guard duty at the prisoner-of-war camp, cut down the number of navvies and another heavy khamsin on the 27th delayed work for that day.

Twenty bombers, raiding Mersa Matruh on the 28th, gave a fillip to our air defence measures. On the camp site, digging slit trenches now received priority. Visits to Mersa [Matruh](#) supplied convincing examples of the necessity for this caution. Nothing, however, came within range of the tripod-mounted Brens and the job of anti-aircraft sentry was a sinecure, a relief from digging.

The battalion's first liaison with the [Royal Air Force](#) began at [Garawla](#) when visits were exchanged and meagre means of hospitality shared with the famous 45 Squadron. They too were desert dwellers. A friendship developed between the two units which lasted throughout the 19th's service in the [Middle East](#) and provided some of its happiest highlights.

A travelling oasis in the desolation was the [YMCA](#) truck with its stock of good things. John Ledgerwood, with energy, craft, and a business acumen which rivalled that of the wily wog, somehow managed to keep up his stocks. He dispensed not only to the battalion but also to lonely detachments far afield. The gratitude of the Tommies in their isolated posts was touching, and our boys were no less grateful for the yeoman service he gave. 'Pay me on pay day' was his answer to longing looks and empty pockets—the unit arrived at [Garawla](#) flat broke—and two hundred pounds' worth of stock, at an average price of five piastres per article, was disposed of in that way: no book entries, no slate, and no IOUs. When payday came, into the [YMCA](#) till went two hundred pounds and twenty piastres. Thereafter in John's emporium was hung a sign: 'If no one is here boys, take what you want and leave the money in the box. If you're "broke" take what you want and pay me Friday.'—a testimonial to the character of the unit.

From the prisoner-of-war camp at Smugglers' Cove came a steady trickle of enemy souvenirs. Wellington West Coast Company were making the most of their guardianship of a nondescript, poor-looking bunch of Italian and native Libyan prisoners who had been passed into their keeping by [7 Armoured Division](#). In a neat raid on [Fort Capuzzo](#) a force from that famous formation had gathered in the garrison, plus their arms and equipment, and departed before retaliation arrived. The captives were in startling contrast to our troops. Their poorly kept weapons were eloquent examples of the inferiority of Mussolini's African Army, and their demeanour as prisoners belied the bellicosity attributed to them by Rome radio.

June ended with the relief of the Wellington West Coast Company by [18 Battalion](#). Its numbers reinforced again, the battalion's digging quotas reached new heights, until on 3 July Hawke's Bay Company departed and the prisoner-of-war camp once more changed hands. By the end of the week it was evident that something was afoot, and on the 7th the 19th was suddenly relieved by [20 Battalion](#). Fresh from [Cairo](#), the 20th took over the area and the task, while the 19th once more clambered into the trucks of 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company and headed back to [Cairo](#). The frustration felt when the battalion was ordered to leave the ditch before it had stopped even one enemy tank was reflected in every face during the preparations for the journey back. Though it was not known then, the unit would return many times to the [Western Desert](#), and the energies spent then, and later, in the construction of set defensive works would not contribute one iota to the final winning of the battles which rolled back and forth across the wastes. The digging, however, did pay dividends in physical fitness.

Another bitter pill shared with all New Zealand troops in [Egypt](#) was the news that the Second Echelon, whose arrival all had long awaited, had landed in [England](#). Rumour had it, too, that the GOC had left [Egypt](#) to lead them in battle.<sup>3</sup> The midsummer heat combined with the trend of events to produce symptoms of irritation. The move back to [Cairo](#) was not popular but once there the battalion let down its hair. Messes staged some terrific parties.

One such beano which will long be remembered by all participants took place when members of 45 Squadron paid the officers' mess an official visit. The evening started with a dinner heavy with dignity but steadily degenerated as the hours passed. When at last the guests departed, clad in tea-towels in lieu of their irrevocably ruined tropical uniforms, it was only to proceed a few hundred yards down the road. They were apparently under the impression that their vehicle could fly, but it failed to take off and merely overturned. Result: one broken neck, one wrecked car, and four badly shaken operational pilots. There were no hurt feelings, however, and later the [RAF](#) retaliated in their own inimitable fashion. Happily their casualty later recovered completely. He had many New Zealand visitors while in hospital and the plaster sarcophagus in which he was encased became an autograph book for the battalion.

Guard duties constituted the main task of the companies during the short stay back at [Maadi](#). The unit was well split up. On 10 July, three days after leaving [Garawla](#), Wellington West Coast Company was posted to the aerodromes at [Heliopolis](#) and [Helwan](#) for anti-aircraft duties with the [RAF](#). On the following day Wellington Company took over from a company of the [Scots Guards](#) at the ammunition dumps at [Tura](#) caves. Hawke's Bay Company moved later to [Gezira](#) and during the month all companies were changed around. The tonic effect of this varied pro-



gramme, new sights, new contacts and not too tedious duties, restored a measure of content. Unit picnics held at the Zoo and at the Barrage were happy occasions.

A reshuffle in appointments gave the battalion a new adjutant, 'Brick' Budd, senior subaltern, forsaking his carriers for that important post at Battalion Headquarters, while [Cedric Williamson](#),<sup>4</sup> OC Hawke's Bay Company and the senior company commander, changed places with [Charlie Webster](#)<sup>5</sup> as OC Headquarters Company.

The troops left in camp kept up a training programme, the specialist platoons especially making good use of the time. More technical equipment had come to hand, and with fully qualified unit instructors fresh from the various schools, some good courses were run. The New Zealand Divisional Signals, still on duty with the [Western Desert Force](#), had borrowed heavily from the battalions' trained signallers, and to make up the shortage men with suitable qualifications were drafted from companies for intensive training. Even in camp communications were vital. With almost half its strength detached, the signal platoon had a difficult time fulfilling its

functions. It was January 1941 before the men lent to Divisional Signals came back, and the pool of trained personnel built up during their absence proved valuable in later operations.

Gas chamber tests, anti-gas drill, and equipment checks were carried out by all ranks and the importance of these precautions was increasingly stressed. Intelligence reports confirmed that the enemy was developing methods of gas warfare and that he had stocks of gas ready for release from the air. The cumbersome respirators plagued their wearers for the duration of the war, but mercifully gas was never used: Mussolini's experiments with the Abyssinians were not repeated on troops who might retaliate.

Skeleton tactical exercises in co-operation with other arms and units were held close to the camp. They were valuable training but not always an accurate forecast of what would happen later on in battle. On 20 August the records show that an exercise involving [20 Battalion](#), Divisional Cavalry, and two [19 Battalion](#) companies proved that 'Tanks are unable to break through a strong infantry line, and suffered large casualties through bunching in the wadis.' At the time the only anti-tank weapon the infantry had was the Boys rifle. Towards the end of the month companies concentrated again in [Maadi Camp](#) and on the 27th they packed up once more. The morning of the 28th saw the unit on the road again for the [Western Desert](#).

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<sup>1</sup> [Cpl J. E. F. Stuckey](#); Ashhurst; born Mangaweka, 10 Aug 1916; farm-hand; p.w. Apr 1941. A determined but unlucky escaper, Stuckey spent a good deal of his time as a prisoner of war either at liberty or in solitary confinement. He made four successful breaks but was recaptured each time. For these and two other unsuccessful attempts, he spent 195 days in solitary confinement.

<sup>2</sup> [Pte B. A. J. Currie](#); [Wanganui](#); born NZ, 10 Apr 1916; labourer; p.w. Apr 1941.

<sup>3</sup> [General Freyberg](#) left [Egypt](#) for [England](#) on 17 June to train the Second Echelon. He returned on 24 September.

<sup>4</sup> Lt-Col C. M. Williamson, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Napier, 5 May 1900; civil servant; company commander 19 Bn Sep 1939-Jun 1941; AA and QMG NZ Maadi Camp Nov 1941-Feb 1943; OC Tps Maadi Camp Oct 1942-Feb 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Maj C. E. Webster; born London, 19 Mar 1906; bank officer; killed in action 20 May 1941.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT



## CHAPTER 5 – BAGGUSH BOX

## CHAPTER 5

### *Baggush Box*

There were vipers, flies and sandstorms.

—Kipling

Burg el arab was the midway bivouac on the return route to the Desert, and though the majority of the battalion bedded down for the night almost as soon as the convoy stopped, some adventurous spirits managed to make for [Alexandria](#) and return before daylight. Early next morning the unit was on the road again and by mid-afternoon was once more at [Garawla](#). Digging started next day; but the diggers were not destined to see the completion of their task, for after the first two days much activity at Battalion Headquarters gave a sure sign of a further move. On 4 September the 19th relieved the [Central India Horse](#) at [Daba](#).

[Daba](#), the railhead of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade during its operations of the previous war, was in 1940 the traffic-churned centre of a desert dust bowl. It was in the middle of the 19th's sector (No. 2), which stretched from [El Alamein](#) station to [Fuka](#). To the north [20 Battalion](#) took over No. 1 sector while in the south [18 Battalion](#) was responsible for No. 3 sector. So 4 Brigade, spread over many miles, linked and guarded the vital points along the desert road and railway. Headquarters [19 Battalion](#) was sited at [Daba](#), while its companies were disposed perimeter fashion at points in the desert surrounding the railway station. Wellington Company's headquarters was three miles away to the west, and four miles farther on in the same direction two of its platoons mounted anti-aircraft sentries at a desert aerodrome. Wellington West Coast Company manned six posts around [Daba](#) and sent one platoon off to an ammunition and petrol dump two miles north of [Galal](#). Hawke's Bay Company was responsible for another six perimeter posts, while one of its platoons reinforced the mobile reserve (Taranaki Company plus the mortar, Bren carrier, anti-aircraft and pioneer platoons) at [Daba](#).

This assignment carried few bright moments and was mercifully short. Sandstorms were constant and severe; the fleas multitudinous and fighting fit. True there was a [Naafi](#) on the spot, plenty of EPIP tents, some wooden buildings, and posts had been dug and wired by previous occupants, but the battalion was not

happy at [Daba](#). Five days later, when the Divisional Cavalry took over, companies pulled out and moved individually to [Baggush](#) amid much rejoicing. One tale, the only bright incident in an uncomfortable sojourn, is perhaps worth recording for it will be remembered long after the discomfort is forgotten.

The men in the post to the south-east were bored. The first day of their occupation had passed without any incident to relieve the monotony. Then a gaffer idly approached the post. On his back was slung an ancient muzzle-loading banduq. It had once no doubt been the pride and joy of his great-grandfather but was now rather the worse for wear.

'Two akkas if you'll fire your gun,' said a bored private. The gaffer could not understand at first why he should receive so much wealth, but at last he got the idea. He fired into the air. Scarcely had the reek from the powder cleared away when, 'Two akkas if you let me fire your gun,' said another soldier. The bargain was sealed by handing over the coins and with much manipulation the piece was reloaded and passed over.

Blending with the bang there was a shriek. Sixty yards away an unsuspecting Arab had been sitting on a camel. He turned a couple of somersaults and landed on the desert. The camel made off at a smart trot into the middle distance.

We were assured by the soldier that the thing went off before he was ready. An examination of the posterior of a very frightened son of Ham showed that the damage was not serious, the old bits of iron did not penetrate his thick skin and there was no claim for compensation. The camel, caught later, proved on examination to have had a bulletproof hide also.

The battalion set up its headquarters at [Baggush](#) on 9 September. Five days later the Italian army crossed the Egyptian border and captured [Sollum](#). With the other units of 4 NZ Brigade Group, under the command of Brigadier Puttick, the planning and preparation of a defence line began immediately. The same night enemy bombers raided [Baggush](#), and though no damage was done the raid did give that realistic touch which had been lacking in previous preparations. The priority of work in the battalion area was: (1) fighting slits; (2) camouflage; (3) living quarters.

Dispersed over a large area of desert, the unit lived and was administered under

company arrangements. With a defence line bounded on one side by a high escarpment and on the other by the railway, companies went to work with a will. In constructing the dug-in position, arrangements were made for attached troops. A troop of four Bofors from 3 Regiment RHA and four Mark II 18-pounder guns of D Troop 4 Field Regiment were sited in an anti-tank role. D Company of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, with twelve medium machine guns, was added to thicken up the infantry fire power. In all it was a large group but the line to be held was long. On the left 20 Battalion continued the sector, which ran from the coast to the escarpment across the Western Desert road and railway. Designed to enclose the main route, the whole position was called the Baggush Box. In addition to fire positions, administrative offices and shelters, the unit dug another tank obstacle and battle headquarters for the Brigade Group command. No power tools, no explosives—all hand done.

The temperatures were torrid and the sea too far away for frequent bathing. Water was rationed and shade nonexistent. The one solitary date palm in the area (the property of Taranaki Company) was a struggling survivor from a past oasis which age and Arab destructiveness had returned to the desert. Evidence of ancient water engineering could still be seen. In the dry months which followed, the unit wished many times that the cisterns and channels had still been in working order.

Some hardy spirits, despite work, heat and stony ground, found time for willing Rugby tussles. The fauna of the desert provided the only other interests; chameleons were kept as pets and fed on a readily available diet of flies. Odd snakes were despatched and carefully hidden in the beds or boots of the unsuspecting. Prize scorpions were matched in battle, wagers being placed on the result. In personal quarters some degree of comfort was contrived and gradually all settled down to the desert existence.

Where the going was easy, digging went on apace. However, most of the area was solid rock, and broken tools and blistered hands were the most tangible results of the effort.

Though it showed few signs to the uninitiated, the area in the dim past had been inhabited, and in the course of digging some interesting relics were uncovered: pottery, lamps (two intact), some copper coins stamped with the eagle device of the

Ptolemies, limestone water pipes, squared stone building courses, and a fragment of Greek inscription showed up as the work went on. Two quite large underground tombs and several cisterns, all probably dating back to the days of Greco-Roman occupation, were found and became part of the defence system the 19th were preparing a system designed to repel the legions of Graziani, a Roman, leading an army of ignominy over ground made glorious by his ancestors.

After a few weeks of work urgency was abandoned, and more time was given to training. Route marches, field firing, and a novelty called 'tank hunting' were introduced. The tactics of this new battle method savoured of salting the bird's tail. Bazookas, Piat guns, and sticky bombs had not yet been invented. The Spanish Civil War, it was argued, had given ample proof that the tank was but a behemoth, vulnerable to infantry weapons and open to attack by determined men. A specially picked platoon commanded by Second-Lieutenant [Yorke Fleming](#)<sup>1</sup> was sent away for training by the CRE of the New Zealand Division, [Lieutenant-Colonel George Clifton](#),<sup>2</sup> and on 28 September gave a demonstration of their craft to all officers.

With great energy, the platoon stalked, engaged, and theoretically destroyed the steel-clad enemy. Thereafter the unit spent much time concocting and bottling a mixture upon which the tank hunters' supposed successes were based. Molotov cocktails, a disgusting brew of dirty oil and other inflammable fluids, were to cause more headaches to harassed company quartermasters and to ruin more rations than they would ever trouble tanks. Later events proved that it took something more substantial to worry a panzer.

There were a few bombing raids throughout the month but the battalion had no casualties, though the area received a rain of thermos bombs, devilish little 14-pound booby traps, which on 13 September caused the first killed in action casualty in [2 NZEF](#). Dropped from a low-flying aircraft, they were set to explode by the time they landed. The bombs were set off where they lay by bursts of Bren fire from carriers, a less laborious method than that laid down in the official instruction. This ordered that a specially constructed wooden triangle be placed around the bomb, two hundred yards or so of signal wire attached, and the operator was then to get behind shelter and tug. It was hard enough to get wood for fuel without wasting it on triangles for bomb disposal, one triangle being necessary for each 'thermos'.

A member of Headquarters Company, finding one of these bombs which had been broken in two when it landed, souvenired the business end and proceeded to investigate. His tinkering proved that the detonator was still intact. The MO that afternoon spent an interesting time extracting the minute fragments of brass which had peppered the soldier's hands and forearms when it went off. He suffered in the cause of science, however, for the now harmless bomb-head was taken to pieces and used as a demonstration model.

Another bombing—fortunately ineffective—occurred when a homing [Blenheim](#) unloaded four bombs on the area in which the men of Wellington Company were at work. Headquarters 202 RAF Group were apologetic and offered one keg of beer per bomb as compensation. The worst feature of the whole episode was the feeling caused when they defaulted in payment.

By 25 September work on the defensive position was far enough advanced for a test occupation. Some light tanks were borrowed and these, together with the unit Bren carriers and a couple of platoons from Headquarters Company, acted as enemy. It was a dusty and exhausting business for the attacking force, but the defending troops in their holes had an exciting time theoretically shooting up the advance. Official conclusions, if any, drawn from the exercise have not been reported. It was a fruitful source of argument among the troops, however, and for many weeks afterwards the inconclusive 'Who shot what?' inquiry raged in the bivouacs.

Competition was always keen for duties which called for a change of location, and Sunday 22 September proved a red letter day for 14 Platoon Hawke's Bay Company. The fates favoured them in the tossing of a coin, and as protective platoon for an ASC convoy of twenty 3-ton trucks loaded with petrol, oil and grease, they left the battalion area on a 250-mile trek to [Siwa](#) oasis.

The situation on the route along the [Qattara Depression](#) was distinctly fluid, [Sidi Barrani](#) was in Italian hands, and the desert to the south-west was in their patrolling area. The job could easily prove to be something more than mere routine. With all weapons loaded with ball ammunition, the three sections of the platoon were split up through the convoy, which set off on its journey along the coast road. The convoy ran into trouble much sooner than expected, for at Mersa Matruh an air raid caught part of the column. The ASC officer commanding, Major [Stock](#),<sup>3</sup> was wounded and

some of the trucks were damaged. As soon as the Savoias flew off the convoy was reorganised, stores from two vehicles put completely out of action were off-loaded and distributed among the others, then with Lieutenant [Dill](#),<sup>4</sup> OC 14 Platoon, in command, the column set off once more. It was expected that a patrol from the King's Royal Rifles would make contact at the next stop.

The delay at [Matruh](#), however, made the keeping of the rendezvous a race against time. As darkness fell the desert going got worse; 'boiler plate', soft sand, and steep depressions made blind driving dangerous and a fast pace impossible. A halt was made to await moonrise, and while the drivers of the trucks slept sentries were posted. Suddenly from away out in the distance came the sound of approaching vehicles. The convoy was roused, engines were started and, with weapons at the ready, all waited breathlessly for the answer to the challenge of the outpost sentries. Then English voices were heard. The tension relaxed as a Rifle Brigade column withdrawing from [Halfaya Pass](#) hailed the convoy.

The moon came up and the journey was resumed. Three tanks looming up out of the darkness provided the next thrill. These also proved to be friendly, and there was another brief halt while news was exchanged, then on again into the night.

About 2 a.m., as the leading vehicle was feeling its way forward, a shadowy figure rose from the desert and challenged. The convoy had reached the outposts of the King's Royal Rifles patrol which was waiting with Bren carriers and portées to accompany the column to [Siwa](#). The convoy laagered for the rest of the night, and after an early breakfast the final leg of the trip across the desert began.

The now quite impressive convoy, enveloped in its own dust cloud, drove on and on across mile after mile of 'sweet Fanny Adams'. The heat was terrific and the going rough. By mid-afternoon, after a monotonous six or seven hours, the edge of [Qattara Depression](#), its walls steep, tortuous and twisted, loomed up. A patrolling Lysander swooped down to inspect, waved, circled, then disappeared over the rim of the desert, where some hours afterwards the convoy looked down on the shining waters and waving palms of [Siwa](#) oasis.

Below, set in a wilderness, was a place of beauty, a place of plenty. Steeped in the legends and histories of the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans, the

oasis was a fascinating place. The convoy drove down the single tarsealed road into the central settlement, reported in and dumped its load, and the troops, tired but intrigued, set off sightseeing. In a bubbling pool with a stone coping still bearing the device of the Roman legion which built it perhaps two thousand years ago, the men bathed as the troops of the Caesars had no doubt done. They bought dates, now ripe and ready for picking, and ate their fill, filling sandbags with the bright red bunches to take back to bare [Baggush](#).

Next morning, after another hour or so sightseeing and some fraternising with the British troops, the trucks formed up for the long grind back.

By mid-afternoon on the fourth day of their absence, 14 Platoon drove in to the battalion area at [Baggush](#) after an uneventful return trip. Dirty, tired, but smugly satisfied, they became the centre of attraction in the unit, a position they held until their dates and tales from [Siwa](#) were exhausted.

Their experience was a valuable lesson in the difficulties likely to be encountered during a long motor move across the desert. Some weeks later 15 Platoon, under Lieutenant [Aitken](#),<sup>5</sup> set out on a similar adventure, and returned having done their job successfully despite a khamsin. Other platoons were required at intervals during the next three months for similar duties.

On 26 September the GOC, now returned from [England](#), visited the battalion and all ranks were glad to see his commanding figure again. In his address to officers he told the story of the Second Echelon's role in the Battle for [Britain](#) and also announced the arrival of the [Third Echelon](#) in [Egypt](#) in a few days' time. Not until the three contingents were together would the New Zealand Division be a complete operational formation. Until then its future role was uncertain. The signing of the [Berlin-Rome-Tokio](#) pact on 27 September indicated that the war would soon spread to fresh frontiers and that the Axis were planning new offensives.

At the end of the month Headquarters NZ Division closed at [Baggush](#) and reopened at [Maadi](#), where units of the [Third Echelon](#) were settling in. Fourth Brigade Group, however, remained at its task, digging and 'singing in the wilderness'. The defence line improved daily and the [Baggush Box's](#) subterranean system progressed at a rate commensurate with the ability of the builders of its individual



compartments. CQMS [Ted Berry](#)<sup>6</sup> of [Wellington Company](#), by guile which discredited his cherubic appearance, obtained from a guarded RE dump a stock of gelignite. Thereafter, work in the sector of the line constructed by men from the capital city went literally with a bang.

The evening of 3 October 1940 saw much jollification in the bivouacs at [Baggush](#) on the first birthday of the battalion. A special trip to [Alexandria](#) had obtained supplies for the event. The quartermaster's department made a special effort, and the timely arrival of a parcel mail from New Zealand helped to augment the rations. It was a really bright show, and though it lasted well into the night even the blackout could not dim its success, though the lack of light contributed toward one amusing incident. The carrier platoon were celebrating in the darkness beside one of their vehicles when suddenly a cry of anguish rent the desert air—one of the platoon had swigged a bottle of sump oil in mistake for the Stella.

The Italian Air Force, despite the fact that it had the air to itself in these early stages, did little daylight work and avoided low-level operations. There was one notable exception, however, when a solitary fighter, coming in out of the sunset, took a nearby airfield completely by surprise and did some good work with his guns. Fortunately the drome was almost deserted, but his visit cost the [RAF](#) one Vickers Valencia troop-carrying plane burned out, and a lot of hot words at the subsequent court of inquiry, when the responsibility for aircraft identification and alarms was under examination. Later the Italians made a good bombing sortie against a railway siding then under construction, being intercepted by [RAF](#) Glosters just after they had bombed. The resultant dogfight was spectacular; but as the pilots of the [Savoia](#) bombers flew at about 10,000 feet even the doyen of our anti-aircraft defences, a solitary Bofors, failed to worry them. There was a keen duck shooter in Headquarters Company at this time who spent all moonlit nights in a specially constructed maimai waiting with a Boys anti-tank rifle for a 'bird' to bank against the moon. He had no luck. (A special order then in circulation credited a Tommy with having shot down an enemy plane with this unloved and unlovely weapon.)

Some thousands of natives were introduced into the [Baggush Box](#) about this time. They were employed in the construction of defensive earthworks, a task which took them many weeks to finish but which could have been done by bulldozer in as

many hours. With them came the flyborne troubles which our rigid hygiene and sanitation methods had up to then kept to a minimum. One Egyptian labourer seemed to be capable of fouling about an acre of desert, so that where a gang of natives were working one moved daintily. They were organised into groups, each group under a 'Rais' or headman. Several groups came under a 'Chief Rais'. It was said that by the time these parasites had taken their rake-off, the wretched labourer drew about two piastres for a day's pay. Their tasks were supervised by our own troops, who were under the threat of severe official displeasure if they used harsh methods to coax the wily natives along. Notwithstanding this the toe of an army boot was judiciously applied on occasion and proved a better incentive to work than kind words transmitted through an interpreter. 'George' toiled no harder than he had to and was adept at all types of subterfuge. One particularly notorious dodger, having been booted in the most suitable place by an exasperated sergeant, proceeded to give a convincing imitation of dying on the spot. The whole gang of course knocked off to gather round and bewail the fate of their black brother, and the sergeant, thoroughly worried, had the 'body' carted to the battalion RAP, followed by a procession of mourning comrades. The MO glanced at the inert figure, raised a dirty galabieh to expose the injured anatomy, then produced a large hypodermic syringe with a needle like a crowbar. George came to life suddenly and, springing up, burst through the ring of onlookers as he beat a hasty retreat. The broad grins of his black brothers and the profanity of the sergeant followed his diminishing shape into the distance.

With hospitality confined to chlorinated water, tinned beef, and anti-scorbutic tablets—all rationed— [Baggush](#) now saw few distinguished visitors. The Chief of the General Staff in New Zealand, Major-General Sir John Duigan, made an informal inspection and the svelte figure of Mr Anthony Eden was seen briefly in the area. Selected soldiers were turned out to meet the latter visitor; a sandstorm raged, his plane was late, and when at last the reception was over the parties groped their several ways back to their bivouacs, gritty, irritable and unimpressed.

The weather was fast deteriorating and the desert existence beginning to pall. The defences were nearing completion, but supplies of sandbags and other necessities for the final touches were scarce. Digging became desultory. Then on 28 October word came to stop work on the defended area and to concentrate on

training. Companies ceased their bedouin existence. Battalion Headquarters issued a training syllabus, discipline tightened up and collective stunts, route marches, and weapon training became daily routine. Under the RSM, [WO I Malcolm](#), NZPS, <sup>7</sup> the NCOs attended a short refresher course. All ranks were keen and progress rapid.

Situation reports and Intelligence summaries compiled from air information and from reconnaissance patrols into enemy territory all gave clear indications that Graziani was preparing to continue his advance into [Egypt](#). His outposts at [Nibeiba](#) and the Tummar were being reinforced and there was generally much movement in the dispositions of the large Italian forces in North Africa. Training and manoeuvres now took on a new interest, and seemed to point to the brigade's participation in a dashing column-cutting venture when the enemy had moved far enough into our territory. It was clear to all that the whole of the Western Desert Force was preparing for battle.

Into the battalion area lumbering I tanks came secretly by night. They rolled off the railway wagons and were guided to carefully camouflaged hideouts that the unit had prepared for them. The 7th [Royal Tank Regiment](#), commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel R. M. Jerram, DSO, MC, had among its numbers a good proportion of [Dunkirk](#) veterans. Their stories and their record infused the 19th with a spirit which burned for offensive action. It hoped at last to abandon its holes. The portents seemed right; surely this time our battalion too would be in the fight.

Leave to [Alexandria](#) was suddenly stopped. War games and manoeuvres continued on an ever-increasing scale. Bayonets were sharpened. Security became a fetish and censorship was rigid. Code-names were allotted to units and to those holding the principal appointments in them. Telephone conversations thereafter were marked by hilarity or exasperation, according to the mood of the caller and the urgency of his call. To stand by and hear the Adjutant, irascible and red-faced, say 'Pansy of Lulu speaking' was too much for the orderly-room staff, and though the business was serious it took some time to train all ranks in correct telephone security procedure.

Air co-operation was now practised and the [RAF](#) treated units to displays of dive-bombing and ground strafing. Blenheims and Hurricanes were seen in increasing numbers and new airfields were plotted on the maps. At the fullscale

exercise by 4 Infantry Brigade Group from 7 to 9 November, Gloster Gauntlets gave information and support for make-believe battles.

Throughout November intensive training continued and much solid work was done. The battalion by this time had achieved a degree of efficiency and co-ordination that was reflected both in administration and manœuvres. All ranks felt that they could now give a good account of themselves.

The 4th Indian Division, commanded by Major-General Beresford-Peirse, DSO, moved in, out and about the area, always moving, always manœuvring. The Indians' war games continued throughout the month, then early in December they deserted the populated coastal strip and swung far out into the desert. With them went some New Zealanders as umpires and observers.

On 4 December the 19th was reinforced. A posting of sixty-eight other ranks from the [Third Echelon](#) made good some of the wastage of eleven months and helped to build up company strengths once more. Two days later the unit assumed responsibility for anti-aircraft defence of all the [RAF](#) aerodromes in the [Western Desert](#). Headquarters remained at [Baggush](#) but companies were widely scattered. Wellington Company stayed on at the base airfield where it had been doing duty for the past month. Wellington West Coast, with one section of Bren carriers attached, moved to [Fuka](#). Hawke's Bay Company took over the defence of Headquarters Western Desert Force. Taranaki Company moved to the forward airfield at [Qasaba](#), while Headquarters Company sent one platoon to an isolated satellite field far out in the desert and another to Brigade Headquarters on defence duties. A couple of days after all these moves were complete, the news all were waiting for broke.

Suddenly sweeping inwards, units of 4 Indian Division on 9 December attacked the forward Italian outpost at [Nibeïwa](#). The Italian garrison, surprised from the rear and taken unawares with their defences and guns pointing the wrong way, found themselves shot up the tail in the manner of the proverbial garden thrush. The inexorable advance of our I tanks, against whose armour the enemy's anti-tank weapons could make no impression at all, completed the demoralisation of the post. The surrender of the Tummar forts followed, and two days later [Sidi Barrani](#) was in British hands.

The discomfiture of the Italians was only equalled by the amazement of our own troops. The attackers themselves had no idea that they were committed until they were almost on their objective. As the prisoners streamed back, marching in long, slow-moving columns, the mopping up of posts to the westwards continued. The Duce's air force tried bombing our rear bases but after a half-hearted attempt, in which the battalion area at [Baggush](#) received nine high-explosive bombs and one incendiary bomb as its share, they gave it up. Hurricane fighters kept them out of the sky.

On 16 December [Sollum](#) fell, and the same day the 19th received orders to concentrate once more at [Baggush](#). Now perhaps the unit was for it. Each man in the battalion fretted and fumed, eager to be in at the kill.

Parties from the 19th found their way forward, following the attacking troops, as sightseers. They returned laden with food, souvenirs, and enemy equipment of the type we ourselves were needing. Some were lucky enough to get away immediately after [Nibeirwa](#) fell. By following a circuitous desert route, the military police posts on the coast road were dodged, and by carefully driving along the tracks made by our own tanks, the minefields at the approaches were avoided. The story of the first of these parties was told to an enthralled audience when they got back to the battalion:

We arrived on the vanquished Italian post just at nightfall. There was a small party of British troops still there engaged in burying the dead and collecting equipment. They made us welcome despite the fact that we were unauthorised visitors, and even shared with us some of the choicer treasures they themselves had gathered from the lavish stocks that the Italians, or more particularly their officers, had left behind. We fed well that night.

When dawn came we wandered among the devastation, mentally reconstructing the momentous event that had so recently taken place. The eternal sand was already beginning to obliterate the now inert and inactive post which had been so painstakingly constructed and maintained. It drifted into the stone sangars, piling up against the discarded equipment and pathetic corpses of mules and men as it crept unceasingly onwards. Soon there would be little to see but another mound on the face of the desert with a few half submerged skeletons of guns and vehicles to mark

the site. A macabre spot; in the silence of that chill dawn nothing moved but the sand and a wisp of smoke from our breakfast fire.

The Tummars told the same tale, the chaos and confusion left after an utter rout. We picked up souvenirs as we went, marvelling at the luxury under which the 'Ite' officers had existed in this desert place; contrasting our own austere bivouacs with the comfort they had contrived. Wire mattresses, sheets, dress uniforms, delicacies of all kinds, were in their galleried dug-outs; some even had scent! We took what wines and choice foods we could carry back with us to the Bn. Sidi Barrani had just fallen and after a quick glance we returned with our trucks laden. It was an unforgettable practical lesson of the errors of the defeated enemy, for the rottenness of his organization lay clearly revealed, but it was not a pretty picture.

While the unit waited for action Christmas came and went. Keeping fit and hard, with route marches almost every day, all expected orders to move forward and lived in constant anticipation. The campaign was sweeping on, and those at [Baggush](#) from time to time saw and spoke to men who had been in it and to those of their own people who, with the approval of Brigade Headquarters, as candidates for practical lessons in 'the military education of officers' had been sent forward as observers.

One party from the battalion had been incautious enough to get ahead of the Australians in their attack on [Bardia](#) and were treated to an excellent exhibition of Italian gunnery, in which the truck in which they were riding played the part of a moving target. Fortunately no hits were scored.

The stories from the front kept every man tense with anticipation. But on 30 December hopes were dashed. With its first-line transport commandeered to help keep up the rapidly extending supply lines, the 19th sat in sour impotence, realising that again it was destined to play the role of spectator only. The members of the transport platoon under Lieutenant [John Carryer](#),<sup>8</sup> who went forward as troop transports, were the envy of all ranks, but even a carefully worded special order failed to relieve the general resentment. Out of the blue came the Aussies; passing [Baggush](#), they leapfrogged through the first battlefields to continue the attack in [Cyrenaica](#). Wavell's brilliantly timed, audacious offensive swept on from success to success. Though still feeling slighted, the New Zealand troops could not but share in the general elation as each communique was issued.

Then came the annual deluge and the desert was turned into a sea of mud. The torrential fall flooded the bivouacs, and where men were camped in wadis there were some narrow escapes from drowning, so swiftly did the floods come down. Wellington Company lost its records, and the camp of a nearby British unit, located in the Maaten [Baggush](#) basin, became a lake dotted with small cones where the tops of bell tents protruded from the muddy six-foot-deep pond. Though it lasted but one night, the rain when it drained away left the desert cold and bleak.

The 19th had now been out in the wastes for almost seven months; it was ill clad and aggrieved by the inactivity. Duststorms harried the position daily and January opened the New Year unpleasantly. On the 13th, in a howling sandstorm, the battalion packed up and entrained at Sidi Haneish, en route for [Helwan](#). None were sorry.

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<sup>1</sup> [Maj Y. K. Fleming](#), DSO; [Auckland](#); born Dunedin, 6 Oct 1912; plastering contractor; platoon commander [19 Bn](#) 1940-41; company commander 1 Scots and 29 Bns [2 NZEF](#) (IP) 1942-44; 21 Bn 1945; wounded Apr 1945; now Regular soldier.

<sup>2</sup> [Brig G. H. Clifton](#), DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; CRE 2 NZ Div 1940-41; Chief Engineer [30 Corps](#) 1941-42; comd 6 Bde Feb-Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped, [Germany](#), Mar 1945; NZ Military Liaison Officer, [London](#), 1949-52; Commandant, Northern Military District, Mar 1952-Sep 1953.

<sup>3</sup> [Maj E. J. Stock](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Ashburton](#), 19 Jan 1907; salesman; comd NZ Div Sup Coln Oct 1939-Sep 1940; wounded 22 Sep 1940.

<sup>4</sup> [Capt B. R. Dill](#); [Te Awamutu](#); born [Australia](#), 19 Apr 1917; clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>5</sup> [Capt W. E. Aitken](#); [Te Karaka](#); born NZ, 27 Dec 1910; stock agent; company commander [19 Bn](#) 1942; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>6</sup> [WO II E. C. Berry](#); [Timaru](#); born [Christchurch](#), 12 Jun 1904; civil servant.

<sup>7</sup> Capt J. Malcolm, MBE; Wanganui; born Scotland, 20 Apr 1901; Regular soldier; RSM 19 Bn 1939-41; Adjutant PW Camp, Featherston, Sep 1942-Nov 1943; Area Officer, Wanganui, 1948-.

<sup>8</sup> Lt-Col J. D. Carryer; Ruhotu; born England, 28 Jan 1911; hostel manager; 19 Bn Oct 1939-May 1942; seconded to British Army Dec 1943-Jun 1945.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 6 – HELWAN

## CHAPTER 6

### Helwan

Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,  
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures:

—Shakespeare ( King Richard III)

Helwan, with its standing buildings and large comfortable tents, compared more than favourably with the Maadi Camp the battalion had left seven months previously. The weather was clement and it was a relief to be free from the depressing dust-storms which had plagued the troops during the last two months at Baggush. Settling in, refitting, and reorganising among civilised surroundings once more was a pleasant experience. The battalion's personal appearance, however, was a problem. The unit was sorely ragged, and one of the first items in routine orders read: 'The wearing of Italian items of uniform will cease forthwith.' Lack of replacements and the cold weather had caused the men's uniform to degenerate into the comic opera variety.

When, on 17 January the first issue of battle dress was received, Ali Dit, the tailor, and others of his ilk began to reap a mighty harvest, for the new uniform was the official walking-out dress and leave to Cairo was sweet. Speed was the main consideration, therefore the normal quartermaster channels were bypassed and officers and privates alike flocked to the native tailors. All ranks had the piastres to pay for their alterations, and though later events proved this to be an ill-starred investment, it was a treat to feel smart once more.

Leave allocations were ample and paybook accumulations permitted lavish spending. In a welter of hot baths, clean clothes, good food and entertainment, drab days in the desert were soon forgotten. The pleasant spots of Cairo were like a taste of Heaven, and the bars and cabarets saw many reunions when First Echelon men met for the first time members of the Third Echelon. Reunion dinners became the order of the day and in the city hotels the Stella flowed freely when ex-members of schools; lodges, clubs and business concerns got together. Every issue of routine orders carried notices arranging for such functions. The New Zealand Club in Cairo, opening on 5 February, immediately became a popular rendezvous for all ranks.

[Naafi](#) parties were a noisy nightly feature in unit lines and the tropic nights echoed to new tunes and songs. 'Oh Farida' and 'Saeeda Bint' replaced 'Samuel Hall' and 'The Woodpecker' as topical favourites in the repertoire of ditties for convivial occasions. Thickly strewn with soldier Arabic, ironical and unflattering to the land, the people and the local potentate, these songs were evidence of the contemptuous feeling which [Egypt's](#) part in the war engendered among those who kept her frontiers.

Golfing one Sunday on the grass course at Gezira Club, a party of four from the battalion, fumbling their unpractised way round, sat down to let a lone player through. Dressed in civvies, General Wavell was not recognised until he came abreast, then springing up in response to his 'Good afternoon', they watched him play a strong, true, iron shot. This stocky, tanned, competent man, whose forces were grossly outnumbered, whose equipment and supplies were dangerously thin, against an enemy who had the advantage of years of defensive preparation, had dared to attack. His successful offensive had given point to our strategy, heart to our own armies, and prestige to our people at a time when all these were most sorely needed. There were hard years ahead yet, but the 1940 campaign in North Africa was the first step towards final victory. As he strode rapidly round the course, those who were watching felt proud to have played a small part in Wavell's Army of the [Nile](#).

Work during the early stages at [Helwan](#) was novel and not very strenuous. Bridging exercises, classification shooting—for which companies moved to [Maadi](#) for a week at a time—combating dive-bombing, street fighting, and a not too vicious version of battle inoculation made a varied and interesting programme.

The inter-unit football tourney was reinstated and the 19th opened the season with a win against [20 Battalion](#). The Freyberg Cup, however, passed to 32 Battalion, for in the semi-finals the 19th were decisively beaten. A regatta on the [Nile](#), and a boxing tournament in which Private [McLaughlin](#) <sup>1</sup> won the divisional bantamweight title, were the sporting highlights of our sojourn at [Helwan](#).

As February progressed it became apparent that a more purposeful programme was being planned. Gradually the pressure was put on and work increased. Night training played a large part. On the 10th senior NCOs began a solid course, while

bayonet training and route marches were the daily dose for all troops. On 18 February the unit welcomed two sergeants and sixty-four other ranks from 22 Battalion. This group comprised the advance party and anti-aircraft personnel of our brother battalion in the Second Echelon. Their arrival heralded the day when the New Zealand Division would be united for the first time and would function as a full formation.

After much preparation, careful checking, and some borrowing from 18 Battalion, the 19th staged an impressive demonstration of an infantry battalion (higher establishment) at full war strength in men, weapons, vehicles and equipment. Spread over an acre or so of desert, with each individual and each truck correctly loaded down to the last official items in the G1098 table, it stood for hours in the sun and was inspected by officers from 5 and 6 Brigades and cadets from OCTU. For the first time the unit was able to see itself as in a full-length mirror. The reflection was gratifying; it looked, and felt, fit to play its full part in any future operation. On the 28th 200 reinforcements were posted to the battalion and the rolls once more showed the unit at full strength: it comprised 32 officers, plus Medical Officer and Chaplain attached, 741 other ranks, with 7 officers and 44 other ranks as first reinforcements. Halcyon days at Helwan were drawing to a close; the unit was now ready for the fray. There was not long to wait. Day and night crossings of the Nile in rubber boats and collapsible pontoons were portents of a changing role. The Division was soon to leave the arid land of Egypt.

Commands and appointments in the battalion had undergone some changes, but most of the original officers were still serving. Wellington Company was now commanded by Captain Clive Pleasants<sup>2</sup> Major Alan Ross<sup>3</sup> having been transferred to the divisional staff early in 1940. Captain Geoff Bedding held the appointment of OC Hawke's Bay Company and Captain Charles Webster now took over Taranaki Company from Captain Errol Williams, who left the unit for a time to become chief New Zealand instructor at the Middle East OCTU. Major Syd Hartnell<sup>4</sup> now commanded 32 Battalion at Maadi, and RSM Jeff Parker<sup>5</sup> took over from WO I Jim Malcolm who also now held a Maadi appointment.

February was drawing to a close and the last days were hectic as the unit packed up. Speculation regarding destination was rife: the Balkans were a hot favourite but lost ground when orders were suddenly issued for the withdrawal of

battle dress, and brand-new tropical topees were handed out. When all the suits of carefully tailored battle dress were gathered in chaotic bulk into the quartermaster's store, fresh orders were received. Battle dress was to be re-issued! There was not time to sort out individual garments and this was a real grievance. The comments were caustic.

Cunningly contrived comforts and prized personal possessions were relegated to base kits; not one ounce of impedimenta above the regulation could be retained. Tents were struck and packed and then the unexpected happened—rain fell. For the next two nights all ranks lived, ate, and slept crowded together in messes and stores.

At 7 a.m. on 3 March, awkwardly, each man laden with gear, the unit piled into trucks and moved out, fully equipped for war. Past the huge compound where some thousands of Mussolini's African 'heroes' were now housed, across the Nile and on to the Cairo- Alexandria road the long column wound. On the same day 5 Brigade Group arrived in Egypt from England.

Arrival at No. 11 camp, Amiriya, dashed any hopes for quarters close to the Alexandrian resorts which had gained such popularity among the men lucky enough to have had leave from the desert in 1940. On the edge of the Western Desert, clouded by depressing dust, this bleak, bare place possessed few facilities for the comfort of troops awaiting embarkation. Shelter was inadequate and waiting time was spent in the acme of discomfort. Half-hearted attempts to keep the men busy and to fill in the time by some form of useful training were foiled by the natural wretchedness of the place. The weather, too, joined forces with the desert to make the stay as unpleasant as possible. Each embarking draft was farewelled enviously by those unfortunates remaining, and long before the last Australian and New Zealand troops had been shipped away, Amiriya had been appropriately christened. An insalubrious spot, its inelegant sobriquet cannot be set down here.

Naturally enough the battalion, in common with the rest of the force at this time, suffered a severe outbreak of AWL (absence without leave). Steps taken to suppress this were rendered ineffective by conditions. Paybook entries in red ink are a poor prophylactic against boredom, and the prevailing philosophy, 'We're here today, but tomorrow who knows?' made a debit balance seem of little importance. A

night in Alex was worth it all.

Alexandria harbour was crammed with craft for the transport of Lustre Force, as this organisation was known, to Greece. All types of ships from spick and span pleasure cruisers to decrepit Levantine tramps were pressed into service. Overhead the RAF buzzed busily about. On the blue Mediterranean the Royal Navy glided silently and efficiently about its business. Embarkation was imminent.

Behind the bustle and excitement lay weeks of planning. Greece had accepted an offer of assistance made by Great Britain, who was watching with some anxiety the concentration of German forces in Bulgaria. The first Libyan campaign had just been successfully concluded and, temporarily at any rate, Egypt seemed safe from invasion from that quarter. Wavell now regrouped his army to meet a new commitment. The Australian and New Zealand Governments had been consulted and had consented to their troops being used in Greece. The New Zealand Division, which now could be employed as a complete formation, was to be included in the force, which comprised 1 Armoured Brigade, 6 Australian Division, the New Zealand Division, and 7 Australian Division (the last formation being recalled to deal with Rommel's April thrust in the Western Desert before it had embarked).

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<sup>1</sup> Pte L. G. McLaughlin; born Australia, 12 Aug 1910; hospital porter.

<sup>2</sup> Brig C. L. Pleasants, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Halcombe, 26 Jul 1910; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn Jul-Oct 1942; 18 Armd Regt Oct 1942-Mar 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Sep-Nov 1944; 5 Bde 1-22 Aug 1944, Nov 1944-Feb 1945, May 1945-Jan 1946; twice wounded; Commander Fiji Military Forces 1949-53; Commandant, Northern Military District, 1953-.

<sup>3</sup> Lt-Col A. B. Ross, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; born NZ, 25 Apr 1899; civil servant; DAQMG 2 NZ Div 1941-42; AA and QMG Jun 1942; killed in action 27 Jun 1942.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> WO I J. W. K. Parker; born Nelson, 8 Jun 1907; Regular soldier; wounded and p.w. May 1941; died 20 May 1947.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 7 – OVER TO MACEDONIA

## CHAPTER 7

### *Over to Macedonia*

... wielding in his hand

The Trident—summoned all the hurricanes

Of all the winds and covered sea and sky

At once with mists,

—Homer

Three ships carried the battalion from [Amiriya](#) to [Athens](#). The carrier platoon, the anti-aircraft platoon, and some of the transport were first to embark. They sailed in the SS Clan Macaulay and arrived in [Greece](#) several days ahead of the rest of the unit, for which they acted as an advance guard and camp constructors.

The larger groups embarked on 11 March. Thirty-three officers and a few batmen in the Hellas and the main body, including the CO, four company commanders, Second-Lieutenant [Heiford](#)<sup>1</sup> and 677 other ranks, in the Marit Maersk, a small ship of Danish register whose limited capacity made this unfortunate splitting of the unit a necessity.

Conditions on board the Marit Maersk were crowded: 749 men plus 47 trucks and 20 motor-cycles comprised the cargo. Riding lightly, her holds, top deck and small shelter deck packed with tethered transport and footloose soldiers, the 1800-ton ship put out to await the rest of the convoy. The weather was perfect and after dreary [Amiriya](#) even this unkempt tramp seemed cosy and clean. Each man had his rations—seven days' hard—his rifle, his haversack, his huge tropical topee and one blanket. Gear was disposed of and the cards came out. Despite the crush, groups settled down to enjoy the cruise across the [Mediterranean](#).

Northwards on blue unruffled seas the convoy sailed, five ships with two [Royal Navy](#) auxiliary cruisers and two Greek destroyers as escort. The first day passed pleasantly, and at night in the lee of trucks and deck fittings, rolled in blankets, the soldiers slept soundly in the sweet sea air. This was a change from the Desert. In the morning hot tea was contrived and over section cookers the bully sizzled. Throughout the next day the picnic continued, and in the darkness of the night of the

13th all hands settled down again for another good sleep. Sailing conditions were still good, but the glass was falling fast.

A freshening wind was the first sign of trouble; it caused a gathering in of loose blanket ends, then as the sea began to rise a few of the lighter sleepers woke. By 11.30 p.m. the lightly laden ship began to labour ominously. By midnight dim figures could be seen making for the rail, only to be driven back again shortly afterwards. The Marit Maersk now began to ship it green. Gear got washed overboard: the topees went first. Drenched and cold, those on deck sought shelter in the holds, cabins and companionways; sick and miserable, those below decks sought the fresh air above. The inky darkness added to the confusion.

The Greek captain and his officers, busy as they were, found time to help with the seasick soldiers. Their own cabins, the engine-room and stokehold, were made available to the shivering troops.

In the early hours of 14 March, completely out of control, the ship parted from the rest of the convoy and the master headed her into the gale. The storm showed no signs of decreasing. Temporary fixtures were wrenched off. A water tank and two noisome makeshift privies spilled their contents among the wretched figures cowering in the scant shelter above decks. In the hold a water truck broke loose, crashing against other vehicles with each roll of the ship. Its careering threatened serious damage until [Private 'Fatty' Langdale](#)<sup>2</sup> managed to apply the brakes and others seized an opportunity to rope it firmly down again.

Daylight brought little relief. The ship was still fighting it out with the elements and few found the battle to their liking. The troops as passive spectators clung to whatever support was available, watching the huge waves mount higher and higher above the bows, then slip sickeningly away beneath the cruiser stern. Each time she seemed certain to slide back into the watery abyss. A big comber came aboard, sweeping all loose gear before it and leaving those unable to find shelter drenched and shivering.

[Crete](#) was sighted in the early afternoon and at 4 p.m., under the lee of Selino Kastelli, the Marit Maersk dropped her anchors. The seas were still high and, though conditions aboard improved for the troops, on the bridge the master was having an

anxious time. The anchors were not holding; the overworked engines were still required.

When the port anchor became entangled with the starboard anchor chain, 'an haven of [Crete](#)' was close to becoming a place of shipwreck. These things, however, the troops did not know; numb and nauseated, the majority were huddling together for warmth and shelter, while a few of the hardier spirits clustered around primuses precariously balancing mess tins above the flames. The demand for hot tea far exceeded the supply.

By 6 a.m. on the 15th the danger had passed, the storm had blown itself out, and anchors had been cleared and course set for the naval base at [Suda Bay](#). Another shock awaited two hours later—from the shore signal station a light winked and to the dismay of the shaken soldiers this message from the Navy read, 'No shore leave.' Two casualties were carted off to the hospital, and the remainder on board spent the time in port sorting out the chaos of equipment, cleaning up the ship and themselves, and drying out sodden clothing and blankets. The ship's engine-room looked like a Chinese laundry as more and more wet blankets were draped over the cylinders and boilers.

At half past eight on the following evening the interrupted journey to [Greece](#) was continued with a Greek destroyer as escort. After a calm and uneventful trip, the [Marit Maersk](#) put into [Piraeus](#) next day. The 19th had arrived; a little battered, but intact. The rest of the battalion which had been ashore for some days was waiting anxiously. Rumour had it that the ship had been sunk. The tempestuous crossing experienced by the convoy from which it had parted company, plus extravagant claims by Radio Roma of Italian successes in the Eastern Mediterranean, made the rumoured fate seem more than a possibility. The men from the [Marit Maersk](#) disembarked that winter's afternoon amid general rejoicing, glad to feel dry land beneath their feet once more. Clambering into trucks driven by men from the transport platoons of 18 and [19](#) Battalions, the column set off for a camp area on the outskirts of [Athens](#).

The ride from the port of [Piraeus](#) to [Hymettus Camp](#) was full of interest. The green cultivated fields sweeping up to snow-sprinkled hills were easy on the eye. After the drab, sun-scorched desert this country was refreshingly similar to New

Zealand. En route the populace turned out to greet the troops. In [Greece](#) beckoning waves from friendly hands and cries of Kalimera (welcome) replaced the familiar outstretched palms and whining baksheesh chorus of [Egypt](#). When the trucks stopped in the tree-studded transit camp the tents were up and waiting. The anti-aircraft and transport platoons had been busy and the new arrivals were grateful to them. Stowing gear, the men drew pay in drachmae and headed for [Athens](#), whose roofs and spires could be seen between and below the pines and cypresses fringing the eminence on which the camp was set.

It was evening by the time they made their way along the ancient cobbled streets of the 'City of Arts and Eloquence', and the first visit, though inspired by material rather than cultural instincts, proved an unforgettable experience. [Greece](#) was at war with [Italy](#); her heroic but ill-equipped army had for the past five months withstood the modern war machine of Mussolini. After the ignominy of North [Africa](#) the Duce's forces were now seeking fame by pushing around the [Balkan](#) peasantry. Mussolini found them made of sterner stuff than was the Italian soldier and the campaign in [Albania](#) was marked by the heroism and hardihood of the defenders, who not only kept the frontiers but ventured to attack and beat back the beseigers. The exploits of the Greeks had fired the imagination and won the admiration of our troops. The Athenians hailed the New Zealanders as allies, believing that they had come to aid their armies and would rid them of the Roman invaders. Their proud city was well within range of Italian bombers and a blackout was enforced. Food was not plentiful and prices were high. Two meat days only each week and no dancing in public places were among the wartime items of self-denial being practised by the population. Despite shortages, they met our men with the warmest hospitality, drew on their slender stores of food, and filled and refilled their cups with strange but potent brews of Bacchus.

Mavrodaphne, ouzo, and Greek cognac were pleasant to take, but there were agonies in the aftermath. In the early hours, streams of stumbling figures groped their several ways along the blacked-out routes between the cafés and the camp. All had overstayed their leave, but next morning, though there were many sore heads, there were no absentees.

On the 18th the drill jackets, plus the few topees that had survived the shipboard journey, were withdrawn. Kits were sorted out again and women refugees

from a nearby camp were soon busy doing the battalion's washing. Bully beef and biscuits were to them a rich payment and our men were only too glad to exchange unattractive rations for clean clothes. On leave in [Athens](#) that day the many public baths were well patronised. Fresh and tidy once more, all enjoyed the short stay, sightseeing while daylight lasted and in the evening repeating last night's programme in cabarets and cafés.

Next morning all was bustle. Barely forty-eight hours after landing, the battalion was again on the move. Unit trucks were packed with equipment and, with a few Bren-gunners for anti-aircraft protection, set off early on 19 March for northern [Greece](#). The rest of the 19th would follow by rail to meet them at [Katerini](#), almost 300 miles away, on the northern slopes of [Mount Olympus](#). [Lustre Force](#) was moving to take up positions in [Macedonia](#). It was a small force to pit against the [Wehrmacht](#) concentrations in Bulgaria. The 1st Armoured Brigade, the New Zealand Division, [6 Australian Division](#), and some extra artillery and Corps troops were the total forces that the hard-pressed [Middle East Command](#) dared send to the aid of the Greeks, whose army was already fully engaged on the Albanian front. The magnificent courage of the small Greek nation and the justice of the cause for which it was fighting were worthy of every aid.

In Athens the German Embassy still flaunted its infamous flag. True, [Greece](#) was at war, but not yet with the Germans, whose suave civilian embassy staff and jackbooted guards enjoyed a convenient diplomatic immunity from interference, an immunity which all knew they were making the most of.

That morning as the unit marched, bayonets fixed, through the city on its way to the railway station, the population lined the streets. They showered the marching men with flowers. Not even in New Zealand had the 19th received so rousing a reception. It was a heartwarming experience, to be repeated again and again during the move northwards. The thumbs-up sign seemed to be a national gesture, children ran out to grasp the hands of the marching men, and young girls in gay traditional aprons banded blue, rose and orange, hung garlands of bright flowers on their bayonets. The older women and the men clapped and waved enthusiastically. Despite the gaiety, however, there were unmistakable signs of war among the throng. Black armbands, ribboned lapels, and the general absence of young men told

the story of a costly campaign. The valiant little Greek Army had withstood a hard winter on its western frontiers and now [Greece](#) was threatened from the north.

The send-off at Rouf railway station while awaiting the arrival of the train was as spontaneous as the street scenes. Civilians, though not permitted on the station, shook hands and passed flowers and flagons of wine through the fence. Officer or private, it did not matter, all were pressed to drink. The march had been hot and after two nights of Greek hospitality there were many parched throats. When, at 2.30 p.m. the unit packed into box-cars—forty-five men plus their equipment to each car—there were many in that happy condition where the desire for sleep could conquer all discomfort. The entraining was reminiscent of [France](#) in the 1914-18 War; each box-car was marked Hommes 40 Cheveaux 8. It was not de luxe travelling, but it was a satisfactory feeling to know that every puff from the engine took the train closer to the destination which had eluded the battalion for the past fourteen months. As it made its way always northwards, through green mountains and closely cultivated plains, all knew that they were constantly creeping nearer the enemy.

At eight o'clock next morning the train stopped at [Larisa](#). The troops were cold and numb, but breakfast was waiting; none slept in. While stretching cramped legs and stamping up and down along the track, the men could see glimpses of the stricken city. Wrecked by a recent earthquake, it was now the target for Italian bombers. Many of its inhabitants, evacuated to [Athens](#), had been camped close to the battalion in a refugee compound at [Hymettus](#). Others who remained turned out that morning to wish the troops well.

At 10 a.m. the journey was continued. On pulling out, a check of the train revealed that there were two extra men aboard, men who as a punishment for misdemeanours had been ordered to stay behind with the reinforcements. It was too late to send them back now, and a little later the unit was glad they were with it. Both rendered stalwart service in the rigorous campaign which followed.

[Katerini](#) was reached in the early afternoon and the troops were marched to a camping area among the pines in the town park, where stood a marble memorial to the fallen of the First World War. Once again a warm welcome awaited the New Zealanders and leave in the township that evening was marked by handshakes and



hospitality. Next morning the unit transport, under Lieutenant [Stewart](#),<sup>3</sup> arrived and on the 21st the battalion moved to its allotted tasks. For the next two weeks all wielded picks and shovels and by hard work and sweat cured an epidemic of change-of-climate colds. In the bracing mountain air men got fit and hard once more digging defensive positions and on road construction work. Each man tackled his task with a will, but the battalion was never destined to occupy the sector on which it first worked.

Intelligence summaries indicated that the German concentration on the Yugoslav and Greek frontiers totalled twenty-one divisions, and included the headquarters of the air organisation which had earlier operated so successfully in [Belgium](#) and [Holland](#). Field Marshal List had led his army to victory in many parts of [Europe](#); now he stood at the doorway to the [Balkans](#), which [Hitler](#) claimed to be 'Germany's south-east flank'. There could be no mistaking his intention, and the presence of paratroops, panzers, and mountain troops all added up to one word: invasion. In Roumania and [Bulgaria](#) the Reichswehr had spent the winter building roads and railways which constantly crept southwards.

On the peaceful northern slopes of [Mount Olympus](#) it was hard to visualise the war that would soon ravage this quiet countryside. The Macedonian peasants toiled on their land from daylight till dark, tending every tree and each small square of growing crop with painstaking care and skill. Spring was close and already the wild flowers were blooming. Blue anemones with their backs to the breeze, yellow crocuses, primroses, violets and wild sweet peas—life in the company camping areas seemed like a bushland holiday.

Battalion Headquarters was established in a little stone house in the village of [Palionellini](#). Its whitewashed front and its trim tidiness were a treat to men who had spent so long in bivouacs and under canvas.

The 19th, as reserve battalion to 4 Brigade, had its companies on road work and digging in the brigade FDLs.<sup>4</sup> They were dispersed as their tasks demanded and lived on the job: Headquarters Company at 'Oak Ridge', five miles to the north, Wellington Company at 'Watch Tower Hill', Wellington West Coast Company near the little village of [Paliostani](#), Hawke's Bay Company at Rodhia, while, fittingly enough, Taranaki Company had been spirited away from [Katerini](#) to the 'Mountain of the

Gods'. There they relieved C Company of [18 Battalion](#) in a defensive post overlooking the main road. All unit transport was brigaded at [Neon Keramidhi](#) and the Commander New Zealand Engineers drew on men and vehicles according to the requirements of the work in progress.

In this small sector of a 100-mile line which ran from the [Aegean Sea](#) east of [Mount Olympus](#) to [Veroia](#) and [Edhessa](#) and thence northwards to the Yugoslav frontier, the New Zealand Division took up its battle positions. It occupied the right of the line and had the responsibility of guarding the [Olympus](#) passes. There was one disturbing factor, however. The security of the Aliakmon line depended on the Yugoslav Army. The position was a strong one, but it could be turned if the Hun broke through at [Monastir](#).

The weather was fine and the unit was happy. Fraternising with the local population, for whom each man's admiration constantly increased, added a pleasant homely touch to the experience. Some soon acquired a taste for the resinated wines; others more fortunate sampled dolma, a local dish of chopped spiced meat and rice wrapped in a leaf, and found it a palatable change from army rations. Eggs and almonds were purchased to add to the army fare, and green vegetables, too, were daily on the menu.

Then, on the 28th, when most of the officers were away on a reconnaissance, a sudden order directed the unit to concentrate at the foot of [Olympus Pass](#). The company NCOs were not found wanting and the dispersed platoons pulled up their stakes in record time. At five o'clock that evening the whole battalion bivouacked at the appointed spot. Next day fresh tasks were assigned. More defensive positions to dig, with locations even more idyllic than the last. The snowy dome of [Olympus](#) towering above, and trees, scrub, wild flowers and mountain streams all created a nostalgic atmosphere. The unit no longer felt strangers in a strange land. Here was a typical New Zealand setting, and the 19th revelled in its surroundings.

On the following day companies again dispersed to dig. Battalion Headquarters in its Oak Grove had a sylvan setting; pale-green budding boughs and a Judas tree with bright purple flowers cast lacy shadows on their tents. The days were sunny and the air sweet. The transport, now back with the unit, lay concealed in bush and scrub while the drivers tended their trucks.

These new positions were prepared on the high ground. Wellington Company at Haduladhika dug in along the north bank of the Mavroneri River and added to its task the reconnaissance of the steep mountain tracks over the south side of the pass. Wellington West Coast Company worked on the forward slope of a high feature between the pass road and the river valley. Hawke's Bay Company was on the south bank of the mouth of the gorge near a modern sanatorium. Taranaki kept vigil at 'Gibraltar', a position overlooking the pass road. As the unit dug, peasant women, old men, and even the children toiled to mend the roads which ran below. Watching them silenced any grouching.

There was little time to lose for events in [Yugoslavia](#) had given [Hitler](#) the excuse he was waiting for. [Germany](#) chose to regard the coup d'état of 27 March as a traitorous move. List made plans to deal with this 'threat' to his flank. Waiting for the war to begin, the men lapped up every item of news and the [BBC](#) bulletins were as eagerly awaited as the cookhouse call. Not all gave grim tidings. The Navy's victory at Matapan on the 28th was a rousing round in the fateful shadow-sparring contest to which our troops were daily listeners. Here was a final and conclusive fight and it caused more comment than all Rommel's advances in [Africa](#), List's menacing moves in Middle Europe, or the [Luftwaffe's](#) brutal bombing of [Britain](#).

On 1 April the almost completed posts were handed over to [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#)—a sour joke after so much hard work—then back went the 19th to the [Palionellini](#) positions it had left over a week earlier. Taranaki Company this time moved with the unit, and with the carrier platoon in an anti-paratroop role, the battalion went to work again as reserve battalion to [4 Infantry Brigade](#). Once more companies bivouacked near their defensive positions.

Digging in respirators, worn for increasingly long periods each day, soon ceased to be amusing. A visit from an



English gas expert (Lieutenant-Colonel Marnham) quickly convinced the men that these precautions were necessary. Gas warfare was painted as a vivid nightmare for the unprepared; the Germans, he reported, were already beginning to manufacture gas in [Bulgaria](#). So, putting the best face on the business, all ranks endured the monstrosity of the masks and, after the first few practice alarms, became experts in anti-gas measures. Meanwhile work went steadily on.

On 6 April [Hitler](#), howling vengeance on 'traitorous [Yugoslavia](#) and pro-British [Greece](#)', declared war. To the unit the impressive news was somewhat lost, for that same day the battalion received its first New Zealand mail since leaving [Egypt](#).

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<sup>1</sup> [Capt H. R. Heiford](#), ED; [Auckland](#); born [Napier](#), 10 Sep 1906; factory manager; p.w. Apr 1941.

<sup>2</sup> [Tpr A. H. Langdale](#); [Auckland](#); born Queensland, 4 Dec 1916; factory hand.

<sup>3</sup> [Capt F. M. Stewart](#), MC, m.i.d.; [Lower Hutt](#); born NZ, 24 Jul 1916; printer; wounded May 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Forward Defended Localities.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 8 – CAMPAIGN IN GREECE

## CHAPTER 8

### *Campaign in Greece*

... there was strife and there was  
Fortitude and there was fierce Pursuit.

—Homer (Bryant's translation)

Northern Greece has always been a bulwark to the richer provinces of the south, for Macedonia, mountainous and desiccated, forms a natural barrier against any invader. Even today the main roads and railway lie at the mercy of the side which can successfully hold the few passes piercing the rugged mountains. Possession of these passes meant the prevention of any mechanised movement south-wards, and the defence lines in Macedonia were planned and manned with this in view.

To the east Thrace is open to entry from Bulgaria, and its effective defence unaided by nature would have been a gigantic task. The line which the Allies planned to hold in the event of invasion began where the Aliakmon River emptied through miles of marshy estuary into the Gulf of Salonika, then followed the mountain range which ran north-west to the Yugoslav border. Its left flank rested on the slopes of Mount Kaimakchalan and at Edhessa it cut both road and railway. On the coast, reserve positions covered the main route via Platamon tunnel and the passes over Mount Olympus.

Along the border on the western flank of the line, Yugoslav forces based at Monastir guarded the main route from Yugoslavia into northern Greece. From Florina to Kozani this fine motor road ran through fairly open country, but a few miles further on began the high rugged country which was entered through the Servia Pass (also known as Portas Pass).

The German declaration of war on 6 April came before the Allied forces were fully disposed, and for the next two days the battalion toiled feverishly at Palionellini, hearing for the first time on 7 April the distant rumble which told of the unhindered advance of the enemy through Thrace. Fourth Brigade prepared for battle. Work went on apace, digging, wiring and siting weapons, and taking every advantage of the limited time to prepare for the onslaught. As a prelude to the

battle the weather broke and became cold and bleak. In driving rain, the New Zealand Division put the finishing touches to its defence sector and stood ready for the fray.

But on the 8th came grim tidings. The Yugoslav Army had broken and the German armour was already at [Monastir](#) threatening the rear of the Aliakmon line. An immediate revision of forces was therefore necessary and it was decided to first fall back on a line which would block any enemy advance from [Florina](#). An intermediate line running from [Platamon](#) on the coast, through the [Olympus Pass](#) and then from [Servia Pass](#) along the Vermion Range, linking up at [Vevi](#) with an emergency force already stationed there, was decided on. Later it was hoped to assemble an Allied force on the [Olympus- Aliakmon River](#) line which would pivot on [Servia Pass](#) to the range of hills west of the [Florina- Kozani](#) road.

As far back as the twelfth century, Samuel, King of the Bulgars, had recognised the strategic importance of [Servia Pass](#) and had built his Byzantine castle above it. Its ruins still tower above the sleepy little village of [Servia](#). This historic pass holds an important position in the history of [19 Battalion](#), for it was here that the battalion was blooded and in its first encounter with the enemy fought and beat off a veteran battalion of Austrian troops.

Late in the afternoon of the 8th 4 Brigade, with 6 NZ Field Regiment and [5 NZ Field Ambulance](#) under command, was hurriedly ordered to occupy the pivot position at [Servia](#), and began to move to the other side of Mount [Olympus](#) to take up a covering position under command of the Australian Corps. The 19th Battalion advance party, with the IO, [Captain D. S. Thomson](#) <sup>1</sup> in charge, left immediately for [Servia Pass](#).

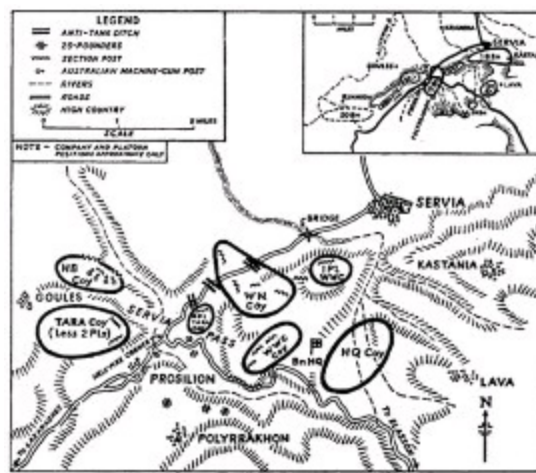
Once more the battalion packed up. Breakfasting at 3 a.m. on the 9th, it then marched in pitch darkness over the mountain roads which were rapidly deteriorating under the heavy rain and the heavy traffic. The unit's first-line transport was having teething trouble with its new trucks; faulty steering gear added to the dangers of driving on steep slippery routes, but after an anxious hour or so both troops and vehicles made the grade, and at Gannokhora the three-tonners of the [Divisional Petrol Company](#) picked up the marching men. In dismal weather the 19th set out in convoy on the 90-mile journey to a new area near [Servia](#).



A poor prospect greeted the battalion on arrival. Night was falling; the rain, sleet, and snow was continuous; there were no tents, and the frowning cliffs which towered above offered little shelter. The road was deep in mud and the weather showed no signs of improving. While the advance party guides floundered their way over the difficult rain-soaked terrain in an endeavour to point out company areas, for the waiting troops it was every man for himself. Companies cowered among the crags and under the sparse shelter of the few stunted shrubs on their new position. Hawke's Bay Company found a barn, dry but not built to the scale necessary for billeting a hundred or so troops, and crowded in somehow, counting themselves fortunate. The dawn broke fine but freezing cold, and after an uncomfortable night sodden and dishevelled figures crawled from beneath their dripping groundsheets. The company cooks somehow contrived a hot breakfast, and with its aid all felt fit for the move to the new areas.

A hurried early morning conference fixed forward positions. The unit's role and the company defended areas were defined as follows: 'The 19th Battalion will hold the road junction and the mouth of the Pass. Wellington Coy, Right, astride Servia Rd. Taranaki Coy, Centre. Hawke's Bay Coy, Left. Wellington West Coast Coy, in reserve with one platoon on hill 852. Bren carriers to patrol left flank of 4 Bde front and connect up with the carriers from 18 Bn patrolling on the right.'

From Brigade Headquarters came a warning that attack from the air or the ground was likely at any time. Work began immediately and through the daylight hours energy and ingenuity combined to overcome most of the obstacles, and the more vital materials were moved up from the road



Servia Pass positions 13-16 April 1941  
Hawke's Bay Company is shown in the position into which it moved on 13 April. Inset map shows changes in battalion dispositions

### Servia Pass positions 13–16 April 1941

Hawke's Bay Company is shown in the position into which it moved on 13 April. Inset map shows changes in battalion dispositions

to the positions. From beneath the shelter of a truck Captain Clive Pleasants, OC Wellington Company, stricken with 'flu, directed the dispositions of his men while hiding from the MO, afraid that should he be discovered he would be evacuated back to hospital.

After all the effort put into digging defensive posts it was ironical that here, where the unit would first see action, it should strike its most difficult digging. The ground was hard, rocky, and open. The tracks up from the road were steep and tortuous. Hawke's Bay Company, fortunate in the night, had a rude awakening in the morning. Theirs was the most formidable task of all; the approach grade was almost vertical and their front was exposed and bare. By lunchtime fatigue and aching shoulders were general complaints but the work went on.

In the afternoon it rained again, but by nightfall good progress had been made, and on the following day, after some adjustments to the original sites, the position began taking shape. Visibility was poor but all around the shouts and thumpings of working parties could be heard. Added to the strength of the 19th were six two-pounder guns from 31 NZ Anti-Tank Battery and a platoon from the Australian 2/1 Machine Gun Battalion. Both these detachments were under command. Further back 6 NZ Field Regiment sited its guns to give support. Along the road and riverbed sappers from 6 NZ Field Company prepared a series of demolitions. Toiling,

sweating, swearing, the men worked to the limits of endurance and at night slept where they lay, alongside their tasks. All knew that there was no time to lose.

On the 12th it snowed heavily and with the snow came a warning that enemy paratroops might be expected on the front at any time. Patrols were strengthened but work went on. The Bren carrier platoon under Second-Lieutenant Yorke Fleming had on 10 April begun patrolling the front, and the carriers of the other battalions now joined it as an anti-paratroop screen in front of the brigade positions. That day two Australian battalions withdrew through the position and a weary, pathetic procession of refugees, both military and civilian Greeks, began to stream back. All felt sorry for them, but the unit had to be careful and they became a constant embarrassment, for the canker of fifth column had already made its appearance and some of Signals' newly laid phone lines were sabotaged. Rough peasant clothing or bedraggled Greek Army uniform could easily cloak a German agent.

In the afternoon the sun broke through and the mists rolled back. For the first time the vast panorama of rugged countryside was revealed. Observation to the north, east, and west was perfect. Below and to the right lay the village of [Servia](#), set in a valley, and behind it a narrow, precipitous rocky ridge, almost unscalable on its northern side, extended to [Prosilion](#), on the left flank of the position. The valley was almost eight miles long, wide at its northern end but narrowing until it reached the throat of [Servia Pass](#), which was barely sixty yards across. Through the pass ran the road to [Elasson](#).

The high rocky hills on which the 19th worked were almost devoid of scrub or trees, clumps of coarse tussocky grass being the only vegetation. In the valley were small areas of cultivation and a few stunted shrubs and trees. To the north the country was wild and broken, with thin patches of pines and beeches. The [Aliakmon River](#) flowed north-east almost parallel with the main road between the pass and [Servia](#). At Servia the road veered sharply north to cross the river at a poplar-fringed bridge and turn north-west again towards [Kozani](#) and the Yugoslav border.

In the unit area two small streams crossed the road. The first, on the right of Wellington Company's position, ran under a reinforced concrete bridge; the second was in the pass itself between [Wellington](#) and Hawke's Bay Companies. Three anti-tank ditches had been prepared between them. Commanding the approaches to the

pass, the Greek Army under General Metaxas during the Bulgar war had dug a system of posts and trenches, and these were now occupied in part by Hawke's Bay Company. A concrete pillbox manned by 16 Platoon Taranaki Company, set on the heights and camouflaged, gave an uninterrupted view as far north as [Kozani](#).

All suitable natural obstacles to the enemy advance were being strengthened by the sappers. The bridge over the Aliakmon was demolished during the afternoon and the road and stream beds mined in many places; later the anti-tank ditches and the small bridge below [Wellington](#) Company were blown. Across the right front of Hawke's Bay Company's position a thousand Mark IV mines were planted in an area open to attack by armoured fighting vehicles. The detachment from [6 Field Company](#), under Lieutenant [Kelsall](#),<sup>2</sup> gave every possible assistance to the battalion in preparing the defences of the pass. On the right, above [Servia](#), 18 and 20 Battalions (the latter around Lava) were hard at work on their sectors. Fourth Brigade Group under Brigadier Puttick was making the most of its waiting time.

The 13th April (Easter Sunday) dawned bright and clear; the sun soon melted yesterday's snow and the change to fine weather gave a fillip to the work. The toiling troops now got their second wind, but there was still much to do and carrying parties were still constantly being called for. In obedience to a brigade order Hawke's Bay Company had to be shifted to a new position. Maximum man-loads were small and two Greek Army mules and an emaciated donkey were pressed into service to relieve the sweating soldiers. The donkey, true to the tradition of his tribe, proved recalcitrant, but the indefatigable Captain Bedding, OC Hawke's Bay Company, saw possibilities in the beast and was persevering. It needed a feed—half a mile away was a small square patch of growing grain—but the donkey refused to budge. To the delight of all ranks the little Greek donkey made the trip to the oats draped across the shoulders of a New Zealand officer. But Bedding's confidence and energy were repaid, for once fed the donkey made the return trip up the goat track to Hawke's Bay Company headquarters with two cases of ammunition slung across his bony back.

By evening a feeling of satisfaction over work well done and the smell of cooking food put the troops in a happy mood. Groups began to congregate around the company cookhouses to collect platoon rations. Men lay relaxed enjoying the last rays of the sun. By some unrecorded strategy pork had been procured and was being

served as a welcome addition to the Easter fare. The meal promised well.

Suddenly across the sky, silhouetted by the setting sun, a flight of seventeen aircraft made its appearance. The men watched with detached interest and munched contentedly—ours no doubt; probably Blenheims. Then the leader banked and dived. In a moment all was pandemonium; up and down the line the aircraft flew, roaring and spitting like devils out of hell. The mess groups scattered, each man cowering in whatever cover he could find. Even the deepest slit trenches seemed inadequate. Then as the raid went on the anti-aircraft guns opened up. A Yugoslav battery somewhere behind the position sent up some heavy stuff, while the 19th's own Bren-gunners emptied magazine after magazine in an ineffectual attempt to bring down one of the snarling Stukas. It was all unavailing, and only when they had exhausted their bombs and ammunition did they head for home.

From Servia to the rear areas at Rimnion the whole position had been well and truly pasted. It was the unit's first experience of a 'blitz', and when the din died down all emerged from cover sobered and shaken. Despite the ferocity of the attack, however, the battalion had only three casualties; [Private Spaulding](#)<sup>3</sup> of Wellington Company, who later died of wounds, was the first member of [19 Battalion](#) to die through enemy action. The impersonal attitude to war now vanished and his company, gritting their teeth, waited to avenge him. For the first and last time the [Luftwaffe](#) had caught the battalion off the alert.

That night was black and moonless and our patrols between the road and river moved with increased vigilance. The events of the evening had made it quite clear that our presence was known to, and the importance of our position recognised by, the enemy. Offensive action by his ground forces could now be expected, and it was no surprise when next morning the signallers working with the Bren carriers out in front helioed his advance. They could see his armour rolling into [Kozani](#). At midday, watchers on the heights saw him approach the blown bridge over the Aliakmon; then as he began to prepare a crossing our artillery opened up, driving him back. His 5.9 guns replied and at 6 p.m. the battalion came under artillery fire.

The battle was now on; both air and artillery were being used against our positions. It was clear that possession of the pass would be hotly contested. That night the Brencarrier screen was withdrawn from the brigade front and the road-

blocks prepared by the sappers were blown. The line was extended by 20 Battalion, who moved out from Lava to Rimnion to join up with the right flank of 19 Australian Brigade. The 26th Battalion was attached to this Australian formation, and with the 20th now spanned the Aliakmon River south-west of the pass. Once more the Anzacs were to be associated in battle. Fourth NZ Brigade Group, under command of 6 Australian Division, would fight as part of the Anzac Corps formed on 12 April. The whole line was now prepared to meet the advancing enemy. In the forward positions the night of 14–15 April was passed in tense expectation of the impending attack. Intelligence identified the enemy out in front as 9 Armoured Division.

Commands and appointments in the battalion at 15 April 1941 were:

Commanding Officer Lt-Col F. S. Varnham, MC, ED  
Second-in-command Maj C. A. D'A. Blackburn  
Adjutant Capt H. S. Budd  
Intelligence Officer Capt D. S. Thomson  
Quartermaster Capt J. H. Danderson  
Medical Officer Capt W. Carswell, NZMC  
Chaplain Rev C. E. Hyde, CF  
YMCA Mr J. H. Ledgerwood  
RSM WO I J. W. K. Parker  
RQMS WO II C. A. Baynes

#### Headquarters Company

OC Maj C. M. Williamson  
Signals Pl 2 Lt C. W. Taylor  
Anti-Aircraft Pl Lt F. P. Koorey  
Mortar Pl 2 Lt J. I. Thodey  
Bren Carrier Pl 2 Lt Y. K. Fleming  
Pioneer Pl 2 Lt L. W. Coughlin  
Transport Pl 2 Lt F. McB. Stewart

#### Wellington Company

OC Capt C. L. Pleasants  
No. 7 Pl Lt C. Meiklejohn  
No. 8 Pl 2 Lt R. B. Scales  
No. 9 Pl 2 Lt E. D. Blundell  
CSM WO II A. W. Steele

CQMS S-Sgt E. Berry  
Wellington West Coast  
Company  
OC Maj R. K. Gordon  
No. 10 Pl 2 Lt H. Heiford  
No. 11 Pl 2 Lt F. M. S. Budd  
No. 12 Pl 2 Lt C. A. L. Ferguson  
CSM WO II J. M. C. Jones  
CQMS S-Sgt C. A. Hammond  
Hawke's Bay Company  
OC Capt T. G. Bedding  
No. 13 Pl Lt J. H. Hutchinson  
No. 14 Pl 2 Lt K. C. M. Cockerill  
No. 15 Pl Lt J. D. Carryer  
CSM WO II S. M. Golder  
CQMS S-Sgt D. Brown  
Taranaki Company  
OC Capt C. E. Webster  
2 i/c Capt D. K. McLauchlan  
No. 16 Pl Lt H. M. Swinburn  
No. 17 Pl Lt A. Lawson  
No. 18 Pl Lt K. Staunton  
CSM WO II J. B. Coull

On 15 April, in the darkest hour before dawn, the enemy made his first attempt to penetrate the battalion's line. Employing three companies of seasoned troops, he approached under cover of darkness on Wellington Company's front. Two and a half hours later his surviving troops were on their way back—to 4 Brigade Headquarters for interrogation.

The sentries in section posts of Nos. 7 and 8 Platoons, whose line extended across the main road, were suddenly aware of approaching footsteps. They peered into the inky darkness trying to discern the movement below, but could see nothing. The shuffle of a party coming towards them down the road could still be heard. The challenge was answered with cries of 'Greko! Greko!' and the listeners relaxed: more refugees. Private Jack Barley<sup>4</sup> left the trench to go down to the tank trap which spanned the road and which the party was now evidently trying to negotiate. He dimly discerned just what he had expected to see, a straggling party of Greeks. A

Greek soldier was leading—he signed for them to go on, and went back to his post. It was 5.30 a.m.

The party, numbering about fifty and making much noise, crossed the tank trap and continued on down the road until they came to the cutting between the first and second anti-tank ditches. As soon as their leading elements were in this cover, the action began. Heavy firing, directed against the forward posts, broke out from the sunken area beyond the first anti-tank ditch. At the same time No. 8 Section of 9 Platoon (which held an extended line above and at right angles to that manned by 7 and 8 Platoons), from its listening post on the high ground above the obstacle had sensed that something was amiss and opened fire along the road on a fixed line. Hawke's Bay Company joined in. Bursts from two of the attached Australian machine guns, plus several grenades, prevented any serious attempt to move around the left flank of the battalion position.

While the enemy were giving covering fire to their penetrating party, 7 and 8 Platoons replied vigorously, but by now the 'refugees' were behind them and making for the second ditch. Enemy elements still in and beyond the first obstacle brought their supporting weapons, light machine guns and mortars, into operation. A red Very light from 8 Platoon called for an enfilade sweep of the anti-tank obstacle from the Bren gun in No. 7 Section; this combined with the fire of the two platoons kept the attackers down. A grenade thrown into the cutting cleared it of enemy and caused him casualties.



Wellington Company positions, Servia, 15 April

### Wellington Company positions, Servia, 15 April



The penetrating party were now proving troublesome, however, and 7 Platoon, whose trenches were on forward slopes, was attacked from the rear. A German captain working ahead of his men killed Privates [McCalman](#)<sup>5</sup> and [Campbell](#)<sup>6</sup> and fatally wounded Lance-Corporal [Kelly](#)<sup>7</sup> with a sudden burst of fire from behind. The German's career was cut short by Private [McKay](#)<sup>8</sup> who, leaping on to the parapets, evened the score by killing him and two of his followers. Private [Jim Frain](#),<sup>9</sup> with a Tommy gun, stopped a rush of about twenty Huns, and Corporal [George Cooke](#),<sup>10</sup> who had taken a section from No. 8 to investigate in the vicinity of No. 7 Platoon's position, put up a remarkably cool performance, bringing down two Huns with his rifle while they and their comrades ineffectually tried to deal with him. This NCO, completely ignoring the bullets whistling around him, continued to advance towards the opposition and, seeing the result of his two carefully aimed shots, the rest of the German party capitulated.

Meantime in 8 Platoon's area similar events were happening, but as the approach to their position was very steep the enemy did not reach a fire position, though a party managed to work round towards the rear of the platoon. Private [Wellman](#),<sup>11</sup> stepping out from the back of his trench in the face of their fire, used his Tommy gun effectively and this party, too, began to surrender. By now the LMG fire from the forward platoons had practically ended, few targets presenting themselves. For the rest of the action they were mainly concerned with sniping at the enemy as he tried to escape. The German LMGs firing from cover out in front did little damage, causing only three casualties—Privates [Large](#),<sup>12</sup> [Duthie](#)<sup>13</sup> and [Kilkolly](#).<sup>14</sup> One gun, however, turning its attention to 9 Platoon, made things very uncomfortable there, but the gunner's use of tracer disclosed his position and Private [McGregor](#),<sup>15</sup> the Bren-gunner in No. 7 Section's post, put him out of action.

It was now light enough for 9 Platoon to see what was happening below them, and from their trenches which overlooked most of the area still occupied by the enemy, they brought effective LMG and rifle fire to bear. Sergeant 'Coffee' Hardgrave<sup>16</sup> with the three-inch mortar soon made the tank obstacle untenable, and before long the majority in that area surrendered. The attackers forward of 7 Platoon were thus disposed of.

On the left of 8 Platoon the trench curved and dipped into dead ground. Out of

observation to the riflemen in 9 Platoon, the enemy established a light mortar. This was rested on the bank with the firer standing against the trench. After his first few bombs he was taken on by the two-inch mortar in No. 8 Platoon manned by Privates [Erskine](#)<sup>17</sup> and [Salmon](#).<sup>18</sup> With their fifth bomb the enemy mortar was silenced, the man operating it being found afterwards with a splinter through his back. On 7 Platoon's front also, their two-inch mortar did some effective work.

The enemy troops were now surrendering all over the area and at 7.15 a.m. a batch of about seventy was sent back. By eight o'clock all those still alive had given up the fight, and a few who could be seen trying to get away towards the [Aliakmon River](#) were engaged by rifle fire. There was some excellent shooting: Private [Guilford](#),<sup>19</sup> with his rifle sights at 1000 yards, dropped a man; Lieutenant Denis [Blundell](#)<sup>20</sup> saw another killed while attempting to take cover about 800 yards away. After the final surrender another batch of approximately fifty prisoners was sent back, and of the three hundred or so who attacked the position, only about twenty or thirty escaped. The enemy killed and wounded numbered about 150, while the 19th's casualties were two killed and six wounded.

This, the unit's first encounter with the Hun, had involved mainly [Wellington](#) and [Hawke's Bay Companies](#), and both had every reason to be proud of their performance. True, Wellington Company had been hoodwinked into letting some fifty truppen through its forward posts; neither had its patrols discovered the approach of the attacking force. The constant stream of refugees passing through the position at the time made the first mistake understandable, and in fact, a body in Greek uniform was found among the German dead after the engagement. Some 19th men are still firmly of the opinion that the Jerries tried to get behind the posts by a ruse and that they intended they should be mistaken for Greeks. The German account does not support this however, and their II Infantry Regiment report reads: 'Also the enemy used a military device which our troops were not prepared for. Taking advantage of his unusually favourable positions, he allowed the companies to run in to a trap and opened fire on them at very short range.'

Some of the statements made by the prisoners taken are interesting. One of the NCOs—a corporal—volunteered the information that there were three companies involved in the attack and that practically the whole force had been annihilated. Several said that they had fought in [Poland](#), [France](#) and [Greece](#), but never before

had encountered such devastating rifle, LMG and mortar fire. An officer told the company commander that he had the previous day driven through the pass in an army car abandoned by the Australians—a remarkable assertion, as the bridge was blown on 12 April—although the German war diaries state that 'Neither air recce nor the general situation indicated that we would run up against a defensive position'.

Neither side had received artillery support. [Wellington](#) Company, believing that it had only a fighting patrol to deal with, did not ask for it. The Hun was evidently confident that his silent attack would be successful. He was, however, equipped with a wireless set, but both the operator and the set were rendered defunct by our fire early in the action. His men were magnificently equipped, and from the amount of ammunition carried had obviously expected to take and hold the position until relieved by a larger force.

The cries of 'Kamerad' and the waving of white handkerchiefs by [Hitler's](#) much-vaunted troops caused almost as much surprise as their attack. When the firing had ceased and the tension relaxed, our fellows eyed their captives with much curiosity. They were in the main a fine-looking lot but obviously were badly shaken by the reception they had received. Up to now their advance had been easy, and perhaps continued success had made them contemptuous of opposition; but they seemed to bear no resentment. While they were being disarmed prior to being sent back through our lines, one officer remarked that 'The Greeks were nothing, but your men can fight and shoot.'

As our own and the enemy wounded were being attended to, an act of outstanding fortitude and coolness by Private 'Vic' Lee <sup>21</sup> was revealed. During the first half of the action a stick bomb thrown by the enemy had exploded, shattering both his legs and feet (his right leg was later amputated). Crawling to the Bren gun, Lee for the rest of the action had sat alongside filling magazines. For this courageous performance he was later awarded the MM.

For the rest of the day the unit was engaged by enemy aircraft and artillery, 'Hellfire Corner' just below the pass being a particularly unhealthy spot. Heavy concentrations of large-calibre shells were put down all over the battalion area. Headquarters Company lost cookhouse and breakfast in one of these 'stonks'. Fortunately the cooks had taken cover, but the company found their loss grievous

enough. Despite the enemy artillery, a party from the carrier platoon ventured out and salvaged a Bren carrier abandoned during the night by another battalion, and later in the day destroyed another some miles away on the left flank. This latter venture was undertaken right under the nose of a German patrol.

About midday a curious incident occurred. Enemy troops, about seventy strong, were observed marching up the road towards the pass, with rifles slung and only two solitary scouts working slightly ahead of them. They were engaged by Wellington Company and scattered in confusion, leaving behind them some twenty casualties. Again at 2 p.m. a party of approximately 150 was seen attempting to cross the Aliakmon. Our artillery opened up effectively. The enemy was finding any movement costly, and at 5 p.m. the unit was not surprised when his aircraft again put in an appearance. For three-quarters of an hour forty-two planes pasted the area, Wellington and Hawke's Bay Companies receiving special attention, every trench and section post in their positions being thoroughly done over.

One of 9 Platoon's sections overlooked the road on a forward slope. A bomb, grazing the ridge, ricocheted down the hill to explode right outside one of their weapon pits. Greatcoats and loose apparel were all blown out of the trench and the men had their faces blackened by the blast. All were severely shaken and Private 'Goldie' Whalen <sup>22</sup> was wounded, but he was able to make his way back unaided and the remainder stuck to their post until ordered in after dark that night.

Casualties from this raid were negligible but the mines laid forward of Hawke's Bay Company area were detonated by the dive-bombing. As in all air attacks, the ack-ack platoon under Lieutenant Pat Koorey <sup>23</sup> kept their Brens firing. Theirs was a thankless, dangerous and unavailing task, for the planes seemed impervious to small-arms fire. The pilot of one particular Me110, after the first day, used to dive down and wave to one of the crews after each attack—a gesture of admiration or, perhaps, of derision.

During this blitz enemy infantry were seen advancing approximately 2000 yards away, and under cover of the dive-bombing they prepared to attack. They were continually kept under observation, however, and when the last planes were going away were within 400 yards of 8 Platoon. By the way they reacted to the opposition they met, it was evident they had expected to find the position completely reduced

by their bombers. Fired at from the front by Wellington Company and from the flank by the Australian MMGs in Hawke's Bay Company's area, they quickly retired, leaving behind between twenty and thirty casualties. Some of their wounded were brought in later, but our stretcher-bearers were exhausted through lack of sleep, and the long carry involved, plus the constant duel of fire now going on, meant that those further away had to be left out in the open. At nightfall a red Very light fired from the area silenced the enemy artillery and indicated that he had returned to retrieve his wounded. On the following day our patrols could find only dead.

The events of the 15th had reflected considerable credit on the unit and it was a matter for great regret when its commander, [Lieutenant-Colonel Varnham](#), had the misfortune to sustain an injury which necessitated his evacuation. Under his guidance and leadership the 19th had developed from a keen but untrained mass of men into a solid battalion fit to fight side by side with seasoned troops. It was the worst possible luck that the unit should lose him now. His battalion, proved in battle, was taken over by Major Blackburn, <sup>24</sup> second-in-command since 1939.

Rain and sleet ushered in 16 April and with daylight the position became more and more unhealthy. The complete capitulation of the Yugoslav Army was now only a matter of hours. With the left flank of the force now wide open and the enemy completely superior in the air, it was clear that withdrawal was the only course. Preliminary orders were issued and movement began immediately. The forward platoons of Wellington Company were withdrawn from the road on to higher ground above the pass. Hawke's Bay Company came further back and Wellington West Coast Company took up a position on the left rear of the battalion. The rain and mud made the going difficult, and all moves involved further heavy carrying by troops who had now for long periods been almost without sleep.

The units on the right and left withdrew also and the sticky task of negotiating the road and pass through 'Hellfire Corner' was accomplished by [18 Battalion](#) without incident. Their progress was watched with bated breath for shelling had been constant and severe, but for some reason the enemy batteries closed down and a passage was made unhindered. Despite visibility difficulties owing to the bad weather, the enemy artillery had all roads in the vicinity well taped, and one of 31 Battery's anti-tank guns sited just clear of the corner was knocked out by his fire, three men being killed. The Australian MMGs also had casualties.

There was some patrolling by both sides, but the day saw no further engagements for the enemy was now wary and had little liking for the treatment his infantry had received the day before at our hands. The bad weather kept his aircraft away and only an odd reconnaissance plane was seen. Increased shelling, however, showed that out in front his forces were massing.

The 17th opened still dull, wet and misty. Orders for withdrawal at dusk were issued. Meanwhile 19 Battalion patrols working forward as far as the river kept a tag on the enemy infantry. One of these patrols, commanded by Sergeant Dave [Rench](#)<sup>25</sup> and including Privates 'Buzz' [Nathan](#),<sup>26</sup> Guy [Roberts](#),<sup>27</sup> and 'Rab' Campbell<sup>28</sup> of 9 Platoon, worked as far forward as the area midway between the 19th positions and the village, where the ground overlooked the village of [Servia](#). Its purpose was to ascertain whether the enemy had crossed the river and also to search all enemy dead and wounded. They found between 100 and 120 dead in and around the tank traps, and three badly wounded Huns on the road back towards the village. After collecting all personal papers found on the bodies, the patrol returned and had the satisfaction of learning later that among the documents they had brought in was a complete enemy cipher.

Dusk came without the withdrawal preparations being discovered and movement began in pouring rain. The enemy shelling was still regular but unobserved, and for once all were grateful for wet weather. The ten-mile march to the embussing point, with the tired troops carrying all weapons and equipment, was a severe test but the battalion came out in good order. The first troops passed through the control posts at 9 p.m., the last some hours later. With the rearguard came Lance-Corporal [Lockett](#),<sup>29</sup> of the sappers, who had set the time fuses on road demolitions which would hinder the enemy's advance once he discovered we were gone. The Sigs, under Second-Lieutenant 'Buck' Taylor, who had done outstanding work throughout, kept the line communication with each company right up to the time they withdrew, while the Bren carriers remained forward of the pass in a rearguard role as the battalion thinned out.

So ended the engagement at [Servia](#). It had been a testing time for every man in the unit. In the positions above [Servia Pass](#) the battalion had battled with the ground, the elements, and the enemy. After eight days of unremitting toil and

tension it was abandoning the battleground; but it was not beaten. To the rank and file the backward move was bewildering for they felt that [Servia Pass](#) was impregnable: come what may, they felt that they could have held on indefinitely. Now, just when the unit had the measure of the Hun, it was disengaging.

The withdrawal, carried out according to plan, was dictated by events far from our front. The collapse of the Yugoslav Army and the overwhelming of the Greeks in northern Epirus had given the enemy a clear field. The four-day check he had suffered on the Aliakmon had been worth every effort. From a rapid rolling forward, his advance for the rest of the campaign became a series of cautious movements. A few British troops and British guns had turned List's triumphal march into a costly campaign. Of Servia, a German writer with their forward troops said:

The Britisher was tough, his positions were superbly selected and adapted. For four days he held us off.... Yesterday evening (17th April) a scout brought the first word of the withdrawal of the Britisher from the commanding position, into which on Easter Monday they had enticed one of our Bns, the marksmen who had won the first bridge over the Aliakmon. During the night probing patrols brought confirmation of the news: protected by the misty weather the Britisher is withdrawing just in time to avoid a flanking attack of another Division which would have led to his encirclement.

In pitch darkness in pouring rain, weighed down with equipment and ammunition, the battalion completed the gruelling march to the embussing point. The move was difficult for the road was under fire and the rough tracks on the steep hillsides were serpentine and slippery. Still, though fatigued almost beyond endurance, the unit made it to the last man and the last item of portable equipment. Just out of range of the German guns, a canopied line of waiting 3-ton trucks loomed up and the weary troops staggered to their allotted transport, crowded aboard and slept as they were and where they lay, exhausted. Few felt the convoy move off.

Through the night the column of transport made good progress, for as far as [Larisa](#) the way south was clear. From there on enemy bombing had made the town and the routes out of it a shambles. The harassed remnants of the small [RAF](#) detachment in [Greece](#) had recently been compelled to abandon their forward airfields in this area. The Luftwaffe had shown the place no mercy. A detour was

made on to the [Volos](#) road; then as the going proved poor, back went the column on to the main south route. Here the convoy received its first check for the highway was literally crawling with moving vehicles. They came nose-to-tail in an unbroken stream and the pace was slow. Once in the column the 4 Brigade convoy moved on again, and by now the troops in the trucks, refreshed by their first full night's sleep for over a week, began to sit up and take notice of their surroundings. There was general amazement at the extent of the trek for they were now well into [Thessaly](#) and still moving southwards. The day was fine, and as the sun grew hotter the trucks were festooned with discarded clothing. Up to now the ride had been enjoyable.

But the column soon began to behave like a concertina and it was clear that somewhere ahead trouble was waiting. The sound of distant detonations told all too clearly what was occurring, and even at this stage there was some confusion, for contrary to all army rules of the road some vehicles kept cutting in and splitting up unit convoys. Control was difficult, and just as the leading truck of first-line transport had got through Farsala the convoy was attacked for the first time. The Stukas roared up and down the road, dive-bombing and machine-gunning. Vehicles were abandoned while the men sought cover wherever it could be found. An air blitz was a nerve-racking experience even when protected by well dug-in posts. On the open road the effect was indescribable. Lying in the scant cover of grass, trees and drains, the troops watched the planes scream downwards with engines at full throttle. They could see the bombs leave the racks and whistle downwards, projected from the fast-moving plane like an aimed rocket. At each dive the forward guns blazed, and as the aircraft straightened out the rear gun carried on the venemous work—a cacophony of hate which had to be endured for the rest of the day, and to which there was no effective reply. The battalion Brens did their best, and Private [Gray](#)<sup>30</sup> was one who gained a great reputation for sticking to his gun. When the attacks started he would hop off the truck, lie on his back and, firing from the shoulder, get away a burst at any Stuka strafing the road.

Sitting on the end of the bridge just outside the village, the battalion ammunition truck was blown to atoms. The bridge itself, a much-bombed target, was damaged and this further delayed progress. When the all clear was given troops scrambled back into the trucks, those whose vehicles had been damaged riding wherever they could find room.



From then on the column consisted of a higgledy-piggledy mass of transport, and with each succeeding air attack throughout the day the confusion was multiplied. Orders to get off the road and disperse, given by various authorities at various points along the route, were not obeyed by all, and soon both vehicles and men became inextricably mixed.

By the time [Lamia](#) was reached, each truck carried a conglomeration of men from all units of the British force. The road was fringed with broken and abandoned vehicles but still seemed to carry a solid stream of trucks of all types. Military police and staff officers worked valiantly to maintain order and give direction. No. 7 Platoon Wellington Company was among those detached for special policing duties along the route. Next morning it seemed a miracle when the battalion found itself at its destination, just east of [Molos](#), near the historic pass of [Thermopylae](#). The day was spent gathering in personnel who had gone astray en route and the final count was surprising. There were but three missing (two of them believed killed) and three wounded. [Corporal Ken MacKenzie](#),<sup>31</sup> a Military Medal winner of the First World War and one of the most popular NCOs in the battalion, and his companion Private [Arthur Golder](#),<sup>32</sup> both of Headquarters Company, were afterwards confirmed as killed during the raid at Farsala.

The Bren carriers got in that night with their own ten vehicles, plus the one they had salvaged at [Servia Pass](#). They had had a difficult journey, milking abandoned trucks en route for petrol and nursing their vehicles through air attack and mechanical troubles. They were the same old carriers they had used in [Egypt](#); throughout the Desert and in [Greece](#) they had given stalwart service. The Sigs truck, one of the last to leave [Servia](#), came in loaded with stragglers and salvaged [Naafi](#) stores. Despite its nightmare journey the unit was still intact.

While dispersed in the [Molos](#) area the battalion was given a coastwatching task, and except for a few air attacks, which caused no casualties, found their role easy. On the 20th Wellington West Coast Company was detached and sent to take up a defensive position on [Thermopylae](#), while the rest of the unit was put to work digging close to the bivouac area. On the 22nd Wellington West Coast Company rejoined the battalion, and on the same evening the unit moved out to occupy its newly made posts.

It had not been in position for an hour when new orders were received: 'Move immediately to a new bivouac area five miles north west of Levadeia prior to taking up an independent role in defence of the Delphi Pass.' Companies collected their gear once more, some moving three or four miles to reassemble at the same spot they had left an hour or so previously. At 5 a.m. on 23 April the last vehicle left [Molos](#) en route for the opposite coast. Another sleepless night.

The battalion had been placed directly under command of Anzac Corps Headquarters, which was then at [Levadhia](#). The orders were to move to a position south of the pass and await further instructions. None came. Before leaving the CO had been informed by Headquarters 4 Brigade that Australian and New Zealand sappers were at the Delphi Pass preparing road demolitions. After waiting two hours at the rendezvous, Major Blackburn went forward some ten miles into the pass but found no sign of the sappers or of prepared road blocks. While he was away Major Williamson, second-in-command, returned to [Levadhia](#). Anzac Corps Headquarters were feverishly packing up and making arrangements to get out. Interviewing General Blamey, Williamson asked for orders and for MT to get the battalion back. The General regretted that there would be no transport available until the next day, and on Major Williamson's return the battalion prepared to move by march and shuttle system using its own trucks. The plan had changed again. Another backward move of 25 miles was necessary. The ASC transport had of course left. Cursing heartily, the unit nevertheless undertook the unpleasant march sturdily. The battalion transport, desperately short of petrol, levelled up the tanks of all vehicles and loaded them to capacity with stores and troops. As the trucks set off, the rest of the unit began their long march.

By now it was common knowledge that the British forces in [Greece](#) were evacuating. Every step along the hot, dusty road was taking the troops nearer the embarkation beaches. It was hard marching, however; rations and water were short and the road was crowded with transport. As the trucks passed the trudging column they piled on board those who were too fatigued to march further, and later in the day our own transport returned to pick up another load of troops. By daylight on the 24th the whole unit was in the new bivouac area near [Thebes](#). It was a tribute to the good heart and discipline of the battalion that none went astray during that difficult move. Even those who, when exhausted, had accepted lifts did not allow themselves

to be carried past the appointed place and on to the beaches. All were tired but still in fighting trim, and as the unit rested under the olive trees out of sight of enemy aircraft, plans were made for the last stand on Greek soil.

The enemy's planes were still troublesome but his intense activity had reaped little tangible result. It was a war of nerves rather than casualties, and despite the mix-up which his mastery of the air had caused during the retirement, it was significant that all units of 4 Brigade Group had assembled at the rendezvous ready for action and practically complete. His constant harassing tactics, however, did contribute to each man's fatigue and irritation.

Though the unthinking and the uninformed blamed the [RAF](#) for their discomfiture, the air force in [Greece](#) had fought to its last Hurricane. At Athens airfield on 20 April the epic battle between the [RAF](#) and the [Luftwaffe](#) had been their swan song. It had cost the Germans a six-fold sacrifice to keep the [RAF](#) out of the skies, and finally, without an airfield on which they could land, the last few British planes were forced to head for [Crete](#).

During the evening of 24 April the battalion with the rest of 4 Brigade Group, plus Australian artillery and MMG units under command, moved to [Kriekouki Pass](#) to cover the withdrawal of the rest of the New Zealand Division. The orders were to hold here until the evening of the 26th. To avoid giving away the position all movements were made by night, and both men and transport were effectively concealed by day. From daylight to dark on the 25th the [Luftwaffe](#) searched frantically, trying by every means to make the brigade disclose its position, but wise to the ways of the Hun it held its fire and hid, taking advantage of every scrap of natural cover the country could provide.

The 19th was the reserve battalion behind the pass. It held a line across the main road, through which 18 and 20 Battalions were to pass as soon as withdrawal was ordered. Contact with the enemy ground forces was considered unlikely, and once more Wellington West Coast Company was sent off in a detached role, this time to the [Corinth Canal](#). With its going the unit sustained the most grievous loss of its career for the company was not seen again. Before the 19th left [Greece](#) two of their number had made their way back to tell of the action at [Corinth](#) in which, though they were overwhelmed, the men from [Wanganui](#) had given a good account

of themselves. Their story is told elsewhere in this narrative.

On the 25th and 26th the unit prepared the position—as far as was consistent with concealment—for defence. At the same time foraging parties were sent out for food and water. The battalion had received no official issue of rations for the last nine days, but Captain Jack Danderson seemed to be able to smell any ration dump within a radius of 30 miles. He had already been to [Athens](#) and come back well stocked, when Brigade Headquarters advised battalion QMs to head for that destination. Those who went found that the dumps on the racecourse had been thrown open to the Greek public and that supplies had completely disappeared. The 19th, however, fed well, and as the rations at this stage had for some time been reduced to biscuits only, the QM's initiative was keenly appreciated by the hungry troops. On a previous occasion while in bivouac near Thebes Danderson had conjured up several demijohns of rum, an unheard of luxury.

Preliminary orders were now issued and arrangements made for the withdrawal, but about midday on the 26th enemy AFVs <sup>33</sup> were reported in the vicinity of [Thebes](#). From Brigade Headquarters came the message: 'Withdrawal postponed twenty-four hours; contact with enemy now likely.' The brigade settled down to fight again, but despite careful probing by low-flying aircraft kept its positions concealed. From cover watchers saw two enemy motor-cyclists race out of [Thebes](#) and halt just beyond. They dismounted and scoured the pass with glasses, then came on. They were allowed to approach unmolested. They halted again just short of the forward positions, carefully scrutinised the countryside once more, then turned and tore back through [Thebes](#). The trap was set.

A little later a column of a hundred enemy vehicles led by two motor-cyclists and a light tank made its appearance. They came on in close formation as if on a peacetime parade. The troops in the pass waited breathlessly. Then the 25-pounder guns of  $\frac{2}{3}$  Regiment AIF opened up. Eight hits were scored as the stricken column tried to disperse. Panic-stricken infantry leapt off the trucks and fled pell-mell in search of cover. Burning vehicles littered the road; the rest turned tail and fled. Had the artillery held their fire a little longer even greater damage would have been done.

The advance was stopped but the position was now known. As darkness fell the

enemy artillery opened up on the pass, but taking advantage of the check he had received, withdrawal began that night. Unwanted stores (including the thirty 'bicycles, push' issued to the battalion in the [Western Desert](#)) were discarded, and at 2 a.m. the unit moved back two miles to an embussing point, bound for an undisclosed destination.

The vehicles and drivers of 4 RMT Company did good work that night moving 4 Brigade Group from a position which by daylight would have been untenable. Food was short and ammunition limited to what was on the spot. Supply systems had broken down and another twenty-four hours at [Kriekouki Pass](#) would have killed any chance of the brigade's withdrawal from [Greece](#). The sterling work of 4 RMT throughout the campaign gained them many friends. To the footsore infantry, the line of drab 3-ton trucks waiting to ferry them over miles of hard roads ahead was a heartening sight. The ASC bus service seemed to be one of the few things which could be depended upon to run to timetable. Once more the unit clambered aboard and, sodden with sleep, felt and saw no more until morning.

Sergeant Dave Rensch has supplied the following account of the withdrawal from [Kriekouki Pass](#):

Half of No. 7 Platoon under Lieut Ron [Scales](#)<sup>34</sup> was detailed to picquet the route to [Megara](#) and left in the afternoon. With Bill [Ivamy](#)<sup>35</sup> as driver I was detailed to pick up the picquets after the convoy had passed through. Our position in the convoy was between [Lt/Col Kippenberger's](#)<sup>36</sup> car and the truck of Australian engineers who were responsible for the demolition of all bridges.

We would travel at a fast rate for some distance then halt while the fuses were lit to blow up a bridge, and then on for about half a mile when we would halt again to await the explosion. This procedure was repeated some 20 times I should think. [Col Kippenberger](#) personally ensured that all demolitions were fired.

On some occasions we flew past intersections to be hailed by anxious shouts and much waving from the picquet, who justifiably thought he would be left behind.

Having heard of the fate of WWC Coy before we left we were most apprehensive of the safety of the remainder of the platoon and were both relieved and surprised to find Lt Scales with his party intact plus two members of the platoon

whom he had found during the afternoon. The men, Pte Duthie and Pte Kilkolly, had been wounded at [Servia Pass](#) and were inmates of a medical camp at [Megara](#).

The debacle which followed the capitulation of the Greek Army at Epirus on 21 April left the Division in a very sticky position. Its extrication reflected great credit both on the skill of its leaders and the energy and tenacity of its troops. Even before the withdrawal from [Macedonia](#), each brigade had worked for weeks without respite. Once movement commenced, the pace became hectic. Unforeseen events, order, and counter-order followed in rapid succession. Plans had to be made and changed from hour to hour. The situation was fluid and dispositions had to be elastic. For formation staffs and units there was little rest. Supplies became a major problem, transport difficulties were a nightmare, and the [Luftwaffe](#) harassed each moving vehicle, diligently searching for hidden halting places. Yet despite fatigue and a few brief inevitable periods of disorder, units stuck together and were ready at a moment's notice to turn retirement into attack. The German ground forces found that they had to move with caution. The discipline of the New Zealand Division was undoubtedly its salvation.

At Thermopylae, and later at [Thebes](#), the enemy AFV spearhead had taken a drubbing at the hands of the gunners. In all the withdrawals the rearguard had left behind a series of demolitions to delay the enemy's advance. Moves were now made only at night, and the nights were fortunately black and moonless. Units became adept at concealment and strict orders not to fire at low-flying aircraft kept the Hun guessing and rendered his air reconnaissance fruitless.

On the night of 25 April 5 Brigade, which had laid up during daylight near the beaches of [Marathon](#), [Rafina](#) and [Porto Rafti](#), was evacuated. The Royal Navy was doing the job quietly and efficiently. Sixth Brigade at Thermopylae had covered the withdrawal, disengaged with difficulty, and passed back through 4 Brigade to cross the [Corinth Canal](#). Now in the [Peloponnese](#), they waited their turn near the port of [Navplion](#). At Kriekouki 4 Brigade in a covering role was ready to move quickly to the beaches below [Megara](#) and be taken off there. [Isthmus Force](#) at [Corinth Canal](#) was holding the bridge lest the plans should miscarry, in which event 4 Brigade would be forced to take the same route as the 6th and get off the mainland.

The landing of German parachutists at [Corinth](#) on the morning of the 26th

changed everything. No longer could the beaches at [Megara](#) be used and, with the bridge across the canal blown and the route in enemy hands, the brigade was in danger of being completely cut off. Sixth Brigade units came back from their lying-up area south of the canal and made a gallant attempt to probe the situation at [Corinth](#). Their efforts undoubtedly kept the Hun busy and prevented him from spreading too quickly towards the routes leading in the only direction now open for the evacuation of 4 Brigade. [Porto Rafti](#), on the east coast, was its last chance.

On the night of the 26th the move was made, and by daylight the whole brigade had arrived in a position within easy distance of the beaches. Dispositions for defence were hurriedly decided upon, for news from the [Corinth](#) area, from [Athens](#), and from the north showed that the brigade was isolated. Few knew how close it had been to being completely cut off. As the convoy with its sleeping troops had passed that night through the outskirts of [Athens](#), German forces from the north were already rolling into the capital. Next morning the German flag was hoisted on the [Acropolis](#).

Before the battalion left [Kriekouki](#), news of the fate of Wellington West Coast Company at [Corinth](#) had been brought back by Privates [Jones](#)<sup>37</sup> and [Sullivan](#).<sup>38</sup> The 4th Brigade rearguard had watched enemy convoys moving confidently along the coast road to [Athens](#), their headlights blazing. There were still twelve hours to wait for darkness and the coming of the ships. In that time anything could happen; up to now the brigade had been lucky.

After daylight on the 27th the battalion dispersed under cover about a mile west of the little village of [Markopoulon](#). It was Sunday morning and the villagers, early astir, were dressed for their devotions. From under the cover of the olive groves the troops listened to the church bells ringing; there were few who did not think of home. The peaceful, cultivated countryside with its green crops, its barns and buildings and yellow reed windbreaks, drowsed in the early morning sun. Rations were distributed. It was a quiet breakfast; each man, weary with the hardships of the past month and busy with his own thoughts, sprawled in the shade, content to eat in silence.

The spell was soon broken, for breakfast was barely finished when the [Luftwaffe](#) found the brigade concentration. Once again the air vibrated with the noise of

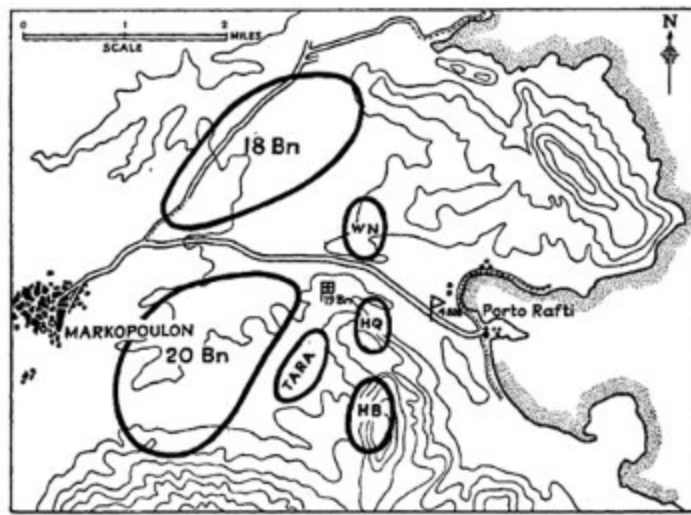
snarling aircraft, bomb explosions, and the whip of bullets. The battalion was fortunate: it was still under cover and had no casualties, though [20 Battalion](#), caught on the move, had over thirty. When the raid was over orders came to destroy all equipment which could not be carried. Fires were forbidden so the transport was rendered useless by draining sumps, running the engines, breaking components and chopping tanks and tires. There was to be no coming back. Extra clothing, a few blankets and personal effects which some men still held, was now an encumbrance; these were given away to the friendly Greeks. Then, without its transport, the battalion marched to its position on the high ground above the beach at [Porto Rafti](#).

The Greeks, who throughout the whole campaign had been magnificent, now watched the troops pass without rancour. The thumbs-up sign was still given to cheer them on their way. Their Kalimera became Kalo kalevothi (pleasant journey). They still smiled. One woman drawing cool water from a well held the bucket while man after man drank. The Greeks had little to give but what they had they gave gladly. A handful of fresh green peas, a pail of sweet water, flowers, a few currants and, above all, a friendship that left a lump in the throat.

The Luftwaffe sent flight after flight to harass the move to the beach but even this did not deter the villagers. They dived for cover too, and came up smiling once again to go on drawing water or to clap the passing troops. The courage of these simple folk was an inspiration; they had known ages of adversity, now they were sharing ours. Their friendship and their indomitable will left an impression which the years will not dim. The New Zealander who served in the [Balkans](#) will always remember the Greeks with affection.

The position at [Porto Rafti](#) was reached before midday and all ranks immediately set about preparing its defence. The battalion was to be rearguard for the brigade, and when the time came for embarkation it would remain until the





4 Brigade positions, Porto Rafti, 27 April

#### 4 Brigade positions, Porto Rafti, 27 April

other units passed through. The atmosphere was tense. In the afternoon sixty or seventy AFVs were reported in the vicinity of [Markopoulon](#) but  $\frac{2}{5}$  Australian Artillery

Regiment and 19 and 20 Battalions' mortars did good work and prevented further penetration. Watching shell after shell land among the homes of the peaceful friendly folk of [Markopoulon](#), the battalion tasted bitterness. Each man hated the Hun, and the war he had forced upon the world, with a fresh intensity. The enemy was now on our heels and the sea was the only means of retreat, but it hurt to have to shell that friendly village.

As the afternoon wore on all waited impatiently for darkness, and when it came the really trying time began. None doubted the [Royal Navy](#); yet as the parties began to move through the 19th's lines down to the beaches, every man who had a watch consulted it frequently and anxiously. The other battalions and units out in front seemed to take hours to come through the position. Four o'clock next morning was the deadline; after that those still on land would be left behind. Would the enemy attack before the job was completed? What would happen if the battalion did not make it? A thousand and one such questions and theories were developed in each man's mind as, crouching in his post, he waited—waited—waited. A smaller perimeter was made at 9 and again at 11 p.m.; parties from the rear, however, kept on coming and as the darkness swallowed them up it grew cold. Some worthy souls worked full time over a primus brewing tea.

At last came whispered orders for the withdrawal—but not yet. In companies, by platoons, with Headquarters Company the last to go and the signals platoon as rearguard for that company. The wrist watches in the last platoons still ticked on—2.45 a.m.—movement began at last. The guide led on down a track to the shore. Here busy black figures could be dimly discerned sorting out the patches of troops crowded together waiting their turn for the caiques and whaleboats which would ferry them out to the warships. God bless the Navy!

The rear elements halted again while the little ships disappeared, the men standing in the darkness listening to the lapping of the water on the beach and the chugging of engines as a pinnace fussed about helping the more clumsy craft out in the bay. There were no doubts now. The embarkation was going according to plan, but time, too, was moving on. Each man was still weighted down with weapons, ammunition, respirators and other items of army impedimenta. The Sigs had lugged all their instruments, from telephone exchanges to signal satchels, with them. It was a wasted effort for the naval guide ordered that everything except weapons and ammunition should be destroyed. Haversacks had to be discarded. All extra clothing was to go, respirators also. Sorrowfully the signallers broke, tramped on, and tore apart the delicate instruments they had so carefully nurtured and carried throughout the whole campaign. Clad now in bare necessities only, with weapons, ammunition, webb and water bottle, they moved on once more. 'Every alternate man to the left' was the order, and so the last platoon split up and filed to their ferries.

The last caique to leave the jetty was loaded to capacity. The Royal Navy crew worked feverishly to get every man aboard and when they cast off she was so deeply laden that her bow stuck firm. The engines raced full astern but to no avail. It was a case of get off and push, and on to the jetty leaped a dozen or so of her passengers. While they pushed the others moved towards the stern, rocking the boat in an endeavour to get her free. With a rush that threatened to leave the jetty party stranded she swung clear, and in the mad scramble to jump on to her fast receding bow, two fell into the water. They were fished out quickly and the caique headed out into the bay.

Even when the dim shape of the destroyer [Kimberley](#) loomed up out of the darkness the caique's troubles were not over. Wind and current were conspiring

against her, and twice she missed the lines while the crew tried to bring her alongside. It was nearly 4 a.m. and the skipper of the [Kimberley](#) was getting anxious—so were the soldiers.

Everybody was edgy. It was right on the deadline for sailing and it seemed an interminable time before the caique slowly came about again. Those on her felt that they were fated to circle round in the darkness for ever. But this time there was no mistake, and as she made fast, eager hands reached out from the destroyer's deck to pull the troops aboard. How many men that last caique carried has never been recorded; their transfer to the warship, however, was over in a few seconds. The wounded were helped off, a few stretcher cases hoisted up; then as the caique cast off, [Kimberley](#) trembled to the turning of her screws and moved out and away from the mainland.

Passed along amidships by cheerful sailors, the troops crowded below decks and squatted to drink the welcome mugs of steaming hot cocoa which had been handed to each man as he was shepherded to his place. A tin of cigarettes followed the cocoa and curious and admiring sailors stood about fingering the weapons. 'Blimey,' said one, 'Look at this!' He drew a machete from its sheath and passed it to his friends. This to them was the army version of the cutlass and it was handed around ceremoniously for inspection. Then another picked up a tommy gun—by the trigger. The resulting burst ricocheted round the steel walls but fortunately no one was hurt. Amid the oaths a very startled sailor was heard to exclaim: 'Eee lad, but they're a bloodthirsty lotta fellas!'

So 4 New Zealand Infantry Brigade Group left [Greece](#). [Ajax](#), [Kimberley](#), and [Kingston](#) carried them safely out into the night and into the [Mediterranean](#). 'The Navy, God bless them!' was the last thought of many a weary man as he dropped to sleep, sprawled serene and undisturbed against the steel bosom of a British warship.

The New Zealand Division had now tasted war, had faced its hardships and fought against heavy odds. In the bitterness of withdrawal they had proved their worth as men and as fighting units. Sticking together, carrying their wounded with them, they had as a complete force made their way through the whole length of [Greece](#). Neither fatigue nor foe had stopped them. Fifth Brigade, and now the 4th, were safely away. The 6th would soon follow. With the last caique on to the

[Kimberley](#) had come the commander of 4 Brigade, Brigadier [Puttick](#), who of his men could say: 'The conduct of all ranks during the operations was of the highest order'. Of his own leadership, and of the mettle of the units he commanded in a difficult campaign, there can be no finer tribute than that paid by General [Godley](#), the commander of 1 New Zealand Division in the 1914–18 War. He wrote:

My Dear [Puttick](#),

I have just been listening on the wireless to the account of your most gallant and splendid rear-guard action and must send a line to congratulate you and your Brigade on a feat of arms which will be a glorious page in the military history, not only of New Zealand, but of the whole Empire. Will you please convey my warmest congratulations and good wishes to all ranks of your Brigade and tell them their performance makes me prouder than ever of having been a New Zealand soldier.

Good luck to you all.

Yours sincerely,  
[Alex Godley](#)

Next morning as dawn broke fine and clear, the few figures who rose from sleep on the throbbing deck of the destroyer watched the sunrise playing on the wake foaming at the stern. Sitting relaxed, and secure, the events of the last month seemed to have been a dream. Every man had but one wish now: to sleep on and on and on.

The 25th April (Anzac Day) saw a dawn parade for Wellington West Coast Company. At 4 a.m. the Company Commander, Major [Gordon](#),<sup>39</sup> was given orders to report with his men to Headquarters 4 Brigade for a special task. His company packed up quickly and, leaving its position on the left of the battalion line at [Kriekouki](#), set off for a rendezvous at the rear of Brigade Headquarters.

The company had been cast for an important role. The [Corinth Canal](#) bridge and the road leading to it were vital to the evacuation plan for 4 Brigade, which was to be taken off by the [Royal Navy](#) at [Megara](#) on the following night, 26 April. If this plan should miscarry, then the brigade would cross the [Corinth Canal](#) and be evacuated from one of the beaches in the [Peloponnese](#) near [Navplion](#).

Early that morning 6 Brigade crossed the canal bridge and before daylight lay up near [Miloï](#), just south of [Argos](#). Fourth Brigade would go next. The canal, unguarded since the Greeks were evacuated from their positions some days before, was an obstacle which, if the enemy were to destroy the bridge, could seal the fate of the troops on the north side. Once our forces were across, however, its destruction by us would delay the German advance and allow more time for evacuation.

Headquarters British Troops in [Greece](#) therefore ordered that [Isthmus Force](#) should be formed and despatched to carry out the following tasks:

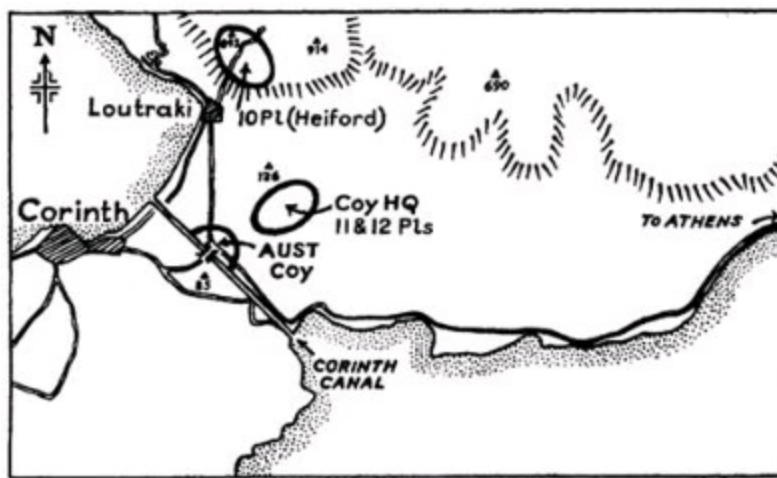
- (a) Keep the main road open for traffic from [Corinth Bridge](#) to [Megara](#).
- (b) Prepare both the bridge and the road for demolition.

Should 4 Brigade be successfully evacuated from [Megara](#), the demolitions would be fired and [Isthmus Force](#) would make for [Navplion](#) and be taken off there. If, however, 4 Brigade had to cross the canal, the force would come under its orders once more.

[Isthmus Force](#) included Wellington West Coast Company of [19 Battalion](#), one section of the British 122 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, [6 Field Company](#) New Zealand Engineers, one squadron of the Divisional Cavalry, a small detachment of the Royal Hussars and some [Royal Engineers](#). Major Gordon was to command the force, and he set off immediately for a rendezvous with the representatives of the other units, timed to take place at Kolatski at 10.30 a.m.

Loading up with six days' rations, the company, under Lieutenant Harold Heiford, moved off to take up a preliminary position astride the road north of Loutraki, where it was thought likely that the enemy might attempt to get through. They made the trip without incident and set up on high ground overlooking the canal.

Meanwhile OC [Isthmus Force](#) was the sole arrival at the Kolatski rendezvous: it transpired later that the other representatives did not receive their orders until that afternoon. However, on proceeding to [Corinth Bridge](#), Major Gordon found that a company of Australian infantry had been taken out of the withdrawing forces and now occupied the



Wellington West Coast Company positions,  
Corinth Canal, 25-26 April (Not to scale)

**Wellington West Coast Company positions,  
Corinth Canal, 25–26 April (Not to scale)**

defensive positions previously prepared by the Greeks on the [Athens](#) side of the canal. The 4th Hussars' detachment was defending the [Corinth](#) side of the bridge, and a subsection of 122 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery was also in position. Another subsection of the same battery had set up on the road-railway crossing on the [Athens](#) route. The 6th NZ Field Company, assisted by the RE detachment, was already preparing the demolition charges on the bridge.

The presence of these additional Australian troops was most welcome, for already the enemy was displaying much interest in the position and the anti-aircraft guns were bombed several times during the day. With the strong possibility of enemy aircraft landing between Loutraki and the canal, where the country was flat and suitable, it was deemed wise to move two of the platoons from [Wellington](#) West Coast Company down from the high ground and closer to the canal.

That evening Company Headquarters and 11 and 12 Platoons moved to a small fir-covered hill to the north-east of the bridge and some 800 yards away from it. No. 10 Platoon remained on the Loutraki road about three miles away. The new positions were taken up at dusk and the two platoons dug in, then made contact with the troops round the bridge to let them know their dispositions. The next move was up to the enemy. At daylight next morning (the 26th) it came.

Just after dawn a vicious dive-bombing attack, directed particularly against the anti-aircraft guns guarding the bridge, commenced and was kept up until the last

gun was put out of action. Ground strafing then started and suddenly the air was full of planes. While the fighters mercilessly gunned the Australian positions, troop-carrying aircraft came slowly down, turned into the wind and, when at about three to four hundred feet, disgorged their cargoes. The paratroops dropped mainly between the bridge and the two platoons. Obviously the company's position under cover of the firs was unknown to the enemy and he had not reckoned with their presence. Those who dropped within range were soon disposed of.

The Aussies were overwhelmed immediately and the tanks, too, were forced to withdraw under the concentrated air attack. The enemy was putting in an all-out effort to take the bridge intact. Anxious to make every shot tell, Wellington West Coast Company pushed forward an attack. But enemy reinforcements were constantly arriving and the second wave of troop-carrying aircraft numbered no fewer than ninety-seven. Paratroops now were dropping all around, and some who had got into position were beginning to take a toll of the 19th's men, but the company fought on. At this stage there was a tremendous explosion and [Corinth Bridge](#), which the Hun had already flattered himself was in his hands, blew up. With it went a German photographer who was standing on one of the piers filming its capture. The sappers had done their work well.

With the blowing of the bridge the German attacking force turned its whole attention to the area in which our men were operating, and heavy fire was brought to bear from both flanks. The position was hopeless, and Major Gordon began to withdraw his men. They would try to reach the brigade, which was thought to be at [Megara](#), Privates Jones and Sullivan volunteering to try to get back and let Headquarters know what was happening. Disengaging was difficult, for now they were being fired at from three sides. Gordon and both his subalterns (Second Lieutenants [Chas Ferguson](#) <sup>40</sup> and [F. M. S. 'Buzz' Budd](#) <sup>41</sup>) were wounded. Ammunition was running low, so gathering the wounded together Major Gordon handed over the survivors to CSM [Jones](#), <sup>42</sup> with orders to continue the withdrawal. Collecting all available ammunition the survivors set off, the wounded giving them covering fire until they were clear.

After the CSM's party withdrew the enemy advanced and picked up our wounded men. They were obviously disconcerted by the unexpected resistance they had encountered and chagrined over the destruction of the bridge. The two platoons had

upset their carefully laid plans and caused them heavy casualties. It was learned later from Australian officers, who after capture had been made to assist, that they had buried no fewer than eighty-eight German dead. Many more paratroops were wounded.

The Germans themselves, writing of the action, said: 'In the storming of "Blood Hill" too, as the little fir covered mountain to the north east has been called since yesterday—the Britishers with troops from their auxiliary nations had dug themselves in properly. Many were placed in the trees barely visible—and didn't they shoot well!'

As the paratroops were collecting our wounded, Jones and his party fought their way out of the bridge area and made for [Megara](#), but unable to get through, took to the hills. While their supplies and ammunition held they carried on a guerrilla fight with Hun parties. Several highly successful ambushes were staged and enemy transport and troops suffered some rude shocks. As the day wore on, however, and the area became thickly occupied by the [Wehrmacht](#), they were forced to split up into smaller parties. Supplies, too, became a problem. Some men tried to get away by sea but were picked up in the attempt. Some were wounded in skirmishes, and some were betrayed by fifth columnists.

Privates [Hill](#), <sup>43</sup> [Watson](#), <sup>44</sup> and [Nielsen](#) <sup>45</sup> remained at large, living in the hills, always moving, always alert, hunted and hungry. Sheltered by friendly Greeks for short periods, they lived by foraging and fieldcraft until in 1945, when the Allies again landed in the [Balkans](#), [Hill](#) and [Watson](#) were able to report back to the British Army. [Nielsen](#) had been evacuated in August 1943 on a caique arranged by the British military mission.

While the battle for the bridge raged below them at [Corinth](#), the men of 10 Platoon at Loutraki were at a loss to know what to do. They could see the paratroops landing three miles away, they heard the firing and the explosion as the bridge blew up, but, obeying orders, they sat astride the road expecting either the brigade or the Hun at any minute. Their visual signals to Company Headquarters were not answered and there was no other method of communication. At midday Greek civilians told them the Germans were in the village below. It was then obvious that the game was up.



Lieutenant Heiford decided to try to get back to the unit and he and his men lay concealed and waited for darkness. About dusk they captured a German paratroop officer riding one of the motor-cycles formerly belonging to their own Company Headquarters. He was evidently out for a joyride and was drunk. When darkness fell the platoon, with its captive, set off for the sea, intending to get a boat across the gulf and make for the unit positions at [Kriekouki](#).

Their furtive progress northwards and their difficult task in locating boats took until almost daylight on the 27th. It was clear that it would be inviting trouble to make the attempt then, for they would have hardly left the shore before they would be discovered. Once more the platoon hid to wait for darkness. A Greek fisherman had promised his motor-boat for the next night, and provided they could see the day out, things looked rosy. The captured German officer proved their undoing. Agitated and now very sober, he did some talking to some civilians who visited the cave in which the platoon was hiding. At midday Greek police arrived as emissaries for the German Army—the cave was surrounded.

The story of Wellington West Coast Company told as the experiences of its individual members would fill many books. The battalion learned the brief facts of the engagement at [Corinth](#) from the two men, Privates Jones and Sullivan, whose stout journey back to the unit is well worth recording. Ordered by their wounded company commander to get back as quickly as possible to Brigade with the news of the destruction of the bridge and the overwhelming of Isthmus Force, they took the company truck and, avoiding the roads, set off for the hills to the north-east, bypassing the area in which the enemy were active. They intended to pick up the road again on the outskirts of [Megara](#). After a long period of rough cross-country driving they were compelled to abandon their vehicle, and decided to try for the main road on foot. When they reached it they hid in the scrub until a civilian car appeared. They stopped the driver, found he was headed for [Athens](#) via [Megara](#), and learned that the enemy was already in the latter place. They took a risk and, lying on the floor of the car, sped through the town; once clear, they left the Greek to go on his way and set off on foot once more towards Villia, where the brigade had last been located.

Darkness fell, but they plodded on, fighting off fatigue and fearful that at any

moment they might walk into enemy hands. About 10 p.m. they hit the road once more and dived quickly for cover at the sound of approaching vehicles. They were Bren carriers—their caution gave place to relief and, rushing out, they contacted [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger](#) and part of the brigade rearguard. After telling their story they were picked up and taken to a spot where they were told to await the arrival of a liaison officer.

While the carriers rattled off on their duties, the two weary men waited, fearful lest they should fall asleep and miss their only chance to join the unit, which was now well on its way to the opposite coast. The truck turned up on time. In it was Lieutenant Latimer, lately of their own company, who was now doing duty as liaison officer at 4 Brigade Headquarters. He picked them up, but their adventures had not yet ended. Lights appeared along the road—a convoy was coming. The New Zealand truck turned off the track and waited. Soon a long stream of German transport began to pass, travelling in the same direction as that which the brigade had taken not two hours before. Quick thinking saved the situation; turning the truck into a break in the column, the New Zealanders now continued as part of the enemy convoy. Moving unnoticed in the middle of the enemy was a nerve-racking experience but it was the only course, and when, at the crossroads, the truck got away in the new direction without a challenge, all aboard breathed a sigh of relief. For the rest of the journey Jones and Sullivan slept soundly and next day woke up to find themselves at [Porto Rafti](#), back with their unit.

Fred [Woollams](#),<sup>46</sup> one of the Wellington West Coast Company NCOs, has given a graphic account of the fortitude of those men who for long periods managed to elude capture. His book, [Corinth and All That](#), is a stirring story of courage and adventure as well as a tribute to the fine Greek folk who defied the threats of the Germans and Italians and did so much to help our troops.

The gratitude he feelingly expresses is shared by all the 19th men who, when all possibility of organised resistance had ceased, broke up into small parties and took to the hills, facing a hard and precarious existence in a bold bid for freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> [Capt D. S. Thomson, MC](#); Stratford; born Stratford, 14 Nov 1915; clerk; wounded 26 Jun 1942; p.w. 16 Jul 1942.

<sup>2</sup> Capt D. V. C. Kelsall, m.i.d.; England; born Taihape, 13 Dec 1913; civil engineering student; p.w. Apr 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Pte L. F. Spaulding; born Blenheim, 2 Mar 1915; mattress maker; died of wounds 13 Apr 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Pte J. E. Barley; Masterton; born Lord Howe Island, 2 Feb 1918; farmer; wounded 24 May 1941.

<sup>5</sup> Pte J. B. McCalman; born NZ, 14 Apr 1909; salesman; killed in action 15 Apr 1941.

<sup>6</sup> Pte W. A. M. Campbell; born NZ, 19 Dec 1911; truck driver; killed in action 15 Apr 1941.

<sup>7</sup> L-Cpl C. J. Kelly; born Wanganui, 22 Sep 1912; electric-range assembler; died of wounds 19 Apr 1941.

<sup>8</sup> Pte R. McKay, m.i.d.; born NZ, 5 May 1914; house painter; killed in action 27 May 1941.

<sup>9</sup> Pte P. J. R. Frain; born NZ, 28 Jan 1918; clerk; killed in action 20 May 1941.

<sup>10</sup> Cpl G. C. Cooke; born Wellington, 17 Mar 1906; clerk; died of wounds 23 May 1941.

<sup>11</sup> Pte R. C. Wellman, MM; Wanganui; born NZ, 7 Apr 1913; labourer.

<sup>12</sup> Pte A. F. V. Large, m.i.d.; Johnsonville; born Palmerston North, 1 Jun 1915; painter; wounded 15 Apr 1941.

<sup>13</sup> Pte W. McL. Duthie; born Dunedin, 29 Mar 1916; cleaner, NZ Railways; wounded 15 Apr 1941.

- <sup>14</sup> Pte J. Kilkolly; Dannevirke; born Hastings, 3 Aug 1917; labourer; wounded 15 Apr 1941.
- <sup>15</sup> WO II N. S. McGregor, MM; Uruti; born NZ, 22 Apr 1911; farmhand; wounded 14 Jul 1942.
- <sup>16</sup> Sgt M. E. Hardgrave; born NZ, 23 Feb 1917; railway porter; killed in action Apr 1941.
- <sup>17</sup> Sgt H. Erskine; Lower Hutt; born Perth, Aust, 6 Aug 1912; waterside worker; wounded 3 Oct 1944.
- <sup>18</sup> Pte V. J. Salmon; Auckland; born Dunedin, 17 Apr 1916; civil servant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.
- <sup>19</sup> Pte R. D. Guilford; Hawera; born NZ, 16 Apr-1917; cheese-factory hand; p.w.15 Jul 1942.
- <sup>20</sup> Lt-Col E. D. Blundell, OBE; Wellington; born NZ, 29 May 1907; barrister and solicitor; BM 5 Bde Apr 1943-May 1944; CO (temp) 23 Bn 8–17 May 1944.
- <sup>21</sup> Pte A. V. Lee, MM; Waihi; born Mercer, 24 Apr 1909; clerk; wounded 15 Apr 1941.
- <sup>22</sup> Pte G. F. Whalen; born NZ, 31 Oct 1915; lorry driver; wounded 15 Apr 1941.
- <sup>23</sup> Maj F. P. Koorey; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 24 Jul 1911; mercer; squadron commander 19 Regt, 1944; wounded 3 Jul 1942.
- <sup>24</sup> Lt-Col C. A. D'A. Blackburn, ED, m.i.d.; Gisborne; born Hamilton, 8 May 1899; public accountant; CO 19 Bn 15 Apr-9 Jun 1941; CO 1 Army Tank Bn (NZ) Jan-May 1943.

<sup>25</sup> WO I D. W. Rench, m.i.d.; Pakaraka, Bay of Islands; born Napier, 2 Aug 1914; farmer.

<sup>26</sup> L-Cpl B. G. H. Nathan; born NZ, 15 Sep 1916; farm cadet; killed in action 21 May 1941.

<sup>27</sup> Pte G. F. Roberts; born NZ, 16 Dec 1916; accountant; killed in action 20 May 1941.

<sup>28</sup> Pte R. J. Campbell; Hamilton; born Waimate, 19 Jan 1917; civil servant; p.w. 21 May 1941.

<sup>29</sup> L-Cpl B. C. B. Lockett; Gisborne; born Wanganui, 24 Sep 1911; surveyor's assistant; p.w. Apr 1941.

<sup>30</sup> Pte J. A. Gray; born Dunedin, 19 Sep 1913; plate-layer; killed in action 20 May 1941.

<sup>31</sup> Cpl K. MacKenzie, MM<sup>\*</sup>; born NZ; clerk; Wgtn Regt in 1st World War; killed in action 18 Apr 1941.

<sup>32</sup> Pte A. C. Golder; born Masterton, 18 Jun 1917; motor mechanic; killed in action 18 Apr 1941.

<sup>33</sup> Armoured Fighting Vehicles.

<sup>34</sup> Lt R. B. Scales; Palmerston North; born NZ, 27 Jan 1915; salesman; wounded 25 May 1941.

<sup>35</sup> S-Sgt C. Ivamy; Picton; born Picton, 30 Aug 1915; barman.

<sup>36</sup> Maj-Gen Sir Howard K. Kippenberger, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Ladbrooks, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 NZEF 1916–17; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939-Apr 1941, Jun-Dec 1941;

comd 10 Bde ( Crete) May 1941; 5 Bde Jan 1942-Jun 1943, Nov 1943-Feb 1944; 2 NZ Div 30 Apr-14 May 1943 and 9 Feb-2 Mar 1944; 2 NZEF Prisoner of War Reception Group in UK, 1944–45; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories.

<sup>37</sup> Pte F. S. Jones; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 9 Nov 1913; lorry driver; wounded May 1941.

<sup>38</sup> Tpr R. J. Sullivan; Matamata; born Seddon, 11 May 1912; labourer; wounded May 1941.

<sup>39</sup> Maj R. K. Gordon, ED; Wanganui; born Bulls, 19 Feb 1899; school teacher; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

<sup>40</sup> Capt C. A. L. Ferguson; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 2 Oct 1915; hardware salesman; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

<sup>41</sup> Capt F. M. S. Budd; Hastings; born Waihi, 19 May 1913; factory supervisor; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

<sup>42</sup> WO II J. M. C. Jones; Okoia, Wanganui; born Wanganui, 10 May 1916; farm labourer; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

<sup>43</sup> Pte A. R. Hill; Taikorea, Rongotea; born NZ, 24 Jul 1918; farmer.

<sup>44</sup> Pte F. K. G. Watson; born Featherston, 25 Sep 1918; labourer.

<sup>45</sup> Pte R. J. Nielsen; born NZ, 17 Jan 1918; engineer.

<sup>46</sup> Cpl F. I. A. Woollams, m.i.d.; Te Kuiti; born NZ, 13 Nov 1916; shepherd; p.w. Oct 1942; escaped Italy, Sep 1943.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 9 – REORGANISATION ON CRETE



## CHAPTER 9

### *Reorganisation on Crete*

... fell into a profound sleep in which we forgot not only cold, great hunger, and fatigue, but our own names and our souls, and passed as it were, into a deep bath of forgetfulness.

—H. Belloc

The first weeks spent in [Crete](#) can be divided into three periods. One, when flaccid and comatose men lounged and were content to lounge, not caring about the past or worrying over the future. Two, when returning vitality after a surfeit of sleep caused individual mental and physical wrestlings with self and surroundings. Three, when phoenix-like the unit rose, cut its losses, reorganised its forces, and stood ready to fight again in a campaign which was to prove even more severe and costly than its first.

For most men, two days and nights saw the end of that first period. The second, with its tempo increasing daily, lasted for perhaps a week. The third period carried the unit through the days of feverish preparation, through the air blitz, into the attack, and on through the deadly duel which characterised the bitter defence and rearguard actions. The survivors took back this spirit of doggedness with them to [Egypt](#) and passed it on to the reinforcements when the unit was brought up to strength once more. Tried by fire, hallowed by sacrifice and strengthened by adversity, this esprit de corps would bind the men of the 19th together through the long years of war which lay ahead.

On 28 April, a fine sunny morning, the battalion woke to find itself at [Suda Bay](#) for the second time in six weeks. [Ajax](#), [Kimberley](#), and [Kingston](#) had made a fast passage from [Porto Rafti](#) and now, anchored in the blue bay, they disembarked their tired passengers and prepared to return once more to [Greece](#), where at [Monemvasia](#) 6 Brigade waited its turn to be taken off.

An unshaven, unmilitary-looking rabble debouched from the three smart grey ships into waiting barges. British troops, Greeks, Australians, Yugoslavs and New Zealanders, a mixture of many nations and all arms, were ferried to the quayside

and shepherded to a refreshment camp just outside the town where food was waiting. In retrospect it can hardly be termed an attractive meal—bully, biscuits, scalding tea, and a small sweet orange—but it was a meal to remember. Eaten at leisure, the first food for weeks served as a set meal and not snatched as a snack, it was little wonder that every man managed each course on the frugal but welcome menu. Mess gear was short; however, except for tea, utensils were superfluous. Mugs and tins were passed around, filled and refilled, until each man's thirst was slaked. After food, a rest and a smoke, the sorting out of units began.

A rough stocktaking showed that two men were missing from the evacuation and that the battalion had arrived in [Crete](#) with a total of 475 all ranks. Despite the loss of over 25 per cent of its strength it was still a fighting force: its dishevelled but serried ranks could still muster 449 rifles, 32 Bren guns, 2 three-inch mortars, 36 tommy guns, 25 pistols and 6 anti-tank rifles. Carrying their precious weapons, the unit formed up and began the weary march to the bivouac area, five miles away among the olive groves near [Galatas](#).

It was a long, hot plod down the dusty road, but the quiet countryside and the promise of sleep ahead kept the overtaxed troops moving on. The grass and shade by the roadside beckoned invitingly and at every halt men cast themselves wearily down to fall asleep immediately. When stirred once more into wakefulness they trudged dully and stiffly forward, until that afternoon, beneath the olive trees among a sparse crop of green barley, the march came to an end.

There were no amenities and practically no necessities on the spot where the 19th stopped, but fatigue needs no feathers. Comfort came from the bare ground, relaxation from the knowledge that sleep would be safe and undisturbed. Sleep itself was all sufficient. Food and blankets were forgotten as, huddled together in groups for warmth, the weary men shared the scanty coverings available and dropped off into oblivion.

Next day was spent in drowsing and in desultory organisation. Blankets were issued, one to be shared among each three men, and rations were received, but as yet there was no desire for movement and there was little response to normal routine calls. It was warm, and sleep and sun were the tonic tired bodies still craved. Night fell, but few were awake when darkness came.

On 1 May there were signs of returning strength, but the degree of exhaustion remaining still claimed much rest. The troops, however, were now flocking to the two-foot-wide creek on the other side of the valley road and to wells for water to wash and shave. Companies were sorted out and the unit moved a short distance, dispersed, and took over an area just south of [Karatsos](#) in an anti-paratroop role as reserve battalion of 4 Brigade. Fifth Brigade moved to the [Maleme](#) aerodrome, while news was received that the 6th was now safely in [Egypt](#).

With a definite job to do, the moribund period ended and the battalion embarked on the task of clearing up its area and improvising camp facilities. There were no tools and no cooking appliances but company cookhouses soon came into being. Mud stoves, petrol-tin cookers and containers, fuel from the olive groves and mess gear from bully-beef tins quickly became standard equipment. Hygiene and sanitation were attended to. The administrative side began to function normally. Rations were arranged and supplemented where possible by a few vegetables, and oranges, which were plentiful and cheap, were bought from the villagers. The water point was set up at a well in the valley between [Galatas](#) and [Karatsos](#).

That night, after the evening meal, groups gathered and reviewed events of the past few weeks. Sections, platoons, and companies became grimly aware of their losses. To men who had served, lived, and shared together for so long, every gap was keenly felt. After Serbia a connected story was impossible. Now in the quietness of the Cretan twilight men began to piece together the saga of the past month. The fate of Wellington West Coast Company at [Corinth](#) was not fully known—were they all captured after the fight? The reinforcements sent to [Volos](#) when the unit moved north—had they got off? The sick and wounded evacuated to hospitals in [Greece](#) during the early stages of the campaign—how had they fared?

The casualty return issued that day was a sad commentary on the cost of the campaign in [Greece](#)—6 killed, 30 wounded, 178 missing—but the last figure was provisional only. All knew that it would contain, when the final results were made known, a large proportion of killed and wounded. <sup>1</sup>

Their companies remembered with affection those who had been left behind killed or evacuated from the field wounded: Chas [Hiskens](#), <sup>2</sup> the father of Wellington Company, a veteran of the First World War, wounded during the first air blitz at

[Servia Pass](#); the cheerful, inimitable Corporal 'Ned' Kelly, who succumbed to wounds after the engagement with the Hun infantry; Lance-Corporal McRae,<sup>3</sup> the long, lean orderly-room clerk from Hawke's Bay Company, who had been killed by a shell while standing outside his company headquarters. Not only had the unit lost a large proportion of its fighting strength but each man who remained had lost friends. With the sadness, however, was mingled a certain satisfaction. The battalion had not been beaten. Despite the heavy odds against it, it had got away. It had not run away, but under the nose of a superior force had been evacuated in good order. Where it had fought against the German infantryman it had beaten him, and when at his mercy on the embarkation beaches he had lacked the nerve to attack. From the campaign in [Greece](#) had come an undaunted doggedness of spirit which would serve the unit well in all future actions.

Early in the first week in May it became clear that [Crete](#) was destined to be more than a mere staging place and rest area for those who had survived [Greece](#). The battered wrecks of warships and merchantmen in [Suda Bay](#) spoke eloquently of the attention the harbour had received from the Axis air forces before we landed. Raids were now increasing in frequency and it was obvious to all that preparations were being made for the defence of the island against an enemy landing. A special order of the day issued by the GOC, who had been appointed Commander of the British Troops in [Crete](#), gave a clear warning that attack could shortly be expected:

Special Order of the Day by [Major-General B. C. Freyberg](#), vc, cb, cmg, dso,  
Commander British Troops in [Crete](#)

The withdrawal from [Greece](#) has now been completed. It has been a difficult operation. A smaller force held a much larger one at bay for over a month and then withdrew from an open beach. This rearguard battle and the withdrawal has been a great feat of arms. The fighting qualities and the steadiness of the troops were beyond praise.

Today, the British Forces in [Crete](#) stand and face another threat, the possibility of invasion. The threat of landing is not a new one. In [England](#), we have faced it for nearly a year. If it comes here it will be delivered with all the accustomed air activity. We have in the last month learned a certain amount about the enemy air methods. If he attacks us here in [Crete](#), the enemy will be meeting our troops upon

even terms and those of us who met his infantry last month ask for no better chance. We are to stand now and fight him back. Keep yourselves fit and be ready for immediate action. I am confident that the force at our disposal will be adequate to defeat any attack that may be delivered upon this Island.

Despite the confident note upon which this order ended, [General Freyberg](#) was under no illusions about the task which confronted the defenders. The topography of the island was entirely in the attackers' favour. The only ports, [Suda](#), [Canea](#) and [Heraklion](#), the only airfield, [Maleme](#), and the airstrips at [Heraklion](#) and [Retimo](#), were on the vulnerable north coast within easy range of the German-occupied [Peloponnese](#) and the Italian bases in the [Dodecanese](#). Already the enemy was successfully raiding the vital points on the island and his bombers had little opposition. [Crete](#) was well beyond the range of the nearest [RAF](#) fighter bases in [Egypt](#) and North Africa. The country was extremely rocky and covered with olive groves. The south coast was steep, dangerous and bare, and to reach it a mountain range in places over 6000 feet high would have to be crossed. Roads were few and rough. Communications were primitive or non-existent. The island was poor and offered little or no material suitable for adapting to its defence. It could not even keep its own population in sufficient food. The defenders had to be supplied entirely from the sea, and in addition had to provide for about 15,000 prisoners of war. Armour, artillery, automatic weapons, ammunition and tools were all woefully short. The units themselves were not yet properly organised.

To the troops, however, the tactical and administrative difficulties of the island's effective defence had little meaning. The battalion, without tools, did its best to dig positions, interspersed its work with a little training and with plenty of rest, held daily bathing parades in the creek or on the coast, and revelled in the sunny days and the peaceful nights. The periodical bombing attacks on the ports could be seen from the unit's area, but the enemy aircraft confined their attention to those targets. The small [RAF](#) garrison on the island did good work, and they and the ack-ack gunners provided the watchers with many thrills. At first the [Luftwaffe](#) did not make its raids with complete impunity, and an enemy bomber disappearing into the sea behind a trail of smoke was a heartening sight.

As in [Greece](#), so in [Crete](#), the villagers made friends with the troops. The majority of the [Cretans](#) were wretchedly poor, and apart from oranges there was

little local food or wine to be found. The women, however, were pleased to do any washing and mending, and the troops' all too scanty clothing supplies were sorely in need of their attention. The children constantly wandered in and out of the lines in search of scraps of food, empty tins, cigarettes and anything else likely to be given away.



There were few leave attractions. Galatas was an impoverished little village, Suda a grubby, straggling port; but at Canea there was a Naafi and a few small cafés. Some liquid refreshment was available but there was very little food. Still, leave was not sought after. The few drachmae which remained from the last pay in Greece had practically no purchasing power here. There were no places of entertainment, therefore the troops contented themselves with swimming during the day leave and sleeping at nights.

The total absence of vehicles made things more difficult and the transport, pioneer, and signals platoons of Headquarters Company, whose normal functioning was now impossible owing to lack of equipment, became rifle platoons. Training began again and it was remarkable how quickly the unit, despite its varied uniform, acquired soldierly smartness once more. Competition between sub-units revived, and the return to a regular routine was welcomed by those who now found time beginning to hang heavily on their hands.

In the quiet spells there was a spate of letter writing, and though censorship regulations to some extent dammed the easy flow of words, there was, nevertheless, much mail despatched from Crete. Today, carefully preserved by

wives, families and friends, these epistles received from loved ones overseas during those anxious days are still precious possessions. To the men whose recent experience had been so bitter, who had for the first time stood amid sudden death, the quiet thoughts of home became very poignant. The comparison between battered [Greece](#) and peaceful New Zealand was painful in its clarity and disturbing in its possibilities. As yet the Southern Hemisphere was safe, but in a few months' time the men overseas were to endure tortures of anxiety when the third Axis partner menaced the shores of their own country.

Some unusual pastimes were devised. Chess became popular; the pieces were of no standard pattern, but served the purpose both for play and as a hobby when amateur whittlers with knives and razor blades shaped them into some semblance of the Staunton models. A few greasy packs of cards worked overtime, but the usually popular poker was replaced by euchre, five hundred and bridge. Crown and Anchor, two-up and housie went into recess. Reason, the lack of hard currency. The slate was tried for a time by some of the more ardent gamblers, but in a few days the bookkeeping became too involved and so, without the usual official warnings, 'vicious' games lapsed.

The BBC news broadcast was again an eagerly awaited daily event and the issue of Crete News helped fill a great need for printed matter. Copies were at a premium, for all were athirst for news. The tidings learned over the air were not reassuring: the [Luftwaffe](#) was still bombing [Britain](#), Rommel was still ranging the [Western Desert](#), and Lord Haw-Haw from Berlin Radio was busy announcing the impending liquidation of the garrison of [Crete](#). As yet there were few qualms. If the sword of Damocles did hang suspended over the heads of the garrison, the menace was disregarded. Rations were the only real worry; no trimmings to eke out the drab daily menu and no returns kept appetites keen. John Ledgerwood's [YMCA](#) emporium was set up once more and was a popular institution, but supplies soon ran out. Replenishments sent from [Egypt](#) shared the fate of many more important items which were being rushed from the all too scanty war stores of the [Middle East](#) for the British troops in [Crete](#).

Our shipping suffered shocking casualties. [Alexandria](#) to [Suda Bay](#) was a suicide route, and though many a gallant crew and craft made the journey, few got through unscathed. A proportion were sunk before sighting [Crete](#), but the majority met their

doom in the daylight raids on the island's ports. These increased in frequency and ferocity throughout the month until a ship still in harbour at daylight stood little chance of ever putting to sea again. Only the fastest units in the gallant and overworked [Mediterranean Fleet](#) could make the trip, arrive at night, berth briefly and turn around again before dawn.

All units from time to time supplied unloading parties at the docks, and this dangerous duty was undertaken by three men from each of the carrier platoons with the New Zealand battalions in [Crete](#). Under Second-Lieutenant Yorke Fleming they were based at [Suda Bay](#), for Bren carriers were being sent to re-equip all battalions. Of the eight or nine ships they worked, all were sunk in the bay, and despite the most valiant efforts a total of eight vehicles was all that could be taken off and brought ashore. Three of these were landed after the main attack opened.

The trickle of stores and equipment which came to [Crete](#) at so great a cost was put to good use. The few tools were worked in shifts to ensure their maximum use. With their help the unit position, well dug in and camouflaged, was added to and improved daily.

The remnants of the Greek Army which had been evacuated to the island towards the end of the campaign on the mainland were reorganised with British assistance. They were to play an important part in the defence. Courageous and hardy fighting men though they were, their organisation, training, and equipment fell far short of modern standards. Some officers and NCOs from New Zealand units were sent to assist them. On 12 May Wellington Company, with the mortar platoon, staged for their benefit a successful demonstration of the company in attack. This and other similar demonstrations added stimulus to the training of the Greek troops. They were keen to emulate our methods, but the wretchedness of their arms and equipment seriously reduced their value as a fighting force.

With the full moon on 13 May the [Luftwaffe](#) began regular night raids. The ports were still their chief target and unloading difficulties were intensified. Three bombs were dropped that night on the battalion area, but there were no casualties; probably some pilot was jettisoning his overs before returning home. At all events, subsequent happenings proved that the 19th's area was not regarded by the enemy as being occupied, and neither did his later reconnaissances pierce our camouflage.



The rising moon, however, made raids by night a regular occurrence.

By now the remarkable recuperative powers of men well trained and well disciplined were manifest. With regular rest and routine the battalion belied its recent rough handling, and though its ranks were thinned, fitness and morale were never more clearly in evidence. The will to work, and the cheerful accomplishment of tasks made unduly arduous by the absence of equipment, were reflected in the orderliness of an area which offered nothing in the way of natural facilities for bivouac or bastion. Despite difficulties, comfort was contrived and defences designed, dug, and camouflaged. Primitive Cretan agricultural implements borrowed from the peasants and steel helmets used as shovels were up to now the only tools available for the job.

Sunday was a holiday, and in the little Greek church at [Galatas](#) Padre Hyde held divine service for the battalion. Here the rolling metre of 'Oh God our Help in Ages Past' took on a truer tone and richer meaning than ever before. These occasions were no mere routine. The poignant service was frequently punctuated by the bombing of our shipping in [Suda Bay](#), and as the Benediction ended with a fervent Amen, the little stone church trembled to the detonations and the congregation filed out into the world at war.

A few members of the unit, including some who had been hospital patients, came with caique parties to [Crete](#). The arrival of these parties now became an almost nightly event, for Greek fishermen organised by the [Royal Navy](#) were smuggling stranded men off the mainland, making the hazardous journey across the Aegean, then putting in to the smaller fishing ports on the north coast of [Crete](#) to land their passengers.

At Kisamos Kastelli, where Major Bedding was in command of two Greek battalions, remnants of 1 Greek Regiment, over 800 British troops were put ashore by these friendly fishermen. Some amazing tales were told. Lance-Corporal 'Des' O'Donoghue, <sup>4</sup> of Wellington Company, who had been evacuated to hospital when the battalion was at [Katerini](#), arrived back with the unit at [Karatsos](#) over a month later. His adventures were typical of those shared by many men upon whose resourcefulness and fortitude fortune had smiled.

Discharged from [26 General Hospital](#) at [Kifisia](#), O'Donoghue found himself at a reinforcement depot on the coast east of [Athens](#) when the withdrawal was beginning. The men in the depot were hurriedly formed into a composite battalion and moved by lorry to the [Peloponnese](#) for evacuation. The convoy, after receiving its share of attention from the [Luftwaffe](#), in due course reached its destination outside [Kalamata](#). There the party destroyed its trucks and lay up to await embarkation. Air attacks and enemy armoured vehicles on the route leading to the town caused confusion and the parties split up, taking cover where they could find it. O'Donoghue, who with a mixed bag of New Zealand troops was machine-gunned off the side of the road, took to the swamp along the riverbed which ran parallel to the main route from the north. In their flight from the German AFVs the men were forced to abandon everything except weapons, then after a difficult trek through the sedge and reeds they reached the coast and went along the beaches in the direction of [Kalamata](#) once more.

Greek civilians confirmed that the town was already occupied by the enemy. Turning back, the New Zealanders hurried to a bay where they had seen three small boats close to the water's edge. It was now dark but the party split up and put to sea, taking turns at the oars and keeping close to the western shore. At dawn they landed, but during the night one of the larger boats had lost contact and now only two remained. They held fifteen men. Without rations or water, their situation was grim. A little bread, some pork, and several stone jars to hold water were obtained from the nearest village, sails were found in the boats, and after a council of war it was decided to head for [Crete](#) via [Cape Matapan](#) and the islands of [Kythera](#) and [Antikythera](#).

There were only two men in the party with experience in sailing, and O'Donoghue took command of one of the boats. It was the smaller of the two, eleven feet long, decked over except for a four by four cockpit, and into it six men were crowded. The two boats put out into the bay at dusk and, once clear, sail was hoisted. O'Donoghue's little craft sailed well but her speed, the working of the mast, and the heavy load opened her seams, and her skipper was forced to head her towards land. At daylight there was no sign of the other boat.

On shore they caulked the gaping seams as best they could and lay low on the

island until night fell. Then, heading for the tip of [Cape Matapan](#), they set sail once more. At dawn the little craft was battling with heavy seas; the wind was against her and the crew all became seasick. Reluctantly she was put about to run before the south-east gale. In the early afternoon she was edged into a small cove, and the shaken and famished party landed on an island five miles further back than the one they had left the previous evening. Three goatherds living with their flocks on the island welcomed, housed and fed them. For the next two days the party lived on a diet of goat's meat and goat milk, then, when the weather moderated, they put to sea in another night attempt to reach the cape.

This time the trip was without incident. Putting into a rock-bound bay at dawn, a cave was found into which the boat was hidden away from the enemy air patrols which were systematically searching the coast during daylight. A villager who had a smattering of English told the party that, on the other side of the cape, a boat called nightly to take off British stragglers. After a rest the party set off again in daylight to round the cape and make for the spot which had been described to them. The weather was rough but, determined to make the rendezvous, the crew headed the boat hard into the wind and sailed up the eastern side of the cape until a bay which seemed to answer to the landmarks they had been given was sighted. They put in, but in the heavy surf were almost overturned. Some of their arms and equipment were washed overboard in beaching the boat; however, she was finally dragged ashore, and after a breather the party headed for the village in the bay. Here they received disturbing news of a Hun launch patrol which was active in the area. It was then too late and too rough to make another attempt to find their rendezvous, so it was decided to set off again at daylight next morning.

At first light the boat was launched. It promptly sank. The villagers helped to salvage it, and when the little craft was beached once more it was found that the keel had carried away. The damage was so extensive that it was decided to abandon the boat and make off overland for the next village, in which it was reported there was a small launch and a schooner. The owner of the launch agreed to take the party on to [Crete](#). As fare he would accept their only pair of field-glasses, plus all the money they could muster as good faith payment; then when they were landed in [Crete](#), they were to arrange for the Army to reimburse him still further. He agreed to sail that night, but warned the men to keep clear of the village till dusk as

German patrols were frequently in the area. At his insistence they reluctantly handed over their glasses and their drachmae and headed for the hills, to return again at 8 p.m. On their way out of the village they saw the schooner beached and full of holes from a well aimed burst by a German plane.

Hiding in the hills behind the village, they found another party of New Zealanders who were on the lookout for a boat also. It was agreed that they would all try to make it in the launch and, after exchanging news, the two parties settled down to wait for dusk. At eight o'clock they returned to the village, only to be told that a German patrol had arrived that afternoon, commandeered all the diesel fuel and the field-glasses from the owner of the launch, and as a precaution against its being used by escaping troops, had put the engine out of action.

Corporal O'Donoghue's party decided to go back and try to repair their wrecked boat, and they retraced their steps to the little fishing village which had been so hospitable to them. On arrival they found that the locals were already attempting to make the craft seaworthy. It was a hopeless task. After spending much time and patience on the job, the boat had to be abandoned. Food, too, was a pressing problem, for the villagers themselves had barely enough to exist on, so back into the hills the party went.

That night an English-speaking Greek, wearing part uniform, arrived and, producing papers to prove his identity, told them that they would be taken off by the customs boat from [Crete](#) at dusk the following night. He had documents for their signatures, crediting him with their rescue, and he told them of the arrangements for their embarkation.

Next night, moving circumspectly in the dark, they made their way down to the bay where they had been told to pick up the boat. The chugging of an engine, and shortly afterwards a hail, stilled their fears. The escapers waded out and scrambled aboard. The Greek crew put them beneath the hatches and set off along the coast for their next rendezvous.

All went well till midnight; then the engine spluttered to a stop and refused all resuscitation. The boat drifted dangerously close to the shore until, using the anchor as a holdfast, she was warped onto the beach. While the engineer set about

constructing a cylinder gasket out of the lid of a fibre suitcase, the six men with some of the crew went ashore. The repairs took most of the day, but at last they were completed and the crew scurried away to take the boat out on a trial run to test the new gasket. Away she chugged out of sight around the point, and a few minutes later another sound was heard. Round the corner came the Hun patrol boat.

Before the German officer in the stern could get ashore the New Zealanders had faded silently away. They hid that night in the hills, but were sought out by a party of Greeks who took them to their village, gave them food and cigarettes, and bedded them down in the local church. The skipper of their boat arrived and told them how the German patrol launch had accosted him during the trial run, had put his engine out of commission, placed a guard aboard and instructed him to sail to the patrol headquarters. He had seen the Germans put into the bay, and once the patrol boat was out of sight they managed to disarm and kill the guard, put about, and make away to the opposite side of the cape.

Next night, after an arduous cross-country trek, the party once more boarded the customs boat and sail was set for [Crete](#). In a favourable wind and in heavy weather, the island came in sight at dawn. Above the clouds they could hear the roar of enemy planes returning to their bases after bombing raids, but they were not seen and managed to creep unmolested into Kisamos Kastelli.

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<sup>1</sup> The battalion's casualties in [Greece](#) were: Killed in action or died of wounds 22, wounded 20, prisoner of war 146 (including 17 wounded), missing but later contacted Allied Forces 3.

<sup>2</sup> [L-Cpl C. Hiskens](#); Balmoral; born Belfast, [Ireland](#), 3 Apr 1904; scrub cutter; wounded 13 Apr 1941.

<sup>3</sup> [L-Cpl A. McRae](#); born NZ, 18 Feb 1909; hotel employee; killed in action 16 Apr 1941.

<sup>4</sup> [Cpl D. M. O'Donoghue](#), EM; [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 12 May 1918; mechanic; injured c. 26 May 1941.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 10 – AIRBORNE INVASION

## CHAPTER 10

### *Airborne Invasion*

Without danger, danger cannot be surmounted

—Publius Syrus

By 16 May enemy preparations for the invasion of [Crete](#) were known to be so far advanced that landings were expected almost hourly. [General Freyberg](#), calling together his officers and NCOs, set the facts frankly before them. An attack was imminent; parachute landings, airborne landings, and an attempt from the sea could be expected. An aerial blitz even greater than that experienced in [Greece](#) would be used against us. Equipment and defensive supplies of all sorts were short and there was little hope of improving the position before the invasion took place. It would need an all-out effort by each individual if the enemy was to be beaten off.

Preparations in our defended areas were as far forward as limitations in supplies and equipment would permit. Now began a waiting game. Forecasts, official and unofficial, fixed the zero hour many times over the next four days, and COs of units were supplied with a translated copy of a captured German order covering the [Corinth](#) landing. This gave useful information on enemy methods. Meanwhile the air raids continued on the ports and dive-bombers harassed transport or troops caught in the open. All movement was made with increased vigilance, and a rumour that enemy fifth columnists wearing Allied uniforms had already been landed on the island added to the tension.

With Headquarters Company abandoning its specialist role, [19 Battalion](#) could now muster four fighting companies. Supporting arms had moved into operational areas and the battalion had in support F Troop of 5 NZ Field Regiment. The gunners, whose weapons were of ancient Italian vintage, set up in the battalion area. A platoon from 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion was added to the battalion strength but was later withdrawn, leaving the 19th shortly before the attack took place.

Equipment was down to a fraction of full war scale. Transport for tactical and administrative use totalled two trucks and three Bren carriers. The unit had but two 3-inch mortars and bombs for them were strictly rationed. There were no tools



except a small pool of picks and shovels which had to be shared by the whole battalion. Small-arms ammunition was plentiful; armour-piercing and incendiary rounds, however, were unobtainable. Some 120 Greek troops attached just before the battle were armed with Steier pattern rifles, dated 1898, and had but three rounds apiece.

This was a picture repeated in all the New Zealand units on the island. Morale was high but supplies of war equipment were precariously low. Every man knew that when the attack came his marksmanship would be a factor in deciding the fate of the battle. Section leaders set about the preparation of range cards upon which almost every object within rifle and LMG range was accurately taped. There was some anxiety about the ability of our defences, dug in soft ground, to withstand the preliminary air bombing, but the arrival of airborne troops was awaited with confidence. The defenders had every faith in their ability to deal with them.

The New Zealand sector in [Crete](#) comprised two main areas: 5 Brigade was responsible for the defence of [Maleme](#) airfield, while 4 Brigade was concentrated between [Suda](#) and [Galatas](#). Brigadier [Inglis](#)<sup>1</sup> assumed command of the latter brigade on 17 May, its former commander, Brigadier Puttick, being appointed commander of the New Zealand Division in [Crete](#). [Colonel Kippenberger](#) commanded 10 Brigade, a composite formation comprising [20 Battalion](#), two Greek battalions, and a composite battalion consisting of ASC and Artillery personnel who, owing to lack of equipment, could not function in their normal roles. A detachment of the Divisional Cavalry operating as infantry completed the establishment of this brigade, which was responsible for the defence of the [Galatas](#) area. Fourth Brigade had a reserve role.

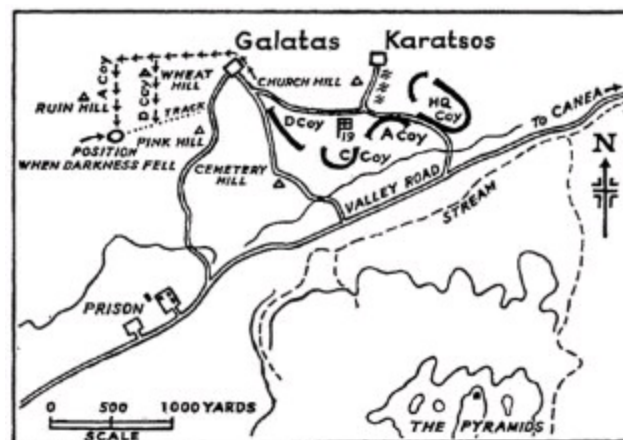
The 19th Battalion, as a reserve battalion to 4 Brigade, had its headquarters sited in the olive groves about 300 yards south of [Karatsos](#). The 18th Battalion, within whose area Brigade Headquarters was set up, occupied a position astride the [Canea- Maleme](#) road about a mile to the north-east, while the Composite Battalion from 10 Brigade lay in an arc north-west to south of [Galatas](#), about a mile and a quarter away. In and around the village were Greek units and the Divisional Cavalry detachment was north of [Alikianou](#).

Communications between and within units was difficult, for visibility was limited,

the whole area being thickly covered with olive trees, vineyards, stone walls and houses. While not unduly difficult, the country was hilly and in some spots steep. Roads and tracks intersecting and criss-crossing patterned the whole place. A phone line to 4 Brigade Headquarters, with another to the gun site of a [Royal Artillery](#) troop of 3.7 howitzers (under command) sited just outside the battalion area, were the only line communications the slender resources of Divisional Signals could allow the 19th. Message traffic all had to be handled by runner or liaison officer—a factor which limited effective control and which weighed heavily once the attack commenced.

The battalion area sloped generally towards the south and west, covering the high ground overlooking the valley road to [Suda](#). [Karatsos](#) in the north and [Galatas](#) in the north-west were each on an eminence, and in the valley between them Taranaki Company provided a link with the defended area on the right. Headquarters Company positions were closest to those of [20 Battalion](#), whose FDLS were 500 yards from the 19th's at their nearest point on the left flank.

The other vital points on the island, [Heraklion](#), [Retimo](#) and [Suda Bay](#), were similarly organised into self-contained



19 Battalion positions, Karatsos, showing route taken in attack towards prison on night 20-21 May. The companies are: A (Wellington), C (Hawke's Bay), D (Taranaki)

[19 Battalion](#) positions, [Karatsos](#), showing route taken in attack towards prison on night 20–21 May. The companies are: A ( [Wellington](#)), C (Hawke's Bay), D (Taranaki)

sectors with the role of preventing the seizure of the aerodromes and ports in

their areas. Once attack came, the reinforcement of any sector would be extremely difficult, for with no transport and no air cover, movement of troops would be attended by great danger and supply problems intensified. As in the New Zealand sector, the garrisons elsewhere were weak in numbers, organisation and equipment. The whole force on the island, including Greeks, totalled some 42,000 and was made up as follows: the MNBDO and one British infantry brigade; the troops evacuated from [Greece](#), now organised into four improvised British battalions, eight weak Australian battalions and eight New Zealand battalions, all of which were below strength; eleven badly equipped, ill-fed, and poorly trained Greek battalions, plus several thousand Greek stragglers. Many of the fighting units were composed of troops who were inexperienced in infantry work and tactics. Also on

the island and also to be fed were a thousand unarmed Cypriot and Palestinian pioneers, 15,000 Italian prisoners of war, and a population of 400,000.

Food supply was a problem, 600 to 700 tons a day being necessary to supplement the island's slender resources. Warships of thirty knots and over were the only ships which stood a reasonable chance of survival against the marauding [Luftwaffe](#). The total cargo one of these ships could land in any one night was 80 tons.

The lot of the small [RAF](#) garrison on [Crete](#), always unenviable, had by now become clearly untenable. Our small force of Hurricanes and Gladiators, despite heroic performances, was gradually being eliminated.

However, in the face of all these difficulties, [General Freyberg](#), in obedience to higher authority, organised the defence of [Crete](#) in a manner which, if limited by material and the time available, was to present a serious and costly problem for the attacking German forces.

The days passed, 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th, but still the promised attack failed to materialise. The 20th dawned with the usual bombing of airfields and ports, but by now these were routine occurrences and in the battalion position an early morning air-raid alarm acted merely as a reveille call. In platoon areas breakfast began to the noise of continuous bombing from the direction of 5 Brigade's sector and more than usual air activity in all quarters.

Hawke's Bay Company was the first in the battalion to see the arrival of the air armada, for after a short period of ground strafing across [Galatas](#), a large flight of Ju52s and gliders flew low over its front travelling east. Breakfast forgotten, there was a mad scramble for action positions. Simultaneously parachutists began to drop. The attack had come.

Gliders of monstrous proportions swooped low, silent and uncanny. The escorting fighters held their fire as the first parachutists floated down, then the sharp crackle of rifle fire from the ground announced the opening of the battle.

The first enemy began to drop into the battalion area at ten minutes past eight. From the open hatches of the Junkers troop-carriers they jumped at the rate of about one per plane per second, plummeted down for perhaps fifty feet, then puppet-like hung suspended beneath huge green umbrellas. For sheer uncanny horror those first few minutes rivalled the worst Wellsian fantasy. Bombing and machine-gunning had ceased and comparative quiet reigned. The air was full of planes and floating figures. Gliders and troop-carriers flew so low and so slowly that they looked like monstrous sharks swimming lazily among a school of jellyfish. Those first few seconds in the Battle for [Crete](#) must remain seared deeply into the memories of those who survived.

The first rifle fire galvanised every man into action; the awe-inspiring spectacle above was now reduced to terms of targets and the shooting was good. The paratroops jumped at heights varying between 200 and 500 feet; a few parachutes did not open, but the rest in their downward journey looked almost leisurely. Silhouetted against the sky, their leg and arm movements could be clearly seen. They stopped abruptly when a man was struck, and it is safe to say that a large percentage of those who landed in the unit's area were dead when they reached the ground. One falling close to Battalion Headquarters had been hit no fewer than nineteen times. Clearly the 19th's presence had been unsuspected, and the casualties the enemy suffered by dropping troops in this area must have been a serious check to his plans.

The excitement and confusion of the first few minutes gave place to exhilaration as the realisation dawned that we were having the best of the battle. Then, as the enemy in their immediate vicinity were disposed of, a spontaneous move by all

sections to go out after those dropping out of range had to be firmly checked. General forays were discouraged, for should the Germans have gained possession of the dug-in positions we would have been left on the outside looking in. The high ground on which the 19th was situated was vital to the defence of the sector. Companies disposed of all enemy in sight, then organised patrols were sent out to deal with dead ground and areas out of range.

By 10 a.m. reports to Battalion indicated that the unit lines were clear of enemy. Dead paratroops lay dotted all over the position: some, still in their harness, hung grotesquely from the olive trees; others had fallen right on top of section posts. Between a hundred and a hundred and fifty had dropped into Headquarters Company's area; the balance landed in front of [Wellington](#) and Hawke's Bay Companies, behind [Wellington](#) and Taranaki Companies, and in and about [Karatsos](#). The great majority, however, had been dropped out of range on the other side of the [Canea-Prison](#) road; these were known to be forming up unmolested ready to attack. In the battalion area, however, there was much to do. Our own casualties were attended to; these included the genial and popular commander of Headquarters Company, Captain Chas Webster, who was killed while leading a patrol against parachutists established on the ground in front of his company position. The enemy prisoners and wounded were collected, the dead searched, and containers of equipment—indicated by their white parachutes—were salvaged and the contents added to the war stores of the unit.

Snipers now began to harass troops moving in the area but our boys, too, were still busy picking off unwary paratroops. Major Williamson, the battalion second-in-command, accounted for one particularly troublesome sharpshooter who had established himself in an olive tree, and whose automatic rifle had already been responsible for the death of more than one of our men. The tactical position was obscure. Communications were out, the phone lines to Brigade and to the 3.7 howitzer troop had been cut during the strafing before the attack, and from outside the area there was no news of what had taken place or how the troops on the flanks were faring. The 19th had taken some prisoners and captured a number of important enemy documents. All ranks were busy testing enemy equipment before putting it into use, and the capture of his weapons had added considerably to the unit's fire power. Particularly useful were the large number of light and medium machine guns

and the mortars, and for both these weapons an ample supply of ammunition had been dropped. Wireless sets, medical equipment, machine pistols, sniper's rifles, and even a motor-cycle and sidechair were gathered in. In the midst of all this excitement Jimmy Meller,<sup>2</sup> the imperturbable corporal cook at Battalion Headquarters, announced and served a hot breakfast.

By now enemy elements out in front towards the prison were engaging the battalion with mortar and machine-gun fire. The 3-inch mortars under Lt Thodey<sup>3</sup> did grand work and located and destroyed many of the enemy weapons. Sergeant Clark,<sup>4</sup> with the detachment sited close to Battalion Headquarters, did an excellent job the whole time the unit was at Karatsos. Our men also used the Hun's own mortars against him, but though these proved to have a greater range than our own, they were not nearly as accurate and required resetting after every round.

The artillery, F Troop of 28 Battery under Major Duigan,<sup>5</sup> had done well. Their gun position was in the thick of the first parachute landing. The gunners made good use of the single rifle they had and quickly supplemented their small arms with enemy equipment. After the landing they became 'infantry' and soon cleared their own and neighbouring territory of lurking paratroops. Armed only with a large knife one of their number, Lance-Bombardier Johnston,<sup>6</sup> stalked, slightly wounded, and captured a paratrooper single-handed. The guns went into action over open sights against enemy concentrations across the valley and, despite all difficulties, gave valuable support to the battalion and other units in the Galatas area until the night of the 25th, when the position was evacuated.

Captured documents showed that two enemy battalions had been landed on the ground towards the prison and it was little wonder that that area proved troublesome. Throughout the day resistance steadily increased. It was clear that the enemy was well established out in front.

All troop-carrying gliders had so far passed overhead towards the coast, but it was feared that landings might later take place on the flat ground in the prison area, and a close watch was kept. About 11 a.m. a further small detachment of paratroops was landed and many containers intended for them fell in and close to the battalion positions. For the rest of the day Wellington and Hawke's Bay Companies, keeping the containers under observation, took a steady toll of Germans as they tried to

extract equipment from them.

An enemy threat developing towards [Karatsos](#) was quickly dealt with by a fighting patrol from [Wellington](#) and Taranaki Companies, which went out about midday and accounted for some twenty Germans. During the afternoon air and ground activity was considerably reduced; the enemy was getting his second wind and preparing for an attack.

News began to trickle through from the other areas, and from the twenty survivors who came back into our lines it was learned that the 3.7 howitzer troop, sited on the flat ground half a mile south of the battalion FDLs across the valley road, had been overwhelmed. One gun had been captured intact. The section from 8 Platoon Wellington Company which had been detailed for protective duties had suffered heavy casualties. The attack had started while the men were still in the mess queue drawing their breakfast rations. A troop-carrier flying low overhead, spilling its paratroops as it came, was their first indication that the invasion had started. Dropping their mess gear, every man went into action immediately. Before long enemy on the ground began returning their fire and, with one of its members killed, the section was forced off the open ground round the gun position and continued the fight from a ditch which ran along the margin of the clearing.

As the weight of enemy numbers increased the position became untenable, and Corporal George Cooke was mortally wounded while withdrawing his men. They attempted to rejoin the artillery personnel who had taken cover on the opposite side of the clearing, and two men were lost on the way. It soon became evident that the enemy were closing in and the survivors decided to try to get back inside the battalion positions. Before they withdrew, however, two men went out in an attempt to locate the two who had been missed when they left the position in the ditch. One of these failed to return, and the other, the section's Bren-gunner, finding no sign of his missing comrades, returned when his shouts had brought him under heavy enemy fire. Four survivors got back to the battalion by way of a stream, crawling in the water and crouching beneath the banks until familiar landmarks were sighted just in front of Headquarters Company's lines. Their report disclosed a serious position, for the howitzer now in enemy hands could be used effectively against the whole sector. Given another hour before the attack began, the rest of 8 Platoon would have been in position covering the artillery area. However, the request for

protection from the troop commander had come too late and the delay had proved costly.

On receipt of this information 4 Brigade Headquarters ordered an attack by **18 Battalion** westwards along the line of the road **Canea- Aghya**, with the object of recapturing the guns. This attack, carried out by one company with two Bren carriers in support, ran into heavy opposition, which later proved to be an enemy attack on the point of being staged against the 19th positions. The 18th Battalion's action, though unsuccessful in its primary object, prevented the enemy operation against the 19th developing.

Some 300 survivors from **6 NZ Field Ambulance** and **7 British General Hospital** were released by a patrol from Taranaki Company, and fed up, yet famished, came into the battalion area about 5 p.m. They had been captured shortly after the attack started. Some **19 Battalion** men who were patients gave the following account of what happened:

The air blitz started just as the **6 Field Ambulance** patients were finishing breakfast. Slit-trench accommodation was inadequate and staff and patients were forced to seek the slender protection of the olive trees. The foliage hid them from the strafing planes, but the bullets tore through the leaves and whipped up spurts of dust all over the ambulance area. Corporal Dick **Burge** <sup>7</sup> of **Wellington** Company, who had been under treatment for three days, was packed up and ready to go back to the battalion when the attack came. He was one of those who found no room in the 'slitties' and his impressions of the now legendary episode are well worth recording. Held a prisoner from the time the ambulance was captured, he eventually returned to the 19th lines when their captors were killed or had cleared out and left their prisoners.

Two paratroop patrols, who must have landed well out of the hospital area, constituted the attacking party. They approached from opposite sides of the clearing, and as they rounded up the patients they were panting with exertion as if after a long run. Tommy guns effectively deterred those who harboured any hopes of making a break for it while the rounding up was in progress. The Germans knew enough English to make themselves understood and soon had both patients and staff herded together into a compact group. No movement was permitted, and their



readiness to aim their weapons at any man who tried to change position convinced everyone that it would be unwise to take liberties.

Shortly after the capture of [6 Field Ambulance](#) was complete, the patients from [7 General Hospital](#) were shepherded into the same area. Many were barefoot, some wore pyjamas only; few were fully dressed for many were lying cases. The attackers in their anxiety to get the prisoners away had allowed them no time to dress, but herded every man capable of standing on his feet into a column, which was marched away under guard. A now-armed German airman, who had himself been a patient in the hospital since his plane was shot down a few days before, proved the most objectionable of the whole enemy party.

Once all the prisoners had been gathered into a single group, a paratroop officer addressed them in English. He told them that they were now 'prisoners of the German Army' which was master of [Crete](#), that they must obey orders, and provided they did this would be well treated. He told them to take off their steel helmets, as by wearing these the prisoners might be taken for British fighting troops and the [Luftwaffe](#), which was cleaning up the remnants of the defending army, would be liable to fire on them. He said that they would shortly be moved to the prison area where the headquarters of his particular group was being set up. The harangue concluded, he hurried off, taking some of his men with him.

The group of prisoners had swelled to about three hundred. There were perhaps twenty guards, and it was natural that there should be some talk of sneaking off. Two machine guns were now set up to cover the area, so plans for escaping were abandoned and all settled down to wait, wondering what the next move would be. Firing could be heard on all sides, and overhead planes could be seen flying back towards the sea. The morning wore on and it became obvious that enemy plans were not working out. The guards were getting anxious and some shooting was taking place quite close to the clearing. New Zealand patrols seemed to be working towards the area.

About midday, after a conference, the guards got busy, rounded up their prisoners into column, and set off south through the olive groves. As the column crossed the road a British tank appeared. The commander, sticking his head out of the turret to talk to the party, was potted at by the guards and popped back smartly.

The tank rumbled off, and the straggling column, with hopes dashed, plodded protestingly on, urged by the threatening weapons of the now somewhat shaken guards. More trouble was in store for the Germans, however, for a hidden Bren-gunner firing parallel with the line of march caused confusion to friend and foe alike. The guards, now thoroughly rattled, turned the party eastwards. Unfortunately the head of the column crossed the line of fire and the next burst wounded several of our men, including Private Malcolm [Highet](#),<sup>8</sup> who was marching side by side with Corporal Burge.

In another clearing, set on a south slope, the party were compactly grouped and instructed to sit down. The sick men were exhausted and everyone was hot and thirsty. Each man wondered what had happened to his own unit area and how his comrades had fared in the attack. It was obvious that the Germans had not had everything their own way. There was still some sporadic firing, but from the slope nothing but olive groves could be seen. The guards, now reduced to half a dozen, were uneasy but kept alert against any signs of a break. Placing themselves in handy positions, they showed plainly that they still meant business.

The day wore wearily on, then in the late afternoon a patrol from 18 Platoon Taranaki Company passed close to the area, and two men managed to creep up unobserved and get into a fire position covering the group with a Bren gun. Their presence caused consternation amongst the guards but the prisoners were naturally elated. For a long time the position was stalemate. The Germans, careful to keep under cover, tried to shift them by fire, and the Bren-gunner, though urged to do so by our men, was loath to reply because of the possibility of hitting some of the prisoners. The prisoners themselves dared not move, for they were still covered by the guards.

At last, leaving the Bren-gunner in position, the second man went off for assistance. While he was away one of the Germans shifted position and the Bren immediately opened up. Unfortunately the burst lifted and caught a group of our medical orderlies, killing some and wounding others. In the confusion which followed, the Germans tried to make off. Arriving on the scene, a patrol from 18 and 16 Platoons Taranaki Company killed several guards then guided the erstwhile prisoners to the battalion area. It was now 5 p.m.; they had been in enemy hands for over eight hours.

News from other sectors was almost nil, but it was evident that 5 Brigade was having a tough time. Aircraft activity and the sound of firing from the direction of [Maleme](#) was continuous, and it was obvious that the attackers were making an all-out effort to capture the airfield.

The Aghya area from which [6 Greek Regiment](#) evaporated soon after the attack opened was also causing Headquarters some concern, for it was feared that a landing strip was being made on the flat land to the west of the prison. At 6.30 p.m. the Brigade Major, Major G. P. [Sanders](#),<sup>9</sup> arrived at Battalion Headquarters with orders for an attack from the west of [Galatas](#) to upset the supposed work of the enemy. While arrangements were being discussed, dive-bombers appeared and blitzed the battalion area, but by now the enemy air-to-ground technique was obvious and our troops confused the aircraft by firing Very light signals. Observation during the day had shown that a white light fired from the ground indicated to the plane the locations of German troops, while a red light fired obliquely showed the direction of our positions and called for offensive action. Later the paratroops used other signals, but by firing many Very lights simultaneously with theirs it was found that the blitzing lost its intensity owing to the pilots' uncertainty.

Of that first day there have been many impressions recorded. Those of Corporal Jeff [Spence](#),<sup>10</sup> of No. 1 Platoon Headquarters Company, though written many years after, are still vivid. His experiences were similar to those of many other men of the unit, for though the 19th hit hard it lost heavily, and for many good soldiers the fighting ended that first fateful day of the airborne attack on [Crete](#).

I can never think of [Crete](#) with any degree of clarity or cohesion. Things moved too fast for nicely marshalled impressions to form. I can remember standing with my section on the valley road from [Suda](#) just before 8 o'clock that bright, sunny morning of May 20. I can remember how the ground and the air shook under the terrific bombardment that [Suda Bay](#) and [Canea](#) were taking.

I can remember Scotty Walker muttering, 'It's all according to Hoyle, brother—they said the invasion would come after an all-in pasting of strategic points.' Then they WERE going to try it on. We scaled up the hill towards our sketchy platoon positions. Quite clearly I can remember stepping over a huge, unflurried ant trail. I

had spent hours watching it. But not this morning.

I can remember Rolly Bosworth's raucous shout, 'Look up the valley!' I can remember the thrill of fear that tingled right down to my boots as I saw for the first time that black swarm of 52's in neat arrowheads of three, thundering towards us 300ft above.

I think we all felt it; we all struggled and sweated up the steep grade spurred on by the fear of men who are left to meet something overwhelming by themselves, without the odd comfort and strength of others.

I can remember our section cook, Phil Padbury, his blue eyes glued up the valley, mumbling something about burgoo and sausages. I can remember fixing my bayonet and then unfixing it again; I can remember firing wildly at the calm, roaring shadow of a 52 right overhead—and cursing Scotty for doing the same thing and wasting ammunition.

I can remember a poor Jerry floating down right above us, his body kicking and writhing in its harness under the impact of a hundred bullets; I can remember the thud as he hit the deck and the soft swoosh as his parachute settled over him; I can remember our sergeant, Denny Lindsey—'Denny the Dreamer'—his face white and eyes very wide and staring as he crawled towards us to see if we were all right; I can remember shouting at him over the din that we were not—that we should retire a hundred yards to the cover of the trees; he nodded and crawled away.

I can remember Whit Porter, suddenly, incongruously called by nature at this of all times; even then we laughed at his modesty as he crawled under the dead German's parachute. I can remember crawling down to another dead Hun nearby to get his Luger and hand grenades. I got them—and a Leica camera as well. I can remember debating with the others whether you pulled or pushed the little coloured knobs on the grenades to make them go off. I still don't know.

About one we ate Padbury's cold porridge and sausages; I can remember lighting a pipe—my first smoke of the day; I can remember the first wonderful draught of smoke.

It gave me away. I felt the bullet explode in my leg, but there was no pain. Tom

Foley dragged me up the open ground to the R.A.P., wished me luck, and skeetered back.

In five minutes he was back at the R.A.P. with a shattered shoulder. Butch was dead, Gordon was dying with a bullet in his stomach. Four others were wounded—all from our platoon. We were signallers, incidentally, but we hadn't seen a field telephone since evacuated from [Greece](#).

After that there is only a morphia-dimmed picture of stretcher bearers and interminable olive groves and whistling Heinkels; of a bombed-out, gutted hospital; of caves and smells and death and Germans and capture. <sup>11</sup>

On the evening of 20 May the battalion received the following orders from 4 Brigade Headquarters for the attack on the prison area:

1. Enemy are preparing what appears to be a landing ground 1000 yards to the west of the Prison 0553.
2. [19 Bn](#) will counter attack this area forthwith, with
  - (1) Bn if situation permits.
  - (2) Two Coys if Bn Comd considers that one coy should be left in present posn.
3. One tp [3 Hussars](#) will come under comd [19 Bn](#) for the operation.
4. After clearing the landing ground [19 Bn](#) with under comd 1 tp [3 Hussars](#) will take up a defensive posn covering the landing ground but with bulk of forces North of rd Khandia- [Aghya](#) 0352.

Time of signature 6.20 p.m.

There were many difficulties and objections to be surmounted before this attack could be staged. It was already evening and there were a bare two hours of light left. Enemy aircraft were still troublesome and all our movements during daylight would be watched. There was a long move to make before the objective could be approached squarely. As the return of the attacking force was not envisaged, arrangements for water, rations, and ammunition would have to be made. At daylight the force would no doubt find themselves in an exposed position subjected to severe air attack, and they had no tools to dig in with. The thinning out of the battalion positions would leave a very vulnerable flank in the [Galatas](#) dispositions.

Taking all the above factors into consideration it was decided to attack with two

companies only, and [Wellington Company](#) (Captain Clive Pleasants) and Taranaki Company (Captain Doug [McLauchlan](#) <sup>12</sup>) made ready and moved out from a start line in front of Hawke's Bay Company's position at 7.30 p.m. The three tanks under Captain Roy Farran proceeded along the road and picked up the infantry at [Galatas](#), having been twice mortared on the way. The attacking force now continued together for 1000 yards beyond the village and wheeled south at a point approximately one and a half miles from the battalion area.

Taranaki Company, on the left, passed through 4 Field Regiment's lines and ran into opposition right away. After a troublesome engagement in which the company sustained some casualties, including Lieutenant [Swinburn](#), <sup>13</sup> who was wounded, two enemy mortars and crews and three LMG positions were destroyed. In swinging in to join the fight Wellington Company lost contact with one of its platoons—No. 9. When at last the firing died down it was dark, and at 10 p.m. Captain Pleasants, who was in command of the force, ordered a halt and the three tanks and the two companies laagered for the night. Arrangements were made to continue the attack at first light next morning. The force posted sentries and lay up in the olive groves approximately 1400 yards from the prison. Of No. 9 Platoon there was no sign, and all efforts to locate it failed.

Back in the battalion area the two remaining companies thinned out and with some Greeks manned the positions vacated by [Wellington](#) and Taranaki Companies. While this reorganisation of forces was in progress word came from [Divisional Headquarters](#) that the 19th would come under command of 10 Brigade forthwith. About 9 p.m. [Colonel Kippenberger](#), the Brigade Commander, called at Battalion Headquarters to discuss the attack then in progress.

It was unfortunate that the orders for the change of command had not arrived earlier, for 10 Brigade, through whose area the two companies had advanced, could have given much assistance. Now, however, night had fallen, the attackers had passed out of the defended area, and the forward commander had no means of keeping in touch with the situation. [Kippenberger](#) then decided to cancel the operation and patrols were sent out to try to locate the force, but it was not until first light next morning that contact was made. The companies were then already moving forward towards their objective, but on receipt of orders from 10 Brigade the attack was called off and they moved back to the battalion area without

encountering any further opposition. At 9 a.m. their original positions were reoccupied, but 9 Platoon was still 'out in the blue' and no report had been received of its whereabouts.

It was some time before Lieutenant Jim Weston<sup>14</sup> and the men of 9 Platoon realised that they had lost contact with Company Headquarters, for during the first half hour of darkness the platoon had been kept fairly busy. One casualty had been caused by fire from our own tanks, then a burst of machine-gun fire and a challenge from the front halted their advance. A well-aimed grenade dealt with the opposition and a section charging the spot found the enemy post deserted. It was pitch dark, and every few minutes the platoon halted and sent out runners to try to link up with the rest of the company. Each time they returned beaten by the black night. However, there was a constant crackle of rifle fire all round, so they continued to advance steadily, confident that the rest of the force was not far away. After crossing the road leading to the prison a halt was called and a patrol sent out to try to locate the advancing force and the prison. They reported that neither the enemy nor our own troops were to be found.

A conference was held and the platoon NCOs were anxious that, despite having lost contact, dawn would find them in a position to materially assist our forces in the attack which would no doubt develop at first light. As they were now so far forward, it was decided to keep going in the hope that the platoon would be able to create a diversion in the enemy's rear.

Carefully probing their way forward the platoon kept going until 4 a.m., when the hills were reached. All was now silent. Dawn came and still there was no firing from the direction of the prison. Slowly the realisation came that they were alone in enemy territory. The attack had been called off.

Now only faith and fieldcraft could get them back to our own lines undiscovered. The platoon was prepared to fight, but the objective was a bit big for so small a force. Moving circumspectly, the men wormed their way further into the re-entrant, got well under cover, posted sentries and waited for darkness.

Weston made a reconnaissance, satisfied himself that there were no enemy in the immediate vicinity and returned to the platoon, confident that if they kept quiet

they had every chance of remaining unmolested. Sergeant Greig,<sup>15</sup> going in the opposite direction, found two paratroops who had been injured while landing in the rough country. They were disarmed and their wounds dressed. The platoon shared its water with them, while they in return shared the food they had; the New Zealanders had their emergency rations only. Both the Germans were ardent young Nazis and spoke English. Hess's descent into Scotland was news that had them hard put to supply a satisfactory explanation.

While this argument was in progress, the platoon commander and the sergeant were busy with binoculars plotting the enemy positions visible from the southern slopes and working out a route back. There appeared to be a post on 'patchwork hill', some 2000 yards away, watching the area in which the platoon was hidden, and in the village below there was considerable movement. Heavy firing was coming from the direction of Karatsos, artillery fire and much mortaring indicating an intense engagement there.

On the mountains behind, Greek snipers seemed to be annoying the enemy, while from the left there was light rifle and machine-gun fire all day. Enemy planes were active as usual and about midday a large force of troop-carriers parachuted supplies into the enemy area. The platoon observers were having a grandstand view. All went well till 5 p.m. The men had rested and slept, and though there was little to eat, all felt fit for the night move ahead.

Suddenly machine-gun fire from a ridge higher up the valley shattered the silence. Crawling up to investigate, the platoon saw that a duel between two parties of troops was in progress. It was hard to decide who was who, for some of the Greek forces wore a uniform similar in colour to that of the Germans, so the platoon held its fire. Then, as the party being pursued up the ridge came into view, they were seen to be wearing khaki. No. 9 Platoon immediately went into action against the other party. The result was devastating. The platoon position was immediately pasted by the party they were trying to help. A heavy machine-gun was posted well above the area in which No. 9 Platoon was hiding and its first burst caused one casualty in the platoon and sent the rest to cover. The position was now untenable; cursing their luck, the men sought a more healthy spot. As the platoon moved the machine-gunner kept up his harassing fire, and at the same time the German party



which had first been engaged also became interested. They sent out a scout to investigate. He was shot as the withdrawal began.

One section, under Lance-Corporal 'Buzz' Nathan, got into position on the high ground to cover the movement of the rest. No sooner had they set up than they were found by the 'friendly' force, whom it is now supposed were Greeks, and raked with machine-gun fire. Nathan was killed and several of his section wounded. The enemy, too, now joined in, but the rest of the platoon ran the gauntlet of fire without mishap.

Germans now began to appear from all quarters and a patrol was seen racing from the village on 'patchwork hill'. One of the Bren-gunners dealt with this new menace while Lieutenant Weston gave orders for the other two sections, under Sergeant Greig, to withdraw by what seemed to be a safer route. They were told to keep going and the Bren-gunner was sent with them. Weston now set about getting Nathan's section off the ridge. The supposed Greek machine-gun was still firing. One of the unwounded men in the section could be seen assisting others down towards a ditch towards where Weston had found cover. All seemed to be going well when suddenly two enemy riflemen appeared about fifteen yards away. Weston ducked and rolled into cover, followed by their bullets. Both missed.

It was now almost dark and the rest of the platoon seemed to have got clear. The platoon commander, lying doggo, decided to risk staying in the vicinity so that he could return to the wounded when things grew quieter. The enemy were by this time closing in, firing Very lights and calling to each other as they searched the area; however, he was not discovered. By 9 p.m., after a series of stealthy advances, he had gained the ridge, but the wounded had gone—it was learned later that the enemy had picked them up and that they were well treated. Their own treatment of the two injured German paratroops no doubt had a bearing on this.

Weston decided to follow the platoon, now under Sergeant Greig, who knew the route chosen earlier in the day and should have been well on their way back to the battalion. Weston found out afterwards, however, that the sergeant, with six men, was captured while attempting to cover the withdrawal of the platoon earlier in the evening. The rest were forced to try and make it via 'patchwork hill' They clashed several times en route with enemy posts, losing a few men each time, and finally

arrived back at the battalion two days later, having circled round and come in from the [Canea](#) flank.

Weston himself, though fatigued almost beyond endurance, reached the proximity of our own lines by 4 a.m. on 22 May. Not knowing the password, or even being sure who was in possession, he decided to wait till dawn before making an appearance. He fell asleep and it was broad daylight before he woke. Gathering his equipment together, he had hardly moved forward when he saw a paratrooper duck for cover behind an olive tree just in front. Though not daring to fire, he kept the German covered and brought him out with his hands up. Keeping his prisoner close, he approached Hawke's Bay Company area and, calling out, was relieved to get a reply in English.

The platoon's survivors totalled eleven men, nine others under Corporal Roy [McLean](#) <sup>16</sup> coming in through the Australian lines two days later. Their sojourn in enemy territory, though costly, had been costly for the Hun also. The return of so many was a tribute to those they had left behind, for the support they had given each other during the difficult withdrawal had alone made possible their return to the battalion. The platoon remained on the fighting strength of the battalion for the rest of the campaign.

There was little sleep for the garrison of [Crete](#) on the night of 20–21 May. On the first day of the battle the enemy had landed, despite stout opposition, about 10,500 well-armed and well-equipped troops. The intense air blitz, plus the close cover, had enabled his paratroops to organise and consolidate in many key positions. It was physically impossible for the defenders to patrol all areas under suspicion, and when night fell there were still minor engagements and much sniping taking place around [Galatas](#). Casualties on both sides had been heavy, and now with the darkness defender and attacker alike became busy with plans for a renewed offensive.

Lack of adequate communications hampered the actions of commanders of defended areas, and as the battle wore on this proved to be the most serious and embarrassing factor in our organisation. The few phone lines valiantly maintained by detachments from Divisional Signals had been cut early in the engagement, and though by nightfall most links in the [Galatas](#) hook-up had been restored, all were

vulnerable to enemy interference and overhearing. Caution was necessary. Movement of messengers was difficult. Control and co-ordination suffered.

After the forlorn attempt made to exploit the unit's counter-attack role, the battalion's lines were left dangerously thinly manned. The positions of the two absent companies were held by a skeleton force from Battalion Headquarters and from Hawke's Bay Company, plus the few Greeks who had remained with the unit, and a strong and varied section made up from men formerly under detention in the [Field Punishment Centre](#) linked up the Hawke's Bay and Taranaki sectors. Energetic patrolling over the whole battalion area now became a necessary precaution for infiltration by enemy elements would be a simple matter once night fell.

Much administrative work had to be done. As soon as it was dark the wounded, under the care of Captain Bill [Carswell](#),<sup>17</sup> Regimental Medical Officer, and his team of stretcher-bearers, were evacuated to an improvised dressing station manned by survivors of [6 NZ Field Ambulance](#) and [7 British General Hospital](#), and established in some caves on the beach west of [Canea](#). The capture of the whole medical area early in the day had disrupted all normal evacuation procedure, and the unit stretcher-bearers, who had spent a busy day succouring the battle casualties, were now forced to undertake the hazardous and difficult task of moving each lying case out of the area. The unit's only remaining truck—a 15-cwt supplied by 2 Welch Battalion—was employed each night on this work.

Rations and ammunition, up to now supplied by the DID (Detail Issue Depot) outside [Canea](#), had to be collected. Though the fate of that town was unknown and conditions along the route were bound to be dangerous, the RSM, WO I Parker, and RQMS, WO II Colin [Baynes](#),<sup>18</sup> made the journey and returned safely loaded with supplies. This was the last normal issue made to the battalion during the campaign. Before these many tasks could be completed dawn had broken and the first dive-bombing attack on the battalion had begun. Camouflage could no longer conceal the unit's presence, for the enemy's ground-to-air communication was good and it was soon clear that the [Luftwaffe](#) had the position pinpointed. While the blitz lasted each section post waited alert and tense for the ground attack which was expected with the dawn. It failed to materialise and by 7 a.m. all was quiet once more. At 8 a.m. Wellington Company (less 9 Platoon) and Taranaki Company returned and reoccupied their original areas, and as at this stage the enemy on the ground were

giving little trouble, rations were distributed to platoons and all men made a good meal.

Between daylight and midday some 300 containers and a few troops were observed dropping to the west of the battalion area along the [Canea](#) road. By now the colour code of these containers was known to us: green indicated mortars and ammunition; red, machine guns, pistols and ammunition; white, anti-tank weapons and ammunition; yellow, medical stores. Selective stalking was now possible and the possession of green containers was always keenly contested.

In response to an order from 10 Brigade, a squadron of Divisional Cavalry and Taranaki Company during the morning successfully staged a counter-attack on enemy elements just outside [Galatas](#), and at 9 a.m. Taranaki Company moved out from its original position to occupy a more forward area astride the road prior to making a further attack. The new objective was [Cemetery Hill](#). This feature dominated part of the battalion's area, and from it heavy mortar and machine-gun fire was causing casualties. Hawke's Bay Company's positions especially were receiving much unwelcome attention from that quarter.

The fighting at this stage was following no ordered pattern, but there was plenty of scope for, and many examples of, individual initiative. Some exciting one-man battles were staged. One outstanding duel was that between Corporal Bert [Ellis](#)<sup>19</sup> of 14 Platoon Hawke's Bay Company and an enemy heavy mortar. The platoon position was on a forward slope of a promontory which jutted out towards the strongly occupied area on [Cemetery Hill](#). With all the section posts evidently clearly visible to the enemy on the high ground, 14 Platoon was having a hot time. One mortar in particular was causing a lot of worry, and around the platoon headquarters's slit trench there were thirteen bomb craters. Deciding to try a desperate measure, Ellis crawled out to a flank, taking with him a captured spandau and a good supply of ammunition. He located the mortar and took it on single-handed. The duel went on at least a dozen rounds without apparent score on either side, but by drawing the fire away from his platoon position Ellis undoubtedly saved the lives of many of his comrades.

The first burst from his spandau drew the mortar fire on to his area, but by the time the bomb had landed the corporal had got away another burst and rolled

downhill into the cover of a small slit trench. Between each bomb he went back to his gun, got in several seconds of solid firing, then tumbled swiftly back into cover just ahead of the next bomb. The end came when a splinter exploded two home-made milk-tin bombs which Ellis had placed in a handy position at the base of a nearby olive tree. The olive, cut off at its foot, did a neat somersault into the trench. It took four men to get the corporal free from its enveloping branches, and shortly afterwards the platoon withdrew to a less-exposed position.

After several delays Taranaki Company, supported by fire from the battalion mortars and from Hawke's Bay Company, began its attack on [Cemetery Hill](#). Three light tanks were also expected to co-operate, but owing to communication difficulties co-ordination could not be achieved and at midday the company moved in without them. Going forward as far as the foot of the hill, 18 Platoon was pinned by heavy machine-gun fire. Nos. 16 and 17 Platoons went on against stiff opposition to the cemetery itself but, after cleaning up the enemy encountered en route, were forced to withdraw owing to heavy mortaring. The enemy, however, was forced off the feature and lost some 15 men, 5 mortars and 10 light machine guns. Our casualties were 5 killed and 3 wounded. That night and the following night patrols sent to the cemetery found no signs of the enemy.

Sergeant Nigel [Hunter](#),<sup>20</sup> who was acting commander of 16 Platoon during this engagement, showed remarkable coolness and courage. This popular NCO displayed in battle the same sterling qualities he had shown on the football field. During the withdrawal he returned to the



The original officers of 19 Battalion

Back row: Lieutenants A. R. Fitchett, I. E. Duff, Captains T. G. Hedding, Lieutenants J. D. Carver, C. Weston, Captain C. L. Pleasants, Lieutenants R. L. Hutchens, A. T. Buxard. Third row: Lieutenant J. H. Hutchison, Captain E. C. Morton, Lieutenant L. W. Goughlin, Second-Lieutenant W. E. Aitken, Lieutenants I. W. Dugleby, Second-Lieutenant D. G. Thomson, Lieutenant F. P. Koorby, Captain D. K. McLauchlan, Rev. C. E. Hyde, Second-Lieutenant K. J. Schmitt. Second row: Lieutenant D. W. Sinclair, Second-Lieutenants E. R. Dell, A. R. Lawson, Lieutenant A. M. Escriu, Second-Lieutenant J. I. Theobald, F. McR. Stewart, Lieutenants D. S. Thomson, J. E. F. Vogel, C. A. Lattier, Second-Lieutenant E. D. Blundell, Lieutenants J. McM. Elliot, J. H. Dunderon. Front row: Major C. M. Williamson, A. B. Ross, E. K. Gordon, C. A. D'A. Mackhara, Lieutenant Colonel F. S. Varham, Lieutenant E. W. S. Williams, Major S. F. Harzell, Captain C. E. Webster, and Major (mascot)

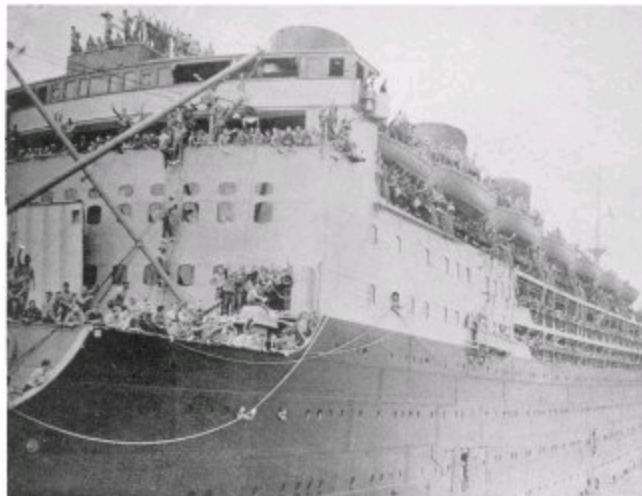
## The original officers of 19 Battalion



Entraining at Trentham, 5 January 1940

## Entraining at Trentham, 5 January 1940

'The ropes were cast off and the *Strathaird* moved slowly out'



'The ropes were cast off and the *Strathaird* moved slowly out'



Work on a tank obstacle in Wadi Naghamish, June 1940

**Work on a tank obstacle in Wadi Naghamish, June 1940**

The *Marit Maersk* arrives at Piraeus, Greece



**The Marit Maersk arrives at Piraeus, Greece**



Welcome in Athens

**Welcome in Athens**



The first German prisoners at Serbia being searched by Ptes  
J. J. Doyle and N. R. Ford

**The first German prisoners at [Serbia](#) being searched by Ptes J. J. Doyle and N. R. Ford**

cemetery and, undaunted by the heavy fire, carried in one of our wounded, then went back to try to bring in another. There was little cover along the route and a stone wall had to be negotiated, but he made both journeys safely and was later awarded a well merited MM.

Reforming after this attack, Taranaki Company took up a position on the left of the Divisional Cavalry astride the cemetery road from [Galatas](#). Enemy dive-bombers singled them out for special attention during the rest of the day and a direct hit on Company Headquarters that afternoon caused several casualties.

As the day drew on there was a distinct lull in the fighting. 'Reckon we've got him beat' was the general comment all round, and this belief gained even more adherents when, at 11 p.m., gunfire and boats in flames were reported out to sea. Though the rumour that the Navy had intercepted and destroyed part of the German invasion fleet was later proved to be true, jubilation was premature. The [Galatas](#) sector was for the time being quiet, but at [Maleme](#) a bitter battle was in progress and the fate of the all-important airfield hung in the balance. When on Thursday the 22nd the enemy landed from the air a further 1800 fresh troops, the scale began to swing definitely in his favour.

The 22nd May dawned quietly in the battalion's positions. The early morning blitz which all had now come to expect did not eventuate. The few aircraft flying over the area took no offensive action though some containers were dropped to the south of Headquarters Company's lines. In the direction of [Maleme](#), however, the air



was thick with planes and the sound of bombing was continuous.

About 11 a.m. a series of heavy explosions signalled the fact that the enemy was now using against us the 3.7 howitzer which he had captured on the 20th. Twelve fighters also added to the general discomfort by systematically strafing the whole of the battalion area. The unit's casualties were mounting but spirits were still high, and the regular shuttle service of troop-carrying planes observed in the western sky was for a time believed to be an attempt by the enemy to evacuate his troops. All were keen to get another smack at the Hun before he could get away.

To regain ground lost by the Greeks during the first day's fighting and to find out if later rumours of the paratroops' withdrawal were correct, [19 Battalion](#) on the afternoon of the 22nd staged a two-company attack on an 800-yard front. Wellington Company (Captain Pleasants) and Headquarters Company (now commanded by the Quartermaster, Captain Jack Danderson) began to move towards the high ground, some 3000 yards south of the battalion area, across the valley road towards the feature known as the Pyramids and the Turkish Fort which was a prominent landmark in that area.

If the enemy was still in possession of the feature, the two companies were to locate his positions, test their strength, and inflict as much damage as possible before withdrawing to the battalion area. Simultaneously with this attack [18 Battalion](#) sent a platoon to [Galaria](#). Both the 19th companies ran into opposition and, as usual, German aircraft took a hand in the proceedings, making low-level attacks and harassing the companies from the time they left these positions. Wellington Company, in particular, encountered strongly held machine-gun posts and in an unsuccessful attempt to outflank them had four men killed, including Private 'Fat' Simpson, <sup>21</sup> whose fearless and aggressive work during the past three days had earned him the admiration of all his comrades. Three were wounded. At 5 p.m. the company withdrew, having accomplished its mission and accounted for some ten Germans.

On their way back Sergeant Bill [Oliver](#) <sup>22</sup> of 8 Platoon had some remarkable good fortune. Two days previously, when the attack was at its height, he had lost his paybook (carrying a substantial credit) plus a carefully hoarded packet of cigarettes. Covering the same ground again, he regained his prized possessions when diving for

cover during an aircraft attack.

No. 7 Platoon, too, were lucky, for during their absence on this operation their position was heavily mortared by the enemy, who was attempting to silence the guns of F Troop, sited about 100 yards in the rear.

Headquarters Company got within 200 yards of its objective, destroyed three enemy mortars and several machine guns, then, as it would have had little chance of success had an attack been ventured on the strongly held high ground without support, withdrew at 7 p.m. After dark a patrol from that company returned and brought in a considerable quantity of enemy stores which they had located during the afternoon. Included in this booty was an anti-tank gun of approximately 1-inch calibre.

Friday the 23rd began uneventfully, but by now the effects of fatigue were making themselves felt and the area was growing foul from unburied corpses. Rations were scanty and water scarce, and though the troops were beginning to show signs of wear, the unit was still in good heart and patrols went out willingly and full of offensive spirit. The morning was quiet, but during the afternoon the artillery troop had an exciting half hour. Enemy mortars got on to the gun position and an unlucky shot set fire to a dump of shells and charges. The blaze was spectacular and drew a further rain of mortar bombs on the position while the gunners were fighting to extinguish the flames and move their equipment out of danger. The yeomen service rendered by F Troop, both in support of the battalion and as 'infantry' working alongside our patrols, won for the gunners the enduring admiration of all ranks in the 19th. Their No. 1 gun was only about 100 yards west of Battalion Headquarters, and liaison and co-operation between the two units was at all times excellent.

Battalion Headquarters, however, was no sheltered spot, and Major Duigan, the battery commander, records that once when offered hospitality there in the shape of a dish of hot stew, he was very glad when the meal was finished and he could leave. The CO, Major Blackburn, was at the time coolly sniping the enemy with a captured machine gun, the Germans retaliating vigorously with unpleasantly accurate mortar fire. Our own 3-inch mortar replied and luckily silenced the enemy with its first shot. This episode was typical of the aggressiveness of the officers at Battalion

Headquarters, and any enemy parties they spotted were engaged from their vantage point on the high ground. Their efforts resulted in a certain amount of discomfort to our own staff but there was much satisfaction in harrying the enemy with his own weapons.

Fifth Brigade were withdrawn during the 23rd towards [Galatas](#) from their position along the Platanias River, where they had been subjected to ferocious air attack and stiff opposition on the ground. During the day it was deemed advisable to lessen the gap between that brigade's area and the [Galatas](#) sector, and strong patrols from 10 Brigade were sent out to link up with them before the next stage of their hazardous withdrawal began. Despite opposition from the ground and air this was accomplished, and as a result the enemy was still denied the routes to the east and south for which he was making so bold a bid. A re-arrangement of units during the day altered the general defence line and [Canea- Galatas- Pirgos](#) became the main defended area. This line was held by 4 Brigade and 19 Australian Infantry Brigade, and 5 Brigade gradually withdrew behind [Galatas](#). The 19th Battalion remained in its original positions throughout, and with other badly depleted New Zealand units was responsible for the sector between the township and the coast.

Saturday the 24th was marked by intense air activity, and the battalion positions received their full share of the strafing directed against the [Galatas](#) sector. It was clear that the enemy would try to link up from the west with his forces in the prison area and make every effort to dislodge the [Galatas](#) garrison. As the day drew on pressure increased, and in anticipation of enemy AFV action on the battalion front a supply of improvised anti-tank mines was distributed to companies. These were laid out in readiness but were not required. It was hoped that the six sticks of gelignite which each contained would have been effective against a lightly armed tank, for it had been reported that armoured vehicles were being landed.

Fighting patrols working in across the front throughout the day took toll of isolated German parties as they ventured close to the positions. However, resistance from the enemy on the ground was increasing and he was now able to bring fire to bear on many parts of the battalion's area. There were several heavy bombing attacks during daylight and the unit was on the alert against an enemy infantry offensive which was expected at any time.

The 2/7 Australian Battalion took up a position on the left flank. On the night of 23–24 May 19 Battalion patrols linked up with them. Enemy movements observed and checked throughout the day indicated that he was still building up his forces out in front, and at nightfall 15 Platoon Hawke's Bay Company was sent to take up a position facing the prison on the right flank of the Divisional Cavalry. The night passed without further offensive action by either side.

On the 24th enemy ground forces began an advance and gained some ground initially in a heavy attack against 18 Battalion, which held an elongated front-line position forward of Galatas and up to the coast road. A plucky counter-attack by the Auckland Battalion forced them back again at the point of the bayonet, but by now the whole of the line was being subjected to continuous fire. The enemy mortars were reinforced by pack artillery, but despite the increase in heavy weapons used against them our own troops were still making effective reply.

But enemy reinforcements were now arriving by air unhindered and in increasing numbers. Maleme airfield, despite a hard-fought action by 22 Battalion and a counter-attack by 20 Battalion and the Maoris, was in German hands and was being used already by the Luftwaffe. It was evident that the days of the defenders of Crete were numbered. Contact with the Retimo sector was lost. Force Headquarters had been withdrawn from the Akrotiri Peninsula to Suda Bay and it was obvious that the Galatas sector would be the enemy's next objective. He did not press home an attack that night.

The 25th May was a bad day. The unit was shelled, strafed, bombed and machine-gunned from daylight onwards. The already depleted companies suffered further casualties, Taranaki in particular being severely mauled. The full-scale attack had begun. No. 15 Platoon Hawke's Bay Company, which had covered the route several times previously, were sent out once more at 3 p.m., together with 7 Platoon Wellington Company, to assist the Divisional Cavalry whose position lay close to the enemy's thrust line.

No. 7 Platoon (Lieutenant Ron Scales and Sergeant Dave Rench) and 15 Platoon (Lieutenant John Carryer and Sergeant Allan Kennedy<sup>23</sup>) moved out of the battalion area at 3 p.m. to rendezvous at the Galatas church. Together the two platoons took cover among the olive trees which lined the sunken road close by, while the platoon

commanders went off to report to Major John Russell,<sup>24</sup> who was commanding the Divisional Cavalry responsible for the defence of this sector of the Galatas line. The men had just settled down to rest when two smoke shells fell among them. A pinkish-coloured cloud went up, and immediately eight Stukas which had been patrolling overhead turned and peeled off one by one to attack.

The air attack followed the now all too familiar pattern; each plane dived in turn, roared down with guns blazing, and released its bomb just as it flattened out. Both platoons suffered, No. 7 having five and No. 15 three casualties. Private Sullivan<sup>25</sup> was killed outright and that stalwart soldier, Private Ted Newman<sup>26</sup> was severely wounded in the thigh; he died later in enemy hands. His fortitude and cheerfulness during this incident were a fine example to his shaken comrades. The platoon commanders returned while the wounded were being moved to the shelter of a stone wall some hundred yards away, where they were left under the care of Private Nicholls,<sup>27</sup> a regimental stretcher-bearer with the party.

The task which had been allotted to the small force was to occupy a ridge ( Pink Hill) extending towards the prison on the right flank of the Divisional Cavalry's positions. This ridge dominated their flank and it was feared that the enemy were about to move on to it. After a brief conference, it was decided to approach the objective by different routes, 7 Platoon going through Galatas and 15 Platoon moving in from the right flank of the Divisional Cavalry positions.

No. 15 Platoon ran into trouble immediately, surprising an enemy patrol working close in to the squadron positions on the right. This patrol was quickly dealt with by grenades and small-arms fire and forced to withdraw, Corporal Robertson<sup>28</sup> and his section doing good work during the hot few minutes while the encounter lasted. The platoon was preparing to move on again when word was brought out by runner that they were to withdraw back to the battalion. This they did without further incident.

Meanwhile, 7 Platoon had reached the objective and, dividing into halves, proceeded along each side of the ridge. Their progress was followed by machine-gun fire from the enemy in the valley towards the prison, but the houses lining the high ground gave a certain amount of cover and the parties went forward steadily. Those working along the west slope—the party commanded by Sergeant Rensch—came under mortar fire just as the sergeant, who with one other man was some distance

ahead of the rest, had reached the last house. The enemy's attack on [Galatas](#) had started and [Pink Hill](#) was obviously one of his objectives.

Rench entered the house just as an enemy machine gun opened up on the platoon's line of advance. He found several artillerymen sheltering from the fire, quite unaware of what was happening. From the balcony, which gave a good view along the ridge, he was unable to see any signs of enemy activity on the high ground, so he moved across to the eastern side of the ridge and linked up with Lieutenant Scales, who with his party was awaiting the arrival of the others. Sustained machine-gun fire was now being directed against the Divisional Cavalry positions which lay to the left rear of 7 Platoon, who were sheltering under the cover of some agave plants on a terrace to the eastern side of the toe of the ridge. Suddenly it was noticed that fire was coming from somewhere overhead. On climbing up to the next terrace, the platoon could see an enemy spandau crew in action on the brow of the ridge. The platoon immediately took up a defensive position.

Private Bert McKay stalked and disposed of the spandau party with a grenade. It was now obvious that the enemy attack was developing from the direction of the prison and a sharp engagement between their forward elements and 7 Platoon took place. McKay, caught out in the open, was wounded in the groin. Undeterred by the heavy fire, Privates Merv [Smylie](#)<sup>29</sup> and Jack [Wildermouth](#)<sup>30</sup> went out and carried him back to cover under the terrace. Smylie then went out again and got in some good shooting with a captured spandau. By this time a fierce duel was in progress and the platoon was replying vigorously and effectively. The artillery sergeant who had come from the house to join the party was killed while doing a good job with a Bren gun. Scales was himself wounded, but the enemy had suffered heavily and there was a brief lull.

At this stage it was noticed that the Divisional Cavalry had evacuated its forward posts, and as his party was entirely out on its own and liable to be cut off, Scales decided to withdraw also. The position was evacuated one by one, Wildermouth and Smylie carrying out the wounded McKay on a wooden door they had wrenched off the nearest house. On the way back the remainder of Rench's party, who had been pinned by fire during the advance along the ridge, was contacted. They, too, had had casualties, and the survivors under Sergeant Dave

Horn <sup>31</sup> now joined the rest of the platoon.

Unable to locate Divisional Cavalry headquarters, which had apparently moved during the time the engagement on the ridge was in progress, 7 Platoon made its way back to the battalion position. It came in through Taranaki Company's lines and rejoined Wellington Company just as the general withdrawal from Galatas began.

By 5 p.m. that evening the enemy had penetrated the Galatas line and elements from our forward units began retiring through 19 Battalion's position. Taranaki Company was hurriedly moved back to its old line on the battalion's right flank, and two platoons from Headquarters Company were sent out to assist it to stave off a threatened enemy infiltration at that point. By 8.30 p.m. more of the forward troops began coming back and despite falling darkness the enemy air attacks continued. The situation was desperate, but at Galatas a thrilling and savage counter-attack by two companies of 23 Battalion, the Bren carrier platoon of the 20th, a party from the 18th and a few gunners, plus two light tanks, recaptured the town, relieved the pressure and allowed the retirement, which was finally ordered at 11 p.m., to take place unhindered.

Tenth Brigade having ceased to exist, 19 Battalion now came under command of 5 Brigade, which was now in command of the Galatas area. The position the unit had held at Karatsos since the beginning of the attack was evacuated. It was a pitch black night, and the men moved out in single file approximately a mile to the south-east. A halt was called and, with its right flank at the village of Evthymi, the battalion took up a new line covering the coast road to Canea. There was no opportunity for previous reconnaissance, but before dawn the whole unit was in the new area. Company positions from the left flank were Taranaki, Hawke's Bay, then Headquarters Company, the last covering a road cutting just in front of the forward positions; Wellington Company was in reserve. To the north, towards the sea, were the Divisional Cavalry and 21 Battalion, very weak in numbers but with A Company of 20 Battalion and some sappers attached to form 21 Battalion Group.

All company positions were on forward slopes, in the open and on rocky ground where a few olive trees gave sparse cover. In the short time available before daylight little digging could be done, and some sections were still entirely out in the open when the first attacks began.

Casualties in the battalion on 26 May were heavy. At 7 a.m. the whole of the unit area came under heavy fire from the ground while strafing from the air was almost continuous. The enemy was trying to force a breach through the road cutting and was throwing in everything he had to obtain his objective. It was a bad morning. Viewing it in retrospect, a member of the unit who afterwards saw service in every theatre in which the Division was employed said: 'It was my worst day in the whole war.' Headquarters Company had thirty men killed and wounded in about as many minutes, and by 2 p.m. enemy patrols had pushed up close enough to our forward platoons to use stick bombs which they hurled from under cover of an embankment. Nos. 5 and 6 Platoons, who had borne the brunt of the attack, used their single remaining grenade effectively before they were forced to retire approximately 150 yards. The enemy quickly moved in to occupy the ground just vacated, but a forward section from a Taranaki Company platoon hotly engaged them and, assisted by several effective bombs from our 3-inch mortar, forced the enemy to withdraw once more.

Taking advantage of this diversion Lieutenant Keith [Cockerill](#)<sup>32</sup> and Corporal Bert Ellis did a quick reconnaissance. They had the unenviable experience of being singled out by two low-flying Me110s and chased over the ridge and back again. At 2.15 p.m., however, 14 Platoon reoccupied the position. A platoon from [21 Battalion](#), supported by a light tank, eased the pressure on the 19th when they moved on to a feature across the road and gave covering fire to our right flank. During the rest of the afternoon the enemy made several attacks but failed to penetrate further.

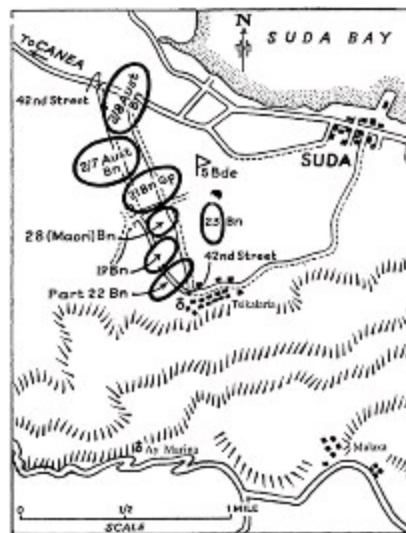
Our numbers were being steadily depleted. At 4.30 p.m. Captain Danderson was severely wounded by a mortar bomb and died some hours later; this mortar also caused nine other casualties. Headquarters Company had now lost its second commander, but at 4.45 p.m. under Lieutenant Weston it pushed forward once more, relieved 14 Platoon, and reoccupied the position from which 5 and 6 Platoons had been forced to retire some three hours previously. While this move was in progress an enemy aircraft discovered the light tank which had taken up a covering position on the right flank. It was attacked repeatedly and was last seen disappearing down the road hotly pursued by an Me110. Down the same road a little later roared an enemy motorcyclist. He rode straight into the unit area, and man and machine almost disintegrated with the weight of small-arms fire which met them.



The late evening was full of incident and the attackers received many nasty shocks. On one occasion a donkey observed among the olive trees below gave away an enemy troop concentration, and a particularly good shot by the 3-inch mortar apparently caused chaos, judging by the screams and shouting which followed the burst.

When darkness fell it was expected that the attack would be renewed. But the enemy had no stomach for night work, and at 11.30 p.m. the brigade withdrew to a position approximately two miles north-west of [Suda Bay](#). Patrols from Wellington Company went out and cleared the south flank before the move began.

By the early hours of the 27th the new line was established. Nineteenth Australian Brigade held the area to the north, with its right flank at [Suda Bay](#) about a mile west of the township. Fifth Brigade was in position along the length of a dusty, sunken road which rejoiced in the title of 42nd Street. On the right of the brigade [21 Battalion](#) Group linked up with 2/7 Australian Battalion. The Maori Battalion, then the 19th and lastly the 22nd, completed the



42nd Street positions, 27 May

### 42nd Street positions, 27 May

line, which ended in the hills near the village of Tsikalaria. The 23rd Battalion was in reserve. The exhausted 4 Brigade had been withdrawn well back towards [Stilos](#), where it was hoped it would get sufficient time to recuperate before taking the line again.

On reaching 42nd Street companies were moved out to their areas, but were told that as there were troops in front of them positions need not be dug other than those necessary for protection against air strafing. Events proved that the troops in front were a myth; however, the enemy was still wary and gave the defenders of the new line a short respite. The spell was welcome, and until daylight almost everyone slept; then as there was water in the vicinity, the troops enjoyed the luxuries of an unlimited drinking ration and a good wash. In the early morning the unit reorganised, ammunition was redistributed and, mixing together for the first time since the battle had started, the men swapped stories and experiences.

At 9.30 a.m. the [Luftwaffe](#) discovered the position and a dive-bombing attack sent each man to cover. During this attack a large ammunition dump out in front of the line blew up with a roar which drowned even the bursting of the bombs. The area was occupied by the enemy at the time, and later some seventy to eighty dead were counted close to the crater. <sup>33</sup> A parachute landing was feared, and while the defensive positions were being hurriedly manned a company from [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#) was drawn up in readiness to deal with this sudden menace.

During this period enemy ground forces managed to get up close without being seen. A sudden burst of spandau fire from some 300 yards out in front indicated the start of the attack. This fire was also the signal for the Maori company detailed for the counter-attack to start their traditional war haka. Here was a task to their liking; led by their company commander, waving a very dirty towel, they moved through [19 Battalion's](#) area and unhesitatingly crossed the sunken road just in front of Taranaki Company. No. 13 Platoon Hawke's Bay Company, over whose positions they passed, held their fire for a moment then, inspired by the Maoris' example, joined in also. Soon the whole force in the vicinity were fixing bayonets and following up.

This bayonet attack on the 27th will remain not only as a highlight in the bitter and hard-fought campaign in [Crete](#), but as an outstanding example of the spirit of New Zealand and Australian infantry. Tired after days of hard fighting, weakened through lack of food, ill armed by comparison with the enemy, our troops attacked spontaneously and moved steadily and grimly onwards through heavy fire. The paratroops fired frantically from their ditches, but here was a test which left no doubt as to the qualities of the opposing forces. The Hun, despite his vaunted superiority,

was no match for this miscellaneous group of New Zealanders and Australians who confronted him with bayonets. There were no prisoners taken; this was mortal combat. In front of the determined advance the enemy broke and fled, leaving behind him many dead and abandoning his arms and equipment as he went. He was driven back about half a mile and lost probably 300 men, and though the left flank was wide open he made no attempt to check the advance or to regain the ground he had lost.

Casualties have been estimated at twenty to one in favour of the attackers who, finally reforming, walked slowly back to their positions collecting food, cigarettes, and equipment abandoned by their opponents. The irony of finding 'Players Weights' in the enemy's packs did not spoil the victors' enjoyment of their smoke. Cigarettes were short and these had been our issue in [Greece](#). The enemy had obviously cashed in on the stores we had left there. The food, too, was a godsend, and a store (abandoned by [Creforce](#)) which previously lay well in front of our position yielded further welcome items. The extra weapons and ammunition also were sorely needed. Best of all, however, was the exhilaration experienced by each weary soldier in the whole jaded group who had taken part in, or witnessed, the episode.

The afternoon was quiet, though with some misgivings large parties of mules and men were seen crossing the hills on the left flank. They were well out of range and opinion was divided as to whether they were enemy or refugees. All knew that should we be outflanked the route across the island would be cut and further withdrawal made impossible. At half past eight that night battalions were advised by runner that the 'withdrawal to Stylos would begin with darkness and that order of march would be 19 Australian Bde at 2200 hrs, then followed by HQs 5 Bde, 28 Bn, 22 Bn, [19 Bn](#), 21 Bn and lastly 23 Bn in that order.'

The move was not without its hazards and alarms, for immediately the Australian brigade began to withdraw the enemy followed up quickly. The last New Zealand battalions had some difficulty in disengaging and the enemy speeded them on their way with harassing fire of all descriptions. The withdrawal was completed under cover given by two companies of Maoris, plus a detachment of commando troops which had arrived in [Crete](#) as reinforcements on the nights of 24 and 26 May. Orders had by this time been issued for the withdrawal of the whole of the [Crete](#) garrison to the south coast.

The night march of 14 miles over the high range of hills to [Stilos](#) further taxed the already tired troops, but by 3 a.m. on the 28th the 5 Brigade units were disposed round the village. Defence positions were taken up by each battalion as it got in and all ranks fervently hoped for a few hours' sleep. But the enemy was early off the mark, and two officers of [23 Battalion](#) who, before settling down, had decided to reconnoitre the area, were startled to see a large enemy party approaching up a wadi close to their unit's position. The alarm was quickly given and there was a mad scramble by both sides to gain the heights. Elements from 23, 21, and [19 Battalions](#) were all quickly involved. As our men reached the top of the ridge they were engaged by heavy mortar fire and suffered a number of casualties.

From behind a stone wall which ran along the ridge, riflemen picked off those of the enemy within range, but he still pressed his attack and a section from [19 Battalion](#) was sent out to deal with a party which had crept up on the left and was lobbing grenades over the wall. The section arrived in time to despatch a German officer and approximately six men who had set up a machine gun, and the situation was then well in hand.

At 9.40 a.m. sudden orders were received to break off the battle; a greater threat to the brigade had developed and Brigadier [Hargest](#) <sup>34</sup> had decided to defy the enemy's aircraft and make a further move to the south during daylight. At this stage the enemy was not pressing, but the steep, broken country made it most difficult to get out our companies as complete bodies and some disorganisation resulted. Fortunately the enemy had had enough and did not hinder the withdrawal except for sniping from the heights.

Headquarters 5 Brigade cleared [Stilos](#) at 10 a.m. and at eleven [19 Battalion](#) followed on the first stage of a heart-breaking march along the steep, tortuous route which was to end at the evacuation point on the Sfakia Beach. In single file on each side of the road the unit moved out, passing on the way a large number of Italian ex-prisoners of war now going back jubilantly to rejoin the enemy.

Weary, footsore and always thirsty, the long, dusty columns of troops trudged dully forward in the hot sun. Occasionally an aircraft appeared and the columns quickly took cover, but fortunately the [Luftwaffe](#) did not come over in strength. After

each alarm the march went on again. At Vrises water bottles were filled from the deep wells of the village, but there was no time to dawdle or to enjoy refreshments; in any case, there was no food.

The wells along the mountain roadway were to prove the greatest boon to the dog-tired troops; without water few would have lasted the distance. The one pleasant memory held by many who took part in that grim journey is of a cool stream rippling beneath a bridge, where in the shade a pause was made to bathe burning, blistered feet and to wash the sweat from sunburned faces.

As the day wore on the only measure of the progress made became the hourly ten-minute halts, but after each all too short relief it was increasingly harder to get up and get going again. The withdrawal went steadily on, until in midafternoon a short stop was made and the 5 Brigade units were sorted out. Then the onward grind began once more.



Mail day at Palionellini

**Mail day at Palionellini**



19 Battalion transport bombed during the withdrawal from  
Servia to Molos

**19 Battalion transport bombed during the withdrawal from Servia to Molos**



Evacuation beach of Porto Rafti  
**Evacuation beach of Porto Rafti**

Arrival in Crete—Capt J. H. Danderson and Sgt K. G. Lett



**Arrival in Crete— Capt J. H. Danderson and Sgt K. G. Lett**



Looking towards Akrotiri Peninsula from north of battalion area

**Looking towards Akrotiri Peninsula from north of battalion area**



Taranaki Company area on 20 May 1941—a dead paratrooper

**Taranaki Company area on 20 May 1941—a dead paratrooper**



Pte K. R. Rieper, a runner, loaded with German pistols and ammunition, 20 May 1941

**Pte K. R. Rieper, a runner, loaded with German pistols and ammunition, 20 May 1941**



**Company area at Karatsos—Ptes T. J. Foley and W. Porter**

The march now became a dogged fight against an overwhelming desire to sleep, with every man almost at the end of his tether with fatigue. March casualties increased. The sick and slightly wounded fell out first, then in ones and twos went those who collapsed at last from sheer exhaustion. Once beyond rousing, these men were reluctantly left by the roadside, but first their water bottles were topped up from the precious stores of their comrades. Those too far gone to look after themselves were propped up where they could be seen by the drivers of the few battle-scarred vehicles running a ferry service along the route. The one Bren carrier still in operation played a prominent part in picking up those who could go no further. Its crew were Lieutenant Yorke Fleming, Lance-Corporal Jack [Check](#)<sup>35</sup> and Private 'Aussie' Aylett,<sup>36</sup> all [19 Battalion](#) men.

The tortuous road still wound upward in a seemingly endless spiral, always steep, with always another crest looming ahead a little higher than the last. The limits of endurance had been plumbed and during the night the column began to break up. Everybody's pace was different. Out in front the CO and second-in-command set a pace which became more and more difficult for those behind to maintain. Frequent halts now became necessary, and with each one the length of the column increased, until finally contact was lost with these two officers and the battalion split up into two main groups. Still, the majority of the troops kept steadily on—there had been no orders about stopping. All through the night they trudged, up and over the pass. Down now, through [Sin Kares](#) and still onwards, until at dawn in the southern outlet of the [Askifou](#) Plain, two groups, each of ninety-odd men,



straggled into 4 Brigade lying-up area. The first to arrive was Battalion Headquarters under the Adjutant, Lieutenant Blundell; with them were some Headquarters Company men and the majority of Taranaki Company. They were got off the road and under cover, and shortly afterwards the other group under Captain Pleasants arrived.

By superhuman efforts the bulk of the battalion had made it. After three hours' sleep—the dead sleep of exhaustion—the business of reorganising companies and stragglers began. Captain Pleasants, the senior officer present, was now in command, for of the CO and second-in-command there was no news and the battalion did not catch up with them again until it got back to Helwan. Brigadier Inglis took the 19th back into 4 Brigade, and under brigade arrangements a welcome distribution of one tin of M and V (meat and vegetables) to each eight men was made. This, with a few biscuits, was the first food issue the battalion had had for several days.

An extract from a letter home written by one of the unit's officers gives a graphic description of the last stages of the march over the mountains and reflects the resolute spirit of the men:

Never was a haul so long or so heart-breaking. I think there were at least ten places at every one of which I expected to be at the summit only to see long weary miles of winding road yet to be covered. It was hard to keep the fellows together and some who just couldn't keep up had at last to fall out and make their own way in their own time. Fortunately few failed to do so. I can remember the lad trudging behind me; a grand lad and as brave as a lion as I had seen with my own eyes, feet gone, utterly exhausted, he kept going though literally, and I think quite unconsciously—whimpering with fatigue. One lad I saw in hospital yesterday had made it with two bullets in his leg. Jove, these fellows of ours have guts. Worn to a frazzle with nothing but a bit of hard biscuit for food they stuck it out, carried all their gear and were always soldiers.

The 29th was spent lying up and recovering. But the men were ready to fight again if required. Though some had made the final few miles literally on their hands and knees, every one of them had clung to his weapons. The mortar men, with their heavy loads, unable to keep up with the rest of the unit, got the only active job

before embarkation. Under the RSM, they remained with [18 Battalion](#) and gave support during the rearguard action when a gallant stand was made by that unit and [23 Battalion](#), who held off the enemy while the rest withdrew to the embarkation beaches.

The field guns of C Troop  $\frac{2}{3}$  Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery, and three light tanks of the Hussars continued to do valiant work until the last, and with 19 Australian Brigade manned a final rearguard line, through which 4 NZ Brigade passed on its way to the [Sfakia](#) plateau.

The withdrawal arrangements were now almost complete and 4 and 5 NZ Brigades lay up to await evacuation. Once again the [Royal Navy](#) was to snatch them away from the enemy. The spent units knew only too well the danger with which the operation was attended, yet none doubted the 'Silent Service'. The Navy would be here as it was in [Greece](#).

Further effective fighting was impossible, for the defenders had exhausted their physical strength and their supplies. A check made of Hawke's Bay Company showed that, while each man still had his weapons, 64 rounds was the total ammunition muster. Before dispersing to sleep 4 Brigade laid out its final defensive line, determined that, if necessary, the Hun should have their last round.

Throughout the day the sorting out of units went on and the weary men slept, confident that the night would see them safely on the decks of a British destroyer. On the two previous nights large batches of troops had been lifted successfully from the beach below. Tonight (30–31 May) it would be their turn. But while waiting for darkness the battalion had its two final misfortunes, the first when the commander of Hawke's Bay Company, Captain 'Brick' Budd, was sent by Force Headquarters to a neighbouring beach on a fruitless search for rations and was unable to get back to the unit because he was held at the point of a gun by a sentry keeping stragglers away from the beach. The second happened when orders came to move to the embarkation point and several of our troops could not be found. These men had safely made the full distance with the battalion, only to be left behind when within an ace of evacuation. The explanation was learned later from Privates Harry [Toho](#)<sup>37</sup> and 'Gandhi' Adams<sup>38</sup> of Headquarters Company, who, after spending some months dodging the enemy, were among those who finally got away from [Crete](#) and rejoined

the battalion at [Helwan](#). Their sleep had been so deep and their cover so good that shouts had failed to waken them and searchers to find them. Fourteen men from the 19th remained at large in [Crete](#). Some, taken off by submarine almost a year later, rejoined the battalion in [Syria](#).

On the night of 30–31 May the survivors of the battalion under Captain Pleasants left [Crete](#). The evacuation was going to schedule, and in batches of fifty the troops were ferried out to waiting destroyers, [HMAS Nizam](#) and [HMS Napier](#). As they moved down the steep goat track to the beach, the GOC Creforce, [Major-General Freyberg](#), stood at a portal formed by two huge rocks, counting the survivors of his own decimated division. The two campaigns of the last few weeks had been costly. All units had suffered, some of them much more severely than did the 19th, which cleared [Crete](#) with a strength of 17 officers and 221 other ranks. The Hun, however, would not forget his meeting with New Zealand troops, and now that the first two rounds had been fought, he too would need a spell to make good his losses before the next battle took place.

The [Nizam](#) and [Napier](#) sailed at 3 a.m. on the 31st. To each weary man crowded on the steel decks, these ships epitomised strength and security. They were the tangible symbols of the tradition and might of an Empire united in arms. Soup, cigarettes, and the cheery naval ratings who served them revived the tired troops, and one irrepressible soul was seen to thumb his nose at the dim outline of the island. We had been pushed out of [Crete](#); yes—but so long as the British Navy sailed the seas, confidence in the ultimate outcome of the war remained unshaken. The destroyers raced on through the calm, inky sea into darkness towards the safety beyond.

The battalion's casualties in [Crete](#) were as follows:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	2	54
Died of wounds	–	7
Wounded	4	73
Wounded and prisoners of war	–	40
Prisoners of war	2	78
Missing, later contacted Allied forces	–	14

Total

8

266

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<sup>1</sup> Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC \*, m.i.d., MC (Greek); Palmerston North; born Mosgiel, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn Jan-Aug 1940; comd 4 Bde 1941–42 and 4 Armd Bde 1942–44; 2 NZ Div 27 Jun-16 Aug 1942 and 6 Jun-31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, Germany, 1947–50.

<sup>2</sup> Cpl T. J. Meller; born England, 4 Jul 1906; orchard hand.

<sup>3</sup> Col J. I. Thodey, DSO, m.i.d.; Perth; born Gisborne, 8 Dec 1910; life assurance officer; CO 21 Bn Jul-Oct 1944, May-Dec 1945.

<sup>4</sup> WO II H. C. Clark; Auckland; born NZ, 2 Apr 1915; plate-layer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>5</sup> Maj J. L. Duigan, ED; Gisborne; born Wellington, 8 Jun 1910; insurance inspector; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

<sup>6</sup> L-Bdr B. W. Johnston, MM; Auckland; born NZ, 11 Nov 1913; fitter; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped Apr 1942.

<sup>7</sup> Sgt A. R. Burge, BEM; Wellington; born Wellington, 6 May 1913; cost accountant; twice wounded.

<sup>8</sup> Sgt J. M. H. Highet; born NZ, 22 Sep 1917; civil servant; wounded 20 May 1941.

<sup>9</sup> Lt-Col G. P. Sanders, DSO, m.i.d.; Linton MC; born England, 2 Sep 1908; Regular soldier; CO 26 Bn 14 Jun-3 Jul 1944; 27 (MG) Bn Nov 1944–45; 27 Bn ( Japan) 1946; Director of Training, Army HQ, 1949–54; GSO 1 NZ Division, Linton Camp, 1954-.

<sup>10</sup> Cpl A. J. Spence; Auckland; born Edinburgh, 8 Jan 1920; clerk; wounded and p.w. 25 May 1941; escaped three times, third attempt successful in 1945.

<sup>11</sup> Auckland Star.

<sup>12</sup> Maj D. K. McLauchlan; Sydney; born Gisborne, 22 May 1911; insurance clerk; company commander 19 Bn 1941–42; OC Bde HQ Tps 4 Armd Bde, 1943.

<sup>13</sup> Maj H. M. Swinburn, m.i.d.; London; born NZ 26 Aug 1918; bank clerk; wounded 20 May 1941.

<sup>14</sup> Capt C. Weston, m.i.d.; New Plymouth; born Inglewood, 6 Mar 1914; farmer; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

<sup>15</sup> Sgt L. D. Greig; Normanby; born Hawera, 31 Oct 1914; labourer; p.w. 21 May 1941.

<sup>16</sup> Capt R. W. McLean; Wellington; born NZ, 15 Jan 1909; line erector.

<sup>17</sup> Maj W. R. Carswell, MC; Palmerston North; born Dunedin, 20 Dec 1914; surgeon; RMO 19 Bn 1941–43; surgeon 1 CCS, 1 FSU, and 1 Gen Hosp, 1943–45.

<sup>18</sup> Lt C. A. Baynes; Oamaru; born Gisborne, 7 Oct 1912; civil servant; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; platoon commander J Force, 1946–47.

<sup>19</sup> L-Sgt B. A. Ellis; born NZ, 24 Feb 1916; labourer; killed in action, 24 Oct 1942.

<sup>20</sup> WO II N. W. Hunter, MM; Hawera; born NZ, 5 Oct 1910; farmer.

<sup>21</sup> Pte J. B. Simpson; born Scotland, 13 Oct 1917; watersider; killed in action

22 May 1941.

<sup>22</sup> WO II W. G. Oliver; Wellington; born NZ, 27 Mar 1915; plumber; wounded 9 Jul 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Sgt A. M. Kennedy, EM; Masterton; born Masterton, 12 Sep 1913; salesman; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

<sup>24</sup> Lt-Col J. T. Russell, DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; 2 i/c Div Cav 1941; CO 22 Bn Feb-Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.

<sup>25</sup> Pte P. Sullivan; born Palmerston North, 17 Dec 1912; oil storeman; killed in action 25 May 1941.

<sup>26</sup> Pte E. G. B. Newman; born Adelaide, 18 Feb 1912; labourer; died of wounds while p.w. 2 Jun 1941.

<sup>27</sup> Pte R. J. Nicholls; born NZ, 13 Mar 1915; painter; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

<sup>28</sup> WO II D. J. Robertson; Pukekohe; born Gisborne, 26 May 1917; labourer; wounded 27 Jul 1944.

<sup>29</sup> L-Sgt L. M. Smylie; born Chatham Islands, 20 Sep 1914; labourer.

<sup>30</sup> Sgt J. Wildermouth; born NZ, 9 Dec 1915; labourer; wounded 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>31</sup> Capt D. Horn; South Africa; born NZ, 27 May 1918; clerk.

<sup>32</sup> Maj K. C. M. Cockerill; Hamilton; born Dannevirke, 15 Feb 1911; school teacher.

<sup>33</sup> Some were probably killed in the subsequent counter-attack.

<sup>34</sup> Brig J. Hargest, CBE, DSO \* and bar, MC \*, m.i.d., Legion of Honour (France) \*; born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; Member of Parliament 1931–44; Otago Mounted Rifles, 1914–20 (CO 2 Bn Otago Regt); comd 5 Bde Jan 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. Sidi Azeiz 27 Nov 1941; escaped Mar 1943; killed in action, France, 12 Aug 1944.

<sup>35</sup> Cpl J. H. Check; born Palmerston North, 15 Sep 1918; shop assistant; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped Nov 1941.

<sup>36</sup> Pte R. Aylett; New Plymouth; born Tasmania, 17 Nov 1915; diesel engineer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

<sup>37</sup> Pte H. Toho; Ohinemutu; born Raetihi, 4 Jun 1918; farmhand.

<sup>38</sup> Tpr A. B. Adams; born Palmerston North, 5 Aug 1916; labourer.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT



## CHAPTER 11 – BACK TO EGYPT

## CHAPTER 11

### *Back to Egypt*

And many a broken heart is here and many a  
broken head;  
But tomorrow,  
By the living God, we'll try the game again.

—John Masefield

The voyage across the [Mediterranean](#) was fraught with danger, but the exhausted troops slept soundly, confident now that, come what may, the Navy would not be found wanting. The hours of darkness passed and the day dawned clear and fine. The morning sun glazed the calm blue sea. The [Nizam](#) and [Napier](#) were making good time, every turn of their screws bringing them and the 1510 weary troops they carried closer to safety. The horizon stretched in an unbroken circle, a picture of tranquillity, but the peace and placidity of that summer's morning were soon shattered. The bosun's pipe suddenly sent every sailor to action stations and the alarm gongs woke the sleeping soldiers.

Swarming out of the morning sun were several small black specks. Nine German bombers based in the [Dodecanese](#) had left with the daylight to search for Allied shipping. Now began a new and nasty experience for troops who knew only too well the terrors of dive-bombing. Herded together like sheep on the decks of the destroyers, with no scope for offensive action and no possibility of taking cover, they were forced to wait and watch while the attack developed. The staccato barking of the ships' anti-aircraft guns was sweet music and when the bombs began to send great columns of water cascading into the air about the two ships, fright was forgotten and a heartfelt cheer went up as one of the aircraft was seen to take a headlong dive and crash into the sea. The ack-ack guns roared continuous defiance but, undeterred, the Junkers came back to drop a second string of bombs. This time [HMS Napier](#) was damaged by a near miss but the Germans lost another plane. It was an anxious time. [Nizam](#) stood by her crippled companion and both ships prepared to fight off the next attack. Suddenly, out of the blue, came a [Fleet Air Arm](#) patrol of two Fulmar fighters; the bombers fled but not before another of their number had

been left behind. The tension was lifted.

It was not the only victory that day, for an announcement on the [Napier's](#) notice board stated that some thirty enemy bombers had been scattered by the [Fleet Air Arm](#) prior to the attack that morning on the two ships.

At 5 p.m. the troops disembarked in [Egypt](#). That once-detested country now became a welcome haven. Entraining at the quayside in [Alexandria](#) en route to [Amiriya](#) no complaints were uttered; even the [Egyptian State Railways](#) were spared the usual curses.

The unpopular desert transit camp now seemed a delightful site; after the never-ending strain of the past weeks, here was peace at last. Welcome faces to greet the survivors included Captain Dave Thomson, WO II Bert Steele, Sergeants 'Buck' Buchanan, 'Fitz' Fitzgerald, <sup>1</sup> 'Snow' Kershaw <sup>2</sup> and 'Killer' Brown. <sup>3</sup> In [Greece](#), sent on a reconnaissance to the embarkation point, these men had been cut off from [4 Brigade](#) and had finally left from [Monemvasia](#), going direct to [Egypt](#) with [6 Brigade](#).

A night and a day were spent at [Amiriya](#). Unlimited hospitality characterised the short stay. The YMCA, local welfare organisations, and neighbouring units vied with each other in providing for the wants of those who were arriving from [Crete](#). Their friendliness was good, and eating and drinking, washing and sleeping, smoking and lazing were all delightful; yet restlessness and unsettlement could not be so easily conquered. Despite exhaustion, many found themselves unable to sit still. Bitter thoughts and cold anger flowed with every mention of the past campaigns. The train journey on the night of 1–2 June gave much time for reviewing the last fortnight's events, and the remnants of the 19th arrived back at [Helwan](#) unbroken in spirit but with a cold and savage hatred in their hearts. But all shared one ray of comfort: the knowledge that the enemy losses in specialised highly trained paratroops had been enormous. The prisoners taken during the early stages of the battle had openly boasted that the island would be theirs in a few hours. Despite complete command in the air and great superiority in equipment, it had taken two weeks to dislodge the defenders. If [Crete](#) had been—as was popularly believed—the full-scale rehearsal for [Hitler's](#) vaunted attack on [England](#), then the German plans would now require considerable recasting.

It was a small battalion which bedded down in the 19th lines at [Helwan](#) Camp on 2 June. Not all the survivors of [Crete](#) could be collected together in the unit area. Many wounded and exhausted men were moved direct to 2 NZ General Hospital at [Helwan](#). During the next few days others joined them as patients in the overcrowded Grand Hotel, the Casino, and its surrounding tents and buildings. The medical staff toiled day and night to cope with the sudden rush of cases. The weather was scorching hot and conditions were far from ideal for treatment, rest and convalescence, but by hard work and improvisation the [NZMC](#) staff, sisters, and nurses under Colonel [Spencer](#) <sup>4</sup> provided a hospital service which met every emergency.

The 3rd June was spent settling into the new camp which Captain Thomson and his small party had prepared. Clothing and personal equipment, pay and Patriotic Board parcels were issued. Fifteen per cent of the meagre strength were permitted to go on leave immediately, but [Cairo](#) beckoned only feebly that day. Showers, 'Stella' from the [Naafi](#), and sleep were the chief attractions; all could be had on the spot. Yet the sudden release from toil and tension caused reaction. At night restlessness still made the sound sleep so sorely needed impossible, while during daylight an unsettled state of mind caused the smallest task to seem tedious. The searing sun added to the tortures of the battle-weary as temperatures rose to record heights.

A large mail accumulated in the past month was distributed and this news of home, though most welcome, seemed only to add to the mental disquiet. Few were able to concentrate on answering correspondence or bring themselves to think of anything but the events of the past two campaigns. Groups gathered in huts and messes to talk of those who were no longer with them. The fate of many men was uncertain, and each remaining man on the roll felt his own responsibility to help piece together the shreds of evidence which might put any man now on the missing list into a more definite category. Reports and returns were being collected, and companies, still retaining their identity, did their best to give the information required of them; but it was a dismal business.

It was a grim irony, too, that a unit which in twenty months' service had known no better shelter than a tent should now find itself in a hutted camp. Being roofed

over and shut up in a full dormitory created an atmosphere akin to claustrophobia, and some found it necessary for many nights to forsake the comfort inside and sleep beneath the stars.

At this time the only transport in the unit was a privately-owned car, the property of three junior officers, inseparable companions whose frequent excursions to [Cairo](#) had become almost a unit legend. To the delight of the troops, the vehicle was now put to a more practical use. It carried rations, it carried sick, and did the hundred and one jobs which distance and lack of official transport made impossible by other means. It was an invaluable acquisition to a unit temporarily bereft of the power to move.

Muster parades and administrative fatigues filled the rest of the week. Night leave was generous, and to those who could find accommodation seven days' leave was allowed. This could be spent in [Cairo](#), the Delta, Upper [Egypt](#) or Palestine. Pay balances accumulated during three months' service in the field allowed the troops to range far and wide. As each batch marched out the scanty battalion roll dwindled still further and a unit training programme became impossible. Before solid training could begin again the battalion needed men, equipment, and new directives. The lessons learned in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) had yet to find a place in military manuals of instruction.

By 7 June strength summaries had been completed and were posted. The final check showed that the 19th were 10 officers and 428 other ranks below strength. The gradual absorption of reinforcements now began and continued throughout the month. Most of the new men were from the third section of the 4th Reinforcements who had been in [Maadi](#) about three months. Some few were from the 5ths who had arrived less than a month ago. The day before the majority of these men marched in, a formal battalion parade was held in honour of the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Rt Hon Peter Fraser, who afterwards met the men informally at a garden party at the [Maadi](#) Club. The occasion was a pleasant one and the personal contact made, and the interest shown by the head of the Government, was appreciated by all ranks. The civilian residents of [Maadi](#) contributed largely to the success of the day by their generous hospitality, showing a warmth of friendliness which must have made unusual demands on such a cosmopolitan community. Irrespective of race or creed, all did their share in entertaining the New Zealand

troops who had returned from [Greece](#) and [Crete](#).

On 9 June [Lieutenant-Colonel Varnham](#), discharged from hospital, marched in to resume command of his battalion. The 19th had always regarded him as its real commander and his coming inspired confidence and spelled renewed activity. With him came 10 officers and 350 other ranks, and from that date constructive work began. The less seriously wounded and the sick, now well, began to find their way back to the unit also, but the 19th was still some 100 men below establishment. To all intents it was a new unit, yet the leaven of the old members, rearranged to meet changing conditions, was a telling factor in its reorganisation.

The veterans were now asked to forgo parochial loyalties in the larger issue of unit efficiency. Wellington West Coast Company was reconstituted and training as a battalion began again. Captain Errol Williams, returning to the battalion after a tour of duty as OC NZ Wing at Middle East OCTU, was chosen to command the new company. To it were posted a proportion of old hands from all the other companies in the unit plus the few WWC men who had got back from [Greece](#).

This was the first of many such occasions when the unit would be called upon to regroup. The words of the commanding officer spoken during a lecture in the far-off days of [Trentham](#) were remembered. On that occasion there was a protest over transfers taking place between companies, and he said that this would happen many times during the course of the war and was something the unit would have to face. Now it became essential, for WWC, if it was to be as efficient a sub-unit as the other companies in the battalion, had to have a liberal sprinkling of leaders who had proved their worth in battle. The transfers were now made without protest, and each of the remaining companies lost good men with regret but with a certain knowledge that necessity would justify their going.

There were many problems to be sorted out, but the ranks were once more swelled to impressive proportions. Each morning there was a period of smartening-up drill, and each afternoon a percentage of the strength was permitted to spend leave in [Cairo](#) while the remainder were kept fully employed in camp construction and administration.

By 24 June the battalion was up to full strength, though equipment was still very

scarce. Transport was limited to two 15-cwt trucks employed on administrative duties. Still, much valuable work was done. In addition to parade-ground ceremonial, route marches and lectures on the lessons of the recent campaigns became the mainstays of the programme.

The war situation was black; everywhere the Germans seemed to be victorious and the greater part of [Europe](#) was now in their hands. The Japanese threat in the [Pacific](#) was causing concern. In the Middle East Rommel had won back many of the gains of Wavell's advance the previous year. The threat to [Egypt](#) was now very real, and both Axis partners had bases relatively secure from attack on which to build up their forces prior to carrying out their threat to seize the [Suez Canal](#). It was evident that sooner or later the desert would once more be a battle arena. In [Tobruk](#) 9 Australian Division, beleaguered since April, were holding out until the army in the [Middle East](#) was again strong enough to come to their relief.

But [Greece](#) and, more particularly, [Crete](#) had changed many accepted standards of warfare. We had been at the receiving end of a very bitter lesson, and every effort was now being made to ensure that all angles of these operations would be exhaustively examined and that we should profit in the future from our past mistakes and by learning from the enemy's tactics. [Brigadier Inglis](#) was flown direct to [London](#) to report on that battle, while other senior officers went to [Malta](#) and [Cyprus](#) to advise the commanders of those garrisons how best to prepare for, and fight off, the airborne landings which were believed imminent. The Empire forces, on the alert in every theatre, waited and prepared to ward off the next blow.

On 22 June, however, [Hitler](#) made a move which was unpredictable. By attacking [Russia](#), he opened an entirely new front and completely changed the strategy of the Axis armies. There were many who delved into history to quote Napoleon's case, but as the German advance kept rolling swiftly on there were few left to prophesy the eventual disaster into which this new campaign would lead him. The German army, it seemed, was invincible, yet those who had fought in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) knew that man for man the Germans must lose to our own forces. But in a war of machines we lagged on foot; in a war of the air we were not yet fledged.

It was hardly surprising that there should be some rancour over past events and that the sorest point of all should be the soldier's reaction to lack of air cover. The

RAF were unjustly labelled by many men who, uninformed and embittered, were prone to vent their feelings at times and in places where they did the most damage. This state of affairs could not be countenanced and official explanations, plus new trends in training which provided for ground-air co-operation on a scale not previously encountered, restored the situation. It became apparent that future operations would see our forces adequately catered for in the air.

Throughout July training toughened progressively. The Wadi Garawi was the arena where movement, attack, and withdrawal were daily lessons for perspiration-soaked soldiers. This dusty, sun-scorched subsidence in the desert will remain as one of the nightmares of [Egypt](#) to those who, in the torrid summer of 1941, staggered back and forth across its soft, yielding surface until the whole unit had attained the co-ordination required of a well-oiled machine. But Wadi Garawi was also a crucible in which fresh friendships were fused. At night in the [Naafi](#) over liberal supplies of beer, these friendships were tempered until the battalion once more became a band united both by comradeship and discipline. They were hard days, but days which would prove their worth when the 19th, as part of Auchinleck's army, would again be pitted against the Axis forces in the [Western Desert](#).

By the end of the month all ranks were thoroughly fit. The unit athletic team, under Captain Thomson, added a strenuous end-of-day programme to their already arduous normal tasks. The battalion was once more working as a cohesive whole; the reinforcements were already finding more satisfaction in duty with a line battalion than they had known in the base training establishments in which they had done their recruit work. The old team spirit was again manifest. The section, the platoon, the company, and the battalion all had their part in the programme, which inspired the best effort from each individual soldier.

The regimental mascot '[Major](#)' attained commissioned rank during this time, Routine Order No. 47 of 19 July stating: 'Pte Major, No 1 dog NZEF, in view of his long and meritorious service with the Bn, and his obtaining a distinguished pass at OCTU had been promoted to the rank of 2nd Lieut.' In addition to the identification discs on his collar he now wore a metal pip. It would have been hard to find a junior officer who carried his rank with more decorum and faultless dignity. On and off parade, '[Major's](#)' manners were beyond reproach, his enthusiasm unbounded and his turnout unblemished.



Battle manœuvres began at the beginning of August. Preliminary training finished, the battalion now worked as a complete unit, and in all these operations co-operation with the air and with tanks took on an increasing importance. It was evident that future operations would see the Middle East Forces take the field on fairer terms than our men had so far known.

Early in August the commander of 4 NZ Brigade Group, Brigadier Puttick, returned to New Zealand to take up the appointment of Chief of the General Staff. His personal courage and unbounded energy during the campaign in [Greece](#) as commander of 4 Brigade, and in [Crete](#) as commander of the New Zealand Division, were well known and the old hands regretted his going. The Brigadier was a professional soldier of plain words and unpretentious habits, a veteran of two wars, in both of which he had earned high distinction; his departure on 6 August meant a loss to the Division. The appointment for which he had been chosen, however, was evidence of his ability as a soldier and of the regard in which he was held as a leader. It also gave an indication of the seriousness of the position in the [Pacific](#).

Brigadier Puttick was succeeded by [Brigadier Inglis](#). Already well known as CO 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, [Brigadier Inglis](#) had commanded the brigade in [Crete](#). A recent tour of duty with the training depot in [Maadi](#) had added to his already established reputation as something of a martinet. For his ceremonial review of the brigade on 12 August, the battalion turned out neat, precise and trained to the minute; the men acquitted themselves well and were complimented. The reinforcements, with vivid memories of the exhaustive and exhausting inspections of the past, stood grimly apprehensive as the steely eye passed down the ranks, but felt proud that their unit could escape censure and even earn praise from so redoubtable a disciplinarian.

Rifle and LMG range practices now became part of the daily round and classification shooting revealed a serious lack of practice on the part of the men newly posted to the battalion. Scores on the rifle range had never given any great cause for satisfaction, but the 19th had always applied itself assiduously to improving its shooting. When the battalion had finally gone into battle, the Huns had complained of the deadly accuracy of their rifle fire, asking if these New Zealand troops were recruited from deerstalkers. They would have rejoiced to see some of

the targets turned in during these practices. Special coaching, however, gradually brought the worst shots up to the required standard and final results showed a considerable improvement.

On 12 August the divisional athletic meeting was held at the sporting club grounds on Gezira Island. The battalion was fully represented and had several successes. The day's break in the pleasant grounds was enjoyed by the desert-weary troops. Service in the [Middle East](#) was supportable solely by reason of agreeable episodes such as this. The sudden change from the dusty, sun-scorched camp to the stately homes and gardens of the British colony of [Cairo](#) and the [Gezira](#) club, where one walked on green grass and sheltered under cool trees, made a refreshing contrast.

The holiday over, the unit once more sweated in Wadi [Garawi](#), but rumour had been busy over the last few weeks and it was becoming increasingly evident that a move was in the air. Equipment was pouring in and battle exercises now involved the whole brigade. Confirmation that the Division would be leaving almost immediately was given by the GOC at a full-dress parade held on the [Helwan](#) Camp football ground. Fourth Brigade was due to take over from the 5th at the combined operations centre at [Kabrit](#). On 17 August units would move to the canal zone for exercises with the Navy and the [RAF](#). With light hearts Wadi [Garawi](#) was traversed for the last time. Stumbling across its stubborn surface, loaded down by full battle kit, the 19th fulfilled the final item on the training syllabus—an approach march followed by a night attack and dawn consolidation. Next day the unit was on its way to [Kabrit](#).

The advance party under Lieutenant F. M. Stewart, the unit transport officer, pulled out early on the 17th. By the afternoon the rest of the battalion were squatting expectantly on their packs waiting the order to march to the railway siding. Despite their heavy loads the men covered those five dusty miles with a step which was almost jaunty, then in the sunset squatted once more on packs among the clinkers beside the railway track. The rising moon replaced the setting sun and at last, clanking and clattering, the troop train drew in. In the pale moonlight the unit scrambled into dirty steel boxcars, hauled its equipment and belongings behind it, and prepared for sixteen hours of discomfort—forty men per car, plus full equipment,

no lights and much dirt. For the first few hours there was little chance to sleep, but gradually the confusion was sorted out and groups settled down.

Morning and the brilliant canal sunshine brought full recognition of the insalubrious surroundings; what the blackout had hidden daylight revealed. Oil, dust, cement and worse, all the odorous residue of the various merchandise the trucks had carried on their previous trips, now clung with grubby tenacity to the persons and kits of their present passengers. At Fayid, in the full heat of noon on 18 August, the battalion, looking like a trainload of sweeps, descended from their boxcars, once more cursed the detested [Egyptian State Railways](#), and embussed in army lorries to conclude the last stage in their 150-mile journey.

The combined operations centre at [Kabrit](#) was situated on a peninsula between the Great and Little Bitter Lakes, through which the [Suez Canal](#) passes. From a training and quartering point of view the camp was a going concern, and the 19th took over the tented lines vacated by the Maori Battalion. As though resenting the newcomers, the desert reacted violently and the unit moved in during a dense dust-storm, which was repeated each afternoon for the rest of the week. Despite the dust the locality had its good



HQ Company headquarters. The casualties are Cpl A. J. Spence and 2 Lt C. W. Taylor. The runner is Pte W. J. Brown

**HQ Company headquarters. The casualties are [Cpl A. J. Spence](#) and [2 Lt C. W. Taylor](#). The runner is [Pte W. J. Brown](#)**



19 Battalion moving down towards the beach at Sfakia

**19 Battalion moving down towards the beach at Sfakia**



The coastline near Sfakia

**The coastline near Sfakia**



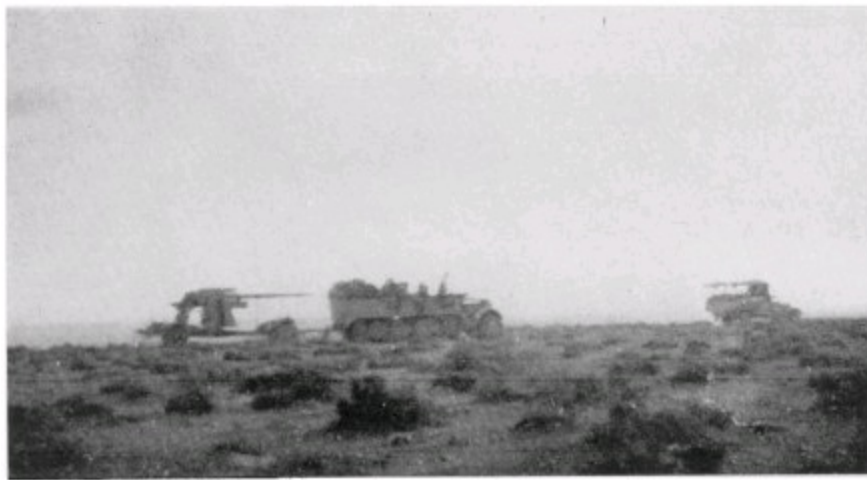
Return to Alexandria—Taranaki Company group: (*standing*) N. E. Andrews, L. G. Schultz, V. C. Gordon, unidentified, A. R. Olsson, T. S. Hermon; (*sitting*) unidentified, M. J. Goodin, G. A. Arthur, J. C. Palmer, R. J. Smith, J. R. Kearns, A. C. Sears

Return to [Alexandria](#)—Taranaki Company group:( standing) N. E. Andrews, L. G. Schultz, V. C. Gordon, unidentified, A. R. Olsson, T. S. Hermon; ( sitting) unidentified, M. J. Goodin, G. A. Arthur, J. C. Palmer, R. J. Smith, J. R. Kearns, A. C. Sears



Rendezvous at Kilo 40 during the move of 12 November 1941—Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell and Capt J. I. Thodey are standing behind the jeep

**Rendezvous at Kilo 40 during the move of 12 November 1941—Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell and Capt J. I. Thodey are standing behind the jeep**



A German 88-mm gun making off—the escarpment above Gambut,  
23 November

**A German 88-mm gun making off—the escarpment above [Gambut](#), 23 November**



The link-up at Ed Duda—three Tank Corps officers unnamed, Brigadier A. C. Willison, Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell, a Tank Corps officer unnamed, and Captain E. D. Blundell

The link-up at [Ed Duda](#)—three Tank Corps officers unnamed, Brigadier A. C. Willison, Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell, a Tank Corps officer unnamed, and Captain E. D. Blundell



**A brew at a post in the desert—D. H. Byrne, W. McL. Duthie, A. Maunder, H. F. Jemison, J. A. Simmers**

points, for the air had a freshness which [Helwan](#) had never known and there was excellent swimming in the Bitter Lakes. Canteen arrangements were good and, as the camp amenities were not over abundant, leave was generous. But throughout the pleasantly active weeks spent at [Kabrit](#), few cared to repeat their first visit to [Tewfik](#) or [Suez](#), whose possibilities could each be exhausted in a single night. When work was over, a swim was all most men wanted, then a visit to the canteen with its full supplies of beer and the opportunity of fraternising with the [Royal Navy](#).

The first period, 19 to 26 August, was spent in preliminary training which proved immensely popular with all ranks. A gauge to its success is the fact that the proportion of non-swimmers in the unit dropped from 35 per cent to 5 per cent. In their spare time all ranks were constantly in the water practising rowing. The craft available could not cater for the demand, and some members of the unit who had never handled a boat before began to show promise as oarsmen. There were some good coaches, for among the original members who left New Zealand with the battalion in 1940 were several representative oarsmen. While in [Maadi](#) and [Helwan](#) these men had taken every opportunity to keep in practice in the skiffs of the Nile Boating Club. But, unhappily, some good men whose skill and enthusiasm would have been invaluable at [Kabrit](#) had been lost in the last campaign. Corporal George Cooke, former New Zealand Olympic oarsman, had been killed in action in [Crete](#), and several others too had made their last journey in Charon's barge. The unit missed them.

The friendly and tolerant tutelage of the Navy was the greatest factor in the proficiency the unit achieved during its training for combined operations. Relations were most cordial from the start and by 27 August, when the 19th embarked on HMS Glenroy, every man felt confident in his ability to take part in the full-scale exercises which were to follow. The Glenroy was no stranger to New Zealand troops; many members of her crew had helped to evacuate them from [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), and 5 Brigade had already completed its course of training aboard her. Her naval routine and nautical nomenclature were modified for the benefit of the landlubbers she carried; but her commander, Captain Sir James Paget, Bt, RN, must have logged some curious incidents during her career at [Kabrit](#).

A happy social occasion during the battalion's stay at the combined operations centre was a day's cricket. The Glenroy fielded several teams to play the battalion and a splendid day's sport resulted. That evening all messes, officers, sergeants and other ranks, entertained their opposite numbers to dinner, which was followed by an exceedingly successful party.

To the troops, the trapeze act they performed climbing up and down her netted sides with full battle kit, then crowding into her snub-nosed landing craft, was something entirely new and interesting. Her efficient and completely self-contained organisation, plus the Navy's traditional imperturbability in moments when all seemed confusion, soon won the admiration of all ranks. The first exercise went with a swing. The battalion was landed at night on a beach in the [Bitter Lakes](#), staged a dawn attack, then re-embarked in a manner which impressed each man with the possibilities of such an operation.

Combined exercises culminated in a full-scale operation for the whole of the brigade. This took place on 5 September and was attended by the GOC. A location having similar features to the coast of [Cyrenaica](#) was selected on the east side of the Canal, where the open sea lay to the west of the coastline. The mythical enemy was an Italian corps, and against them 4 NZ Brigade Group, with support from the [Royal Navy](#) and the [RAF](#), was to make a raid from the sea. A heavy air attack on [Suez](#), one of the many staged during the battalion's stay there, held up proceedings for an hour or so, but the operation was completed successfully and was the final big scheme in which the unit participated at [Kabrit](#).



Air raids on [Suez](#), [Ismailia](#) and [Geneifa](#), and the Canal itself were a nightly occurrence. The searchlights and anti-aircraft barrage put up by the defences were on a scale beyond anything our troops had so far seen. Anti-aircraft drill was perfected through constant practice. 'Aircraft yellow' gave preliminary warning; 'Aircraft red' spelled take cover. On one occasion an 'aircraft black' heralded a possible paratroop landing, and the battalion stood to and brought a mobile fighting column into readiness to combat a landing should one have taken place.

Brigade aquatic and athletic sports provided a vigorous and pleasant end to the stay on the Canal. Already hardened by its desert training at [Helwan](#), the unit was now in fine fettle, and the warning order which was received early in September for its return to the [Western Desert](#) was greeted with great enthusiasm. On 8 September the advance party comprising the transport from all units in the brigade left [Kabrit](#), and on the 15th the battalion once more shouldered its packs and boarded the train for [Baggush](#).

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<sup>1</sup> S-Sgt [K. J. G. Fitzgerald; Nelson](#); born NZ, 9 May 1911; civil servant.

<sup>2</sup> Pte [G. M. Kershaw](#); born [Dannevirke](#), 28 Apr 1917; grocer.

<sup>3</sup> Lt [G. D. Brown](#); Mangaweka; born [Levin](#), 14 Jan 1921; farmer; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Col [F. M. Spencer](#), OBE, m.i.d.; born [Rotorua](#), 3 Oct 1893; medical practitioner; [NZMC](#), 1 [NZEf](#), 1914–19; CO 2 [Gen Hosp](#) 1940–43; died of sickness (North Africa) 12 Jun 1943.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

# CHAPTER 12 – THE DIVISION IN THE DESERT

## CHAPTER 12

### *The Division in the Desert*

For death was a difficult trade.

—James Elroy Flecker

The 19th detrained in the [Western Desert](#) at [Sidi Haneish](#) on the morning of 16 September. A year earlier some of its members had taken part in the construction work when this desert railway station was being built. Though to many the location was new, neither the old hand nor the recruit felt enthusiastic about this destination. True, the [Baggush Box](#) held many memories for the unit and not all of them were unpleasant, but while taking over E and F sectors from the [Essex Regiment](#) it was all too clearly revealed that the place was still drab, dreary, and uncomfortable.

The prospect of action in the near future seemed to be confirmed by the ominous entry in routine orders, 'No leave until further notice', and as companies moved out to their respective areas the general feeling was: 'Oh well, we won't be long here anyhow.' The official orders were: 'Keep the positions in good repair; build alternative fire positions where necessary; carry out patrols by day and night; normal training wherever possible.' Work began at once.

The unit sector was about two miles west of that prepared previously and the few features on the uninviting landscape were well known to those who had toiled in [Baggush](#) for six months in 1940. Their knowledge of the area plus their experience in desert dwelling was valuable, for September was the beginning of the bad season and well-constructed bivouacs and field works would be more than ever necessary in the months to follow. This area, while no improvement on the one the 19th had made and occupied last year, was closer to the sea, but the weather was now cold; it was too chilly for pleasant bathing, and the ground had been so badly churned up that dust cloaked anything and everybody. Every movement caused a fresh cloud.

Tools and weapons, however, were kept fully employed from the day the 19th moved in. Construction work, patrols, weapon training and night marches filled the days for 4 and 6 Infantry Brigade Groups during their stay in the [Baggush Box](#).

An old-timer in the [Western Desert](#), 'Major', the bull terrier mascot of the 19th, received promotion to the rank of lieutenant, Routine Order No. 2 carrying the following notice: '2nd Lieut. "Major" (No. 1 Dog, NZ Div) to be Lieut, with effect from 24 September, 41. Authority, approval of the CO granted on the grounds that the prescribed period for one pip regimental mascots has expired and that during such period 2nd Lieut "Major" has carried out in a soldierlike manner all duties allocated to him.' With the last statement in the notice, all who knew the dog readily concurred. As befitting his profession he was aloof to petting, but received congratulations from all and sundry with soldierly dignity.

The tactical situation in the [Western Desert](#) could be likened to a calm before the storm. During the British preoccupation with [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), the Axis commander in North Africa had used the short route from [Italy](#) to build up considerable forces and supplies. The German-Italian army was now reported to be preparing for a full-scale operation against [Tobruk](#), whose gallant garrison had twice withstood and fought off assaults. Their stand was a severe check to Axis plans for the invasion of [Egypt](#) via the [Western Desert](#).

The British forces in [Egypt](#), too, had been building up steadily and after the [Balkan](#) campaign the brief breathing space had been used to full advantage. Now was the time for determining the first issue in our [Middle East](#) strategy: the Axis forces in North Africa were to be destroyed. All available air forces and transport began to concentrate in [Egypt](#) from [Syria](#), Palestine and [Cyprus](#). A steady stream of new American equipment swelled the depleted war stores of the theatre. In the main these stores, however, were at this stage confined to transport and heavy equipment. None affected the war equipment tables of an infantry battalion.

By November 1941 General Sir Claude Auchinleck was ready to launch his offensive. Training in air co-operation now occupied such an important place in the syllabus of all arms that its effect on morale was evident throughout the whole army. Though the system of ground-to-air communication between forward units and army co-operation squadrons proved to be inadequate during the later mobile operations, the promised full support of the [RAF](#) in the campaign ahead put every man in good heart.

On 10 September [Eighth Army](#) was constituted and Lieutenant-General Sir Alan

Cunningham appointed to command it. The New Zealand Division, with 4 Indian Division and 1 Army Tank Brigade, were grouped to form 13 Corps (commanded by Lieutenant-General A. R. Godwin-Austen) and this formation took over the headquarters of the old Western Desert Force at midnight on 26–27 September. Wavell's battleground was again to be the scene of operations, and the first phase of the plan was to trap and destroy the Axis forces in Eastern Cyrenaica. Over a month elapsed before the opposing armies clashed in battle.

Meanwhile, in the battalion positions at Baggush work and training continued. General Cunningham visited the area on 29 September inspecting units at work. Dust and fleas continued to irritate; but an occasional reconnaissance aircraft was the only sign of the enemy. October arrived, and on the 3rd the unit celebrated its second anniversary. Though both occasions were spent in drab discomfort, they are still recalled with pleasure by all who participated. The midday meal on Sunday, 5 October, in the dry cisterns and dugouts which served as company messes was the result of hoarding and planning over many months.

The 19th Battalion was now a band united by stronger ties than mere military discipline. The main body survivors and the newest recruits all felt that they were part of a good unit, and on its second birthday toasted their battalion's success for the future and retold with satisfaction its past exploits. It was a happy party, and in the small hours of the next morning the desert re-echoed to the hilarity of farewells as groups broke up to wend their uncertain ways back to bivouacs and posts.

On the 4th the battalion moved approximately seven miles to take over J sub-sector of the Box. This area lay between the road and the railway and linked up with 20 Battalion which was in position between the road and the sea, while on the left flank 18 Battalion held an area from the railway line to the escarpment. Conditions were hard, water was at a premium; but out of the most unpromising material ingenuity contrived some semblance of comfort, and self-discipline and collective effort resulted in a pattern of ordered living only possible through the co-operation of each man. But the battalion had no illusions about this construction work on the Baggush defences. The veterans knew that the Box could not turn an attack of any weight, and it was unthinkable that any serious action would take place within its defences.

A lecture given about this time by an officer of the Royal Tank Corps on the organisation of a tank brigade was attended by all officers and NCOs, plus one private from each company. It reflected the general trend of future tactics and provided much discussion in the bivouacs. The significance of 'one private from each company' was not lost, and it is safe to say that the men selected for so unusual an assignment did much effective work when they returned to their companies. The salient points of the lecture were retold many times. The effect was good. All ranks predicted that armour would play an important part in the success of the forthcoming operations.

Tactical training and instruction intensified throughout the month, and on the 14th the battalion moved out with other units of 4 Brigade Group to laager 10 miles south of [Fuka](#) for the whole of the following day and resume operations against 'an enemy fortified camp' the next night. [General Freyberg](#) attended the exercise, and the 'G office' comment at its conclusion was: 'Although the move was carried out in complete darkness over very rough country it was very successful.' Bumping and rattling through the desert night, mounting and dismounting from shadowy trucks, scurrying forward on foot in uncertain and devious directions—all this no doubt was useful training, but in the absence of a real enemy and with some trucks which represented tanks and some which did not, the operation, by daylight, left the troops blown and somewhat bewildered. The worth of these night manoeuvres would be proved later in battle.

By way of group instruction the Engineers introduced a new angle on modern warfare in their demonstration of the use of the mine detector and the lifting of mines, and a detachment from the [Green Howards](#) gave an astonishing exhibition of wire crushing and surmounting obstacles. These diversions, besides training, guards and fatigues, filled days which were as varied as the programme, for heat, cold, dust and rain all could occur within the same twenty-four hours.

On 19 October [Lieutenant-Colonel Varnham](#) made an informal round of visits to the companies of his battalion to say goodbye. Recalled to New Zealand for special duties, he handed over to Major S. F. Hartnell, who had commanded Taranaki Company when the unit was formed; except for a tour of duty at [Maadi](#) as CO of a training battalion which kept him out of the campaigns in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), the new

CO's service had all been with the 19th.

The CO's going was regretted by all, for the battalion owed much to his leadership and influence. As its first commanding officer, its moulding was in his hands, and he soon had reason to be proud of his command. The respect and esteem in which he was (and still is) held by all ranks was a tribute to his sterling qualities.

The rest of the month passed with the daily entry 'Normal Routine' in the unit war diary. There was one constant topic, however, which outshone all others—not far away over the escarpment was a South African brigade, and a Kiwi-Springbok Rugby football match was in the offing. By the end of the month preparations for this match had assumed the proportions of an international test, and a fortnight before the game was played thirty men were detached from their units and reported to Divisional Headquarters for training. The battalion paraded five men for the selector's verdict. Three made the grade—the RSM, Jim Coull, <sup>1</sup> 'Knox' Welsh, <sup>2</sup> and 'Tris' Heggjun. <sup>3</sup>

On 4 November the Commander-in-Chief, [Middle East](#), visited the Box, and in the 19th area a full ceremonial parade of all units of 4 Brigade Group was held. Sir Claude made a quick inspection, presented medals for immediate awards earned in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), took the salute at a march past and departed. Lacking Wavell's pug ruggedness of feature and Wilson's genial bulk, omitting the usual cheery words of encouragement to the troops, the C-in-C earned few words of approbation from the ranks. However, when he pinned the scarlet ribbon of the VC on the tunic of Lieutenant Charles [Upham](#) <sup>4</sup> of [20 Battalion](#), the cheers from all units were spontaneous and full-throated.

On 8 November the anxiously awaited football match was played. The time could not have been more inopportune for other dramatic events were looming, and a day or so before there was an official comment that the Division might have to default the classic encounter. However, the game was played before a gallery of some 8000 enthusiastic spectators in weather reminiscent of a typical New Zealand winter Saturday afternoon. It was cold and showery, and though the field and the grandstand was sandy, stone-sprinkled desert, both the players and those behind the wired-off sidelines put on a strenuous performance. It was a grand game played



in the best traditions. The plucky representatives from the Springbok brigade lost but kept the score down to 8-nil; while war was forgotten, red-hatted generals and balaclavaed privates alike shouted themselves hoarse for a hectic hour when a small leather ball loomed larger than the biggest tank in Rommel's [Afrika Korps](#).

Yet even while the game was in progress, not far away from the Rugby ground the Engineers were stacking newly pointed and sharpened bayonets into bundles of twenty for return to the units of the Division. Preparations for the push were well advanced. The stage was set for a grimmer battle.

In the forthcoming operations both sides would encounter different conditions from those the troops a year earlier had known. The methods of warfare had advanced; science and experience were combining to produce new tactics, new weapons and new moves. Two factors alone remained stable: the desert and the men who, moving like mites across its wastes, formed the opposing armies drawn up in battle array. It was 11 November—a solemn anniversary forgotten in a frenzy of preparation for further sacrifices—when the first of the Division left for the assembly area.

Administrative arrangements on the British side were impressive. The railhead had crept onwards from [Matruh](#), 75 miles west to Bir Misheifa. A pipeline now pumped a steady stream of precious water from [Alexandria](#) to a point some 10 miles short of the new railhead. Its availability so far forward was important, for in the desert no army could operate unless supplies were assured. Nearly 30,000 tons of munitions, fuel and supplies came into the forward area in the brief space of six weeks. Equipment was checked, and once more among the flurry of transport whose tracks twined and intertwined over the troop-infested areas, despatch riders sped bearing packets marked 'Secret'.

New Zealand Division Exercise No. 4, 4 NZ Infantry Brigade Group Operation Order No. 1, [19 Battalion](#) Operation Order No. 1: in rapid succession these were issued for action to all concerned. None had any illusions about the impending operation, for the word 'Exercise' was a security fiction to cloak the real import of the preliminary moves. Five officers and 59 other ranks, nucleus if necessary of a new [19 Battalion](#)—all protesting—marched out to the LOB <sup>5</sup> camp that night, and the following day (12 November) the movement forward began.

The selection of men to be left out of battle was a vexing business to every CO. From those chosen there were always the most bitter objections, yet it was vital to leave behind sufficient good, tried leaders on which the battalion could if necessary rebuild after the battle. Never was this to be more clearly demonstrated than with [20 Battalion](#) which, when almost wiped out at [Belhamed](#), returned to [Baggush](#) where Lieutenant Upham, VC, was among the men left behind; men who later constituted the vital core of a 20th Battalion which was able to take its place with the rest of the brigade in the next campaign some seven months later. The 19th entered the November 1941 campaign under establishment in officers, and Sergeants Roy McLean (Wellington Company), Dave Rench (Wellington West Coast Company), Ron Liddel <sup>6</sup> (Hawke's Bay Company), and 'Snow' Rundle <sup>7</sup> (Taranaki Company) served as platoon commanders.

The advance party, consisting of part of the battalion orders group, pulled out before dawn to rendezvous in the early morning at Kilo 40. At 10.30 a.m. the rest of the battalion, mostly conveyed in the 3-ton trucks of D Section of [4 Reserve MT Company](#) (Captain [Blanch](#) <sup>8</sup>), left [Baggush](#) via the main road, bypassed [Matruh](#) on to the [Siwa](#) track, and finally struck off into the desert to laager 68 miles from the starting point. It was a good opening move, fast, orderly and unhindered. Debussing at 4 p.m., there was still plenty of time to prepare a hot meal before dark and to settle down as snugly as possible in the bleak, open desert for the night. By dusk it was miserably cold and dismal. The battalion remained in laager all the next day, going through each item of equipment for final tests and checking.

Away out in the desert the other units were concentrating according to plan as the Division assembled for battle. Well pleased at last to have an offensive role and happy in a conviction of moral and material superiority over the enemy, each man looked to his arms and waited resolutely for movement to begin again. With adequate air support this campaign might well turn the tide of the German victories. The men who had suffered and survived [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) were among those whose hopes were highest.

Now began the phase in which the New Zealand Division became fully mobile; when the infantryman came to regard a truck and not a trench as his home; when each vehicle became a self-contained caravan carrying its own supplies and its own

reserves. When the campaign began men soon learned how to snatch each brief halt as perhaps the only opportunity they would encounter in the day to brew up, to feed, to make all the necessary arrangements for comfort before movement began again. The drivers of the vehicles responded well to their early training, and the ease and accuracy with which large bodies of transport were moved long distances in desert formation, fully dispersed by day and nose to tail in columns by night, was remarkable. In this campaign the Division was to achieve an outstanding record for desert movement.

At 1 p.m. on 14 November 4 NZ Brigade Group Operation Order No. 2 arrived by despatch rider but still no order came to advance, and it was eight o'clock on the morning of the 15th before the battalion scrambled back into its transport and the wheels again began to turn. Meanwhile, however, senior officers from all units had attended a conference at [Divisional Headquarters](#) to study a model of the ground to be occupied. The force was approaching the Libyan frontier and from now on enemy action could be expected. A heavy ground mist obscured visibility all round, but up above [RAF](#) escort fighters were keeping watch. Their speeding shapes were seen with satisfaction by those who remembered all too vividly the grim days spent moving down from [Macedonia](#) when the [Luftwaffe](#), unobstructed in the air, had dealt mercilessly with our transport.

When the early morning mist evaporated the full panorama of mechanised movement was unfolded. It was a breathtaking spectacle. As far as the eye could see, across the stony wastes crept rattling lorries, truck quads, portées and guns. They kept interval and distance for safety, and hour after hour rolled steadily forward with nothing to disturb the pattern of their progress except when a solitary, darting despatch rider cut through the tracks on the shortest route to his moving destination. A strict wireless silence was enforced, and so far the advance towards enemy territory seemed to have been undetected.

The going was rough, but 4 Brigade Group moved 55 miles that day and on halting learned the news that all future movements would be made during darkness. In the laager, in enveloping night and intensifying cold, the men dug in, then slept fitfully and uncomfortably in the holes they had made. The weather was bitter but worse was yet to come.

Caution characterised the next moves for the frontier was close. Reconnaissance parties were pushed forward, and on the night of 16–17 November, in torrential rain, and on the night of the 17th–18th, half the unit moved at a time in close column to an area already marked out. An electrical storm raging in the distance made the drivers' task doubly difficult—vivid lightning flashes seared straining eyes then Stygian darkness swallowed up every trace of the vehicle ahead. It required nerves of steel to keep going steadily forward but the mass of vehicles kept on, each one handled by instinct sharpened by long practice. There were no major hold-ups, and on each move the whole battalion convoy arrived in its appointed area before dawn. At daylight the trucks dispersed and the unit laagered at Alam el Seiyif. The position was close to the Wire and about half-way between the enemy frontier posts of [Capuzzo](#) to the north and [Maddalena](#) to the south.

The eve of the British offensive had arrived. General Cunningham's forces were now in position for the first phase of the new operation. The capture of [Cyrenaica](#) was its object. Forward aerodromes sited in the [Western Desert](#), where the [RAF](#) could screen [Malta](#) convoys and watch over the uncertain destiny of that heroic little island, were an urgent necessity. These would be available once [Cyrenaica](#) was cleared. The initial role of [13 Corps](#), of which the Division was part, was to isolate and later destroy the frontier posts. Thirtieth Corps to the south, commanded by Lieutenant-General C. W. M. Norrie (now Sir Willoughby Norrie, Governor-General of New Zealand), would deal with the enemy armour and attempt to relieve [Tobruk](#). The following night, 18–19 November, after a cold move of 16 miles, the battalion crossed the Wire and laagered in [Libya](#).

The approach march had now ended and the Eighth Army, in co-operation with the Navy and [RAF](#), was fully on the offensive. The same night the Navy shelled enemy fortifications at [Halfaya](#) and at daylight the land battle began. Thirtieth Corps, which was strong in armoured formations, delivered the main thrust for Rommel's panzers were mostly concentrated towards the coast and therefore in that corps' area of operations. The enemy was clearly surprised, and news from all sectors of the [Eighth Army](#) front was good.

Thirteenth Corps carried out its preliminary tasks without difficulty, and all in all operations progressed well. The Army Commander now decided to push ahead with

the second stage of the plan, which was to link up with the forces in [Tobruk](#). The enemy forward airfield south of Sidi Rezegh escarpment, one of the ridges which stepped up from the coast to the inland plateau and commanded the main line of communication to the west, had been captured by [7 Armoured Brigade](#).

Thirteenth Corps had now swung right towards the coast, and [2 NZ Division](#) had begun to move to the north-east when a report was received that, 20 miles away at Bir el Hamarin, a force of 200 German tanks was approaching. Shortly afterwards successive waves of [RAF](#) fighters were seen heading north-west, and it was later reported that our own armoured forces, with good co-operation from the [RAF](#), had the situation well in hand. Fourth Brigade Group, however, remained in position, put its area in a state of defence and, with the squadron of I tanks which had come under command the previous day, prepared to deal with a threatened attack. An enemy reconnaissance plane flew over the brigade area several times but at last paid the price of its curiosity and was brought down by AA fire. This incident, plus the constant [RAF](#) activity, was most heartening. Clearly the [Luftwaffe](#) was to be well taken care of here.

The expected enemy armoured attack did not develop, and on the morning of the 21st, in biting cold weather, all units stood by their transport awaiting word to move. The journey began again at 1.30 p.m., and once more in full daylight the whole Brigade Group, plus its attached tanks from 8 Royal Tank Regiment, rumbled purposefully forward across the desert, heading for [Menastir](#), 45 miles away to the north-east. The task allotted it was to block the [Bardia- Tobruk](#) road and prevent the enemy from withdrawing his forces to the west. The move was uneventful until, when passing the Libyan Omar, the formation was shelled, but the advance was not checked though some bursts fell among [20 Battalion](#).

Earlier in the day wireless silence had been lifted and operators on the brigade links heard their first reports of offensive action. At dusk all vehicles moved into tight formation and in darkness continued to make good progress until 9 p.m. Obstacles about which there had been no previous intelligence were then encountered. An extensive area of deep mud resulting from the torrential rains of the 16th–17th and an anti-tank ditch 12 feet deep by 15 feet wide had to be negotiated. It was a pitch black night with drizzling rain, and considerable delay and scattering resulted. The drivers of the vehicles were equal to the occasion and safely brought the whole of

the brigade to the other side, but it was an anxious night for the officers responsible for guiding and control. By 1 a.m. on the 22nd all units were through and reforming, and the move continued until 4 a.m. when the destination, Bir ez Zemla, was reached.

Here the brigade deployed and 18 and 20 Battalions were immediately engaged by the enemy forces round [Bardia](#). A wedge was quickly driven between positions near the frontier and those to the west. The 18th then sent fighting patrols to within 200 yards of the [Bardia](#) forward defences while the 20th, with a block across the main road, attacked north-west. Both units were successful and about 150 prisoners, a quantity of motor transport, two armoured cars, and two 88-millimetre guns were captured. The 19th Battalion was held in reserve until the afternoon, and while awaiting on the escarpment had a grandstand view of the engagement. Shells from our guns shrieked over their heads on the way to [Bardia](#). Below them a company of the 20th could be seen at grips with the enemy. Yet, despite these distractions, the noise, and the potential danger, several footballs were brought out and the men punted them around on the flat sandy area as though nothing untoward was happening. Had the unit been there for another few hours no doubt goalposts would have been erected.

About an hour before dark the 19th moved along the escarpment at Bir el Baheira to relieve the Divisional Cavalry, who were guarding the tracks leading down from the high ground. Before nightfall the change-over had been successfully effected, and at 11 p.m. a reconnaissance patrol commanded by Lieutenant [Simpson](#)<sup>9</sup> was sent out to contact Brigade Headquarters. It reported back with the news that [20 Battalion](#), after a successful attack with 'I' tanks at [Menastir](#), was now mopping up and that [18 Battalion](#) had moved in behind Wellington Company. The same day 5 Brigade occupied [Capuzzo](#) while 7 Indian Infantry Brigade took [Sidi Omar](#).

In other sectors, however, [Eighth Army](#)'s initial successes were seriously threatened. The whole operation had resolved itself into a series of scattered conflicts being fought simultaneously and many miles apart. Rommel had summoned his full armoured strength in an attempt to deny us the commanding positions we were clearly attempting to gain, and the [30 Corps](#)' spearhead was in danger of being cut off. At [Sidi Rezegh](#) the situation was critical; attacks by [15 Panzer Division](#) and [21](#)

Panzer Division had been beaten off at great cost to our own armoured formations. The sorties from **Tobruk** by 70 Division, which began at dawn on the 21st, had progressed more slowly than was

A captured German motor-cycle combination at Ed Duda—J. Cowles and Noel Christensen in front



**A captured German motor-cycle combination at Ed Duda—J. Cowles and Noel Christensen in front**



Battalion positions on Jebel el Emside in Syria

**Battalion positions on Jebel el Emside in Syria**



Entrenched at Minqar Qaim—Sgt J. Hough

**Entrenched at Minqar Qaim—Sgt J. Hough**

Wellington Company advancing against the *Ariete Division* on 3 July 1942



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Army Form M, post.	
FIELD MEDICAL CARD	
S.T. Davis 100-100-100	No. <i>100-100-100</i> Date <i>10-7-42</i> Unit <i>100-100-100</i> Rank <i>Private</i> Branch <i>Medical</i> Division <i>100-100-100</i> Date of admission <i>10-7-42</i> Date of discharge <i>10-7-42</i> Name of hospital <i>100-100-100</i> Name of physician <i>100-100-100</i> Name of surgeon <i>100-100-100</i> Name of anesthetist <i>100-100-100</i> Name of pathologist <i>100-100-100</i> Name of radiologist <i>100-100-100</i> Name of other specialist <i>100-100-100</i> Name of attending physician <i>100-100-100</i> Name of hospital <i>100-100-100</i> Name of city <i>100-100-100</i> Name of state <i>100-100-100</i> Name of country <i>100-100-100</i>
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This card is to be filled out by the medical officer in attendance. Field medical cards to be filled out by the medical officer in attendance.	

Major's Field Medical Card

**Major's Field Medical Card**





*Duda, other ranks' mascot, with  
Pte E. C. Wheeler*

**Duda, other ranks' mascot, with Pte E. C. Wheeler**



*Major, official unit mascot, with  
Lt J. E. May, July 1942*

**Major, official unit mascot, with Lt J. E. May, July 1942**



*Major's grave in Italy*

**Major's grave in Italy**

expected and had proved costly in men and tanks. Expecting to fight their way out between two Italian divisions which had been besieging the fortress, they found themselves confronting the Afrika Division which had moved into the sector between times.

On the 22nd Rommel continued his counter-offensive and his panzers drove our armour off [Sidi Rezegh](#). On the 23rd, advancing further along the escarpment, they overwhelmed and virtually destroyed 5 South African Brigade. In the face of these reverses the final phase of the [Tobruk](#) operation was postponed. Thirteenth Corps' role was revised and on the 23rd, leaving 5 Brigade to deal with [Sollum](#) and [Musaid](#) and to contain the [Bardia- Halfaya](#) area, the rest of the New Zealand Division moved westwards to link up with 6 Brigade, which while advancing along Trigh [Capuzzo](#) captured part of the headquarters of the Afrika Korps and was now approaching the area of the German successes. The 19th Battalion led 4 Brigade Group (less [20 Battalion](#)) during this move, and at first light 44 Royal Tank Regiment joined up with the column and came under command immediately. At a conference held at 6.30 a.m. [Brigadier Inglis](#) issued his orders for an attack on the enemy airfield and supply dumps at [Gambut](#), 20 miles to the west.

The approach march to [Gambut](#) was tricky, for while the brigade was moving along the escarpment overlooking the [Bardia- Tobruk](#) road, it was itself overlooked by a higher escarpment to the south. The shortcomings of this route were clearly demonstrated when, with the brigade still approximately 10 miles from its objective, enemy guns and what appeared to be tanks opened up from the left flank. Our own artillery replied immediately and the lorried infantry quickly debussed, dispersed, and lay down while the duel went on. The 19th Battalion received immediate orders to move two companies—Taranaki (Captain Everist <sup>10</sup>) and Wellington West Coast (Captain E. W. S. Williams), plus one section of Bren carriers and two troops of 46 Battery (Captain J. W. [Moodie](#) <sup>11</sup>) from [4 Field Regiment](#) under command—up on to the escarpment to drive off the enemy there and act as a flank guard while the main body of the brigade pushed on to [Gambut](#).

This small covering force, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell, moved up through a wadi until it made the top of the escarpment, then with the Bren carriers patrolling 500–600 yards in front of [Wellington West Coast Company](#)

and with Taranaki Company covering the left flank, skirted along the ridge. There was no sign of the enemy and it was assumed that he had withdrawn westwards. Other enemy mechanised forces could, however, be seen in the distance withdrawing from [Gambut](#).

Keeping on a westerly course until noon, Hartnell's small force then approached an enemy column of about forty vehicles moving west from Bir el Garabat and covered by what looked like four medium tanks in hull-down positions. The 46th Battery engaged this target and also successfully dealt with some more enemy vehicles moving north along Trigh Capuzzo. At this juncture Brigade Headquarters reported that the way was clear to advance, but in view of the fact that the brigade would be unlikely to be shelled from the escarpment while the enemy was being engaged by his group, Hartnell decided to make no forward move until the enemy withdrew. This they did some twenty minutes later, and once more the force moved westwards.

At 2.45 the enemy force appeared again and by skilful use of every depression and wadi avoided our artillery fire until they finally disappeared over the escarpment to the north-west. At 3.30 p.m. the advance was resumed, and at this stage the force was joined by the remnants of an artillery supply column which had been dispersed by enemy tanks to the south-east. After a further advance of some 9000 yards, approximately eighty vehicles were seen in the sunset to the west and a halt was called while the identity of this force was ascertained.

Wireless touch, which had been lost since early afternoon, was now established with Brigade, and it was learned that [Gambut](#) had been successfully occupied. It was notified also that [20 Battalion](#) should be in the vicinity of the area in which the force was located. As nothing had been seen of that unit, it was thought that the vehicles to the west might be those of the 20th. One or two 25-pounder shells fired at this time added weight to this assumption that it was a British unit. A Bren carrier under command of the Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Jock Thodey, went out to investigate and was fired upon when approximately 400 yards off, thus leaving no doubt that the force was hostile. Immediately a gun battle began, both sides commencing a vigorous programme. The situation was reported by wireless and permission asked to attack after dark. Brigade Headquarters, however, ordered Colonel Hartnell to disengage immediately and to rejoin the brigade group. A guide

was sent out to bring his force in.

At 8.45 p.m. a defensive position on the perimeter of the airfield was taken up, and having successfully countered the enemy's threat to the brigade's left flank, the force laagered for the night. No casualties in either men or vehicles had been sustained during the day's operations. The rest of the unit had taken part in the occupation of the airfield and was already dug in as follows: Wellington Company (Major [Woolcott](#)<sup>12</sup>) on the left of Brigade Headquarters, Hawke's Bay (Captain D. S. Thomson) and Headquarters Company (Major D. K. McLauchlan) on the right of Brigade Headquarters. They had been mortared and shelled during the evening but had managed to construct adequate cover. No. 12 Platoon (Lieutenant Y. K. Fleming) patrolled down the escarpment to the north during the night.

Next day (24 November) the battalion area was shelled intermittently and a violent explosion in the direction of the escarpment caused one of our patrolling Bren carriers commanded by Corporal Frank [England](#)<sup>13</sup> to go out to investigate. It proved to be a Dodge 8-cwt truck from a British unit which had struck a minefield, but a group of enemy was also spotted in position by a cave and later engaged by a party under Captain [Quilter](#).<sup>14</sup> They surrendered after a sharp exchange of fire. When brought in and interrogated they were found to be fifty-eight members of a German engineer unit whose task was to mine the escarpment road. [England](#) at once returned to the road and, leaving his carrier and crew at the foot of the escarpment, reconnoitred forward on foot. On reaching the crest he was startled to see an enemy gun and crew, plus some transport, pulling out. He was unobserved and, lacking any means of reporting back to our artillery and without hope of hindering their withdrawal, he coolly took a photograph as the gun drew abreast of him.

From the observation made the day before by Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell's flank guard, it was clear that the presence of enemy to the south of the airfield was due to his anxiety to keep open the road on to the high ground and so enable any of his troops still hiding in the vicinity to retire along Trigh Capuzzo. A close watch was therefore kept on that area.

The unit Bren carriers kept constant patrols forward of the battalion FDLs. They reported the presence of several enemy parties and during the day engaged one small force, captured twenty-two prisoners, and inflicted some casualties on the

enemy.

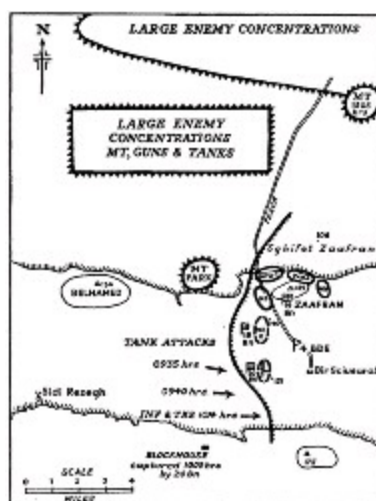
The [Gambut](#) airfield was strewn with wrecked enemy machines, many burnt-out aircraft being eloquent testimony to the efficiency of the [RAF](#). At least one of these aircraft was a British Hurricane—complete with German markings—which had been captured and used by the enemy. There was still some booty to be had in the captured positions around the airfield. Interesting souvenirs picked up included a supply of [Luftwaffe](#) shirts of synthetic wool and several dress uniforms belonging to senior officers—uniforms which no doubt they had hoped to wear on their triumphal entry into [Cairo](#). As a welcome addition to and change from the scanty ration of rusty, chlorinated water, a number of wicker-covered flagons of Chianti and many bottles of Vichy water were also found. This tangible evidence of a successful operation boosted up the already high morale of the troops, for so far the campaign had been a popular venture and in the battalion at all events there was a feeling of great confidence and cheerfulness.

Fourth Brigade Group remained in position on the [Gambut](#) airfield until 3 p.m. (24 November) and then moved unopposed 18 miles to a line west of [Ed Dbana](#). During this move [20 Battalion](#) rejoined the brigade and reported a further successful engagement in which it had captured a good bag of prisoners. The brigade laagered for the night. As soon as it had laid out company areas, [19 Battalion](#) sent out patrols. One of these sighted a camp of some 32 tents tucked into a wadi on the southern escarpment. An outpost was established to watch the area but it appeared to be unoccupied, and apart from some Very lights in the distance no enemy activity or movement was seen.

That evening at Brigade Headquarters a conference of commanding officers was held and information given on events further west. Rommel's counter-stroke had been followed up by powerful armoured thrusts eastwards, and the panzers were now attempting to re-establish their line of frontier defences. The recapture of the dominating features south-east of [Tobruk](#) was imperative, and that night [4 Brigade](#) received orders to make a dawn attack on [Zaafran](#). This feature was about four miles away to the west and in line with Point 175 on the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, where [6 Brigade](#) was already heavily engaged.

The night move was made on a three and a half mile front. The 19th Battalion

was on the right, **18 Battalion** in the centre, and **20 Battalion** on the left. At dawn on the 25th **18 Battalion** attacked, and with the assistance of I tanks—which were roughly handled by the enemy anti-tank guns—took the position and sent back three German officers and 108 other ranks to the 19th. The brigade group



4 Brigade position, Zaafran, 25 November 1941  
HB 2 and Tara 2 are the positions taken by Hawke's Bay and Taranaki companies after the advance by 18 and 20 Battalions

#### **4 Brigade positions, Zaafran, 25 November 1941**

HB 2 and Tara 2 are the positions taken by Hawke's Bay and Taranaki companies after the advance by 18 and 20 Battalions

then dug in just south of **Zaafran** and a heavy duel soon developed between our own and the enemy artillery. The 19th Battalion Bren carriers went out as forward observation posts and did some excellent work in locating enemy artillery positions; one carrier with Corporal Frank **Newton** <sup>15</sup> in command was responsible for bringing our artillery on to five guns, all of which were later knocked out.

The rocky ground at **Zaafran** made deep digging impossible and sangars of stones were built around the fighting slits. They were poor protection, and it was fortunate that there was no enemy air attack against the position that day. Accurate mortar fire, however, was directed on to our forward posts and there were some casualties, including three men from 4 Platoon **27 MG Battalion** who were attached to the 19th at this time.

On the high ground towards the Blockhouse on Sidi Rezegh escarpment the enemy was holding strongly fortified positions, and his artillery commanded both the areas held by New Zealand troops—Point 175, won and consolidated by 6 Brigade

during the previous two days, and [Zaafran](#) which 4 Brigade had just cleared of enemy. Our artillery silenced the German guns on the ridge by 9 a.m. and at 9.30 broke up an infantry attack developing against 20 Battalion's position. A little later what appeared to be a general advance by enemy tanks was also stopped. The New Zealand gunners, despite ammunition restrictions, were doing fine work and their accurate and efficient fire made the enemy most cautious. However, it seemed obvious that an armoured assault on the position was impending and a call was made for bomber support. Here was the first test of the new ground-to-air procedure—though the ultimate result was good it did not work out quite according to the book. The message was sent, the recognition strips put out and the flares prepared: the planes were expected at 1.30 p.m. As the hour approached all stood by expectantly: 1.30 came and went, 2.30, 3 p.m., then there was a steady drone from above—but it came from the wrong direction. The drone turned into a roar as a flight of Ju87s supported by fighters snarled in from the west. Locating their target, they passed over the battalion, turned, and came back to dive-bomb the brigade area. No casualties resulted; fortunately the call for bomber support turned out to be unnecessary as the expected tank battle did not develop that day. At all events no [RAF](#) planes were available as the air force was fully employed against the panzers advancing on the frontier.

At seven o'clock that evening [Brigadier Inglis](#) returned from [Divisional Headquarters](#) with orders for an attack on [Belhamed](#), to coincide with an assault on [Sidi Rezegh](#) and then [Ed Duda](#) by 6 Brigade. The battalion took no part in this attack but was left in reserve near Brigade Headquarters and the grouped transport remaining at [Zaafran](#). As the men of the 19th watched their sister battalions go forward, some were envious, but the fates were kind to the unit for many men of those battalions did not return from this attack.

The 18th and 20th Battalions were again successful in a silent night attack which demoralised the enemy. By 11 p.m. they were consolidating on the [Belhamed](#) escarpment with many German prisoners on their hands and many dead Germans lying about. Their tenure of the feature was soon to be furiously contested, for the enemy was well aware of its importance. Soon the cold, uncomfortable wind which swept across its bleak slopes was joined by a lethal rain of mortar bombs and shells, which poured in from three directions and made the gain an uncomfortable one

indeed. By daylight both battalions had suffered grievous losses but hung on grimly, fighting off enemy counter-attacks and improving their positions throughout the morning of 26 November.

In the afternoon the [RAF](#) sent over two sorties to deal with enemy armoured concentrations forming up to counter-attack. The situation was still grave, however, for while 4 Brigade was clinging stoutly to its objective, 6 Brigade was encountering devastating opposition at Sidi Rezegh. For that brigade's secondary objective, [Ed Duda](#), there were no troops to spare. Accordingly, new plans were made that day.

On the afternoon of the 26th units from the [Tobruk](#) garrison made a sortie from their perimeter and captured [Ed Duda](#). To [19 Battalion](#)—the only infantry unit in 4 and 6 Brigades which still remained at full strength—was allotted the role of linking [Eighth Army](#) with the forward troops from the garrison. The operation involved a long and dangerous advance through enemy territory. Its success was vital to the Army Commander's plan. [Belhamed](#) was still firmly in our hands, but the furious fighting there and at [Sidi Rezegh](#) was evidence of the anxiety of the Axis command about the progress of events in the sector. No easy operation was expected.

Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell called together his orders group and in the gathering dusk outlined his plan. It was to be a night attack with I tanks, the first operation of its kind ever undertaken. The idea had not been relished by the tank commanders for—as the whole campaign was to prove to our cost—there had been too little training in co-operation between infantry and tanks and as yet the two arms had achieved little co-ordination with, or confidence in, each other.

The Brigade Commander's insistence that the tanks, despite their objections, should precede the battalion and make their best speed to [Ed Duda](#) while the infantry followed up was justified, as this operation was perhaps the most outstanding success in the campaign. The fourteen Matildas charging through the enemy positions in pitch darkness were thought likely to leave him thoroughly shaken and off balance before he faced the following infantry. This proved to be the case.

Ten thousand yards was the distance to the objective and the intervening area was expected to be strongly held by entrenched infantry with artillery support. Only

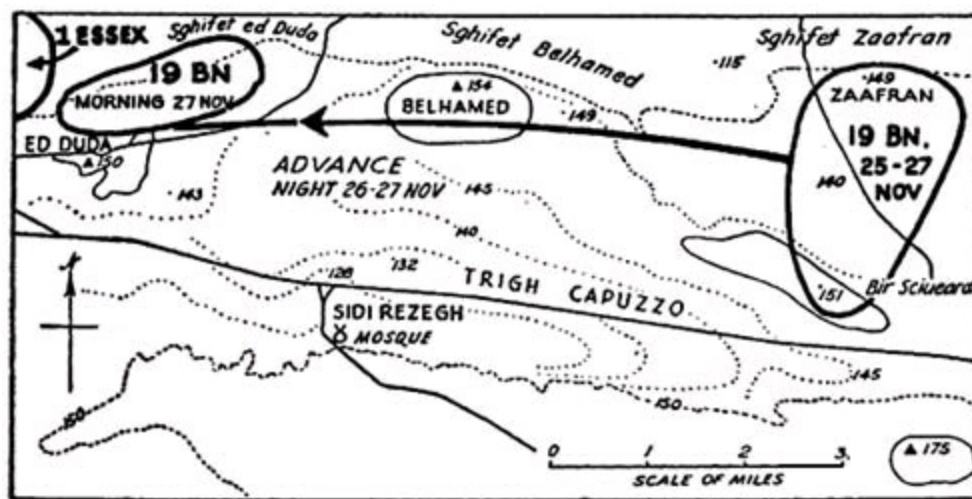


one truck per company could be taken to carry weapons and ammunition; the wounded would have to be picked up later. News from the battalions on [Belhamed](#) was not reassuring; they had had heavy casualties. Sixth Brigade, too, was being severely mauled. The 19th could expect no better treatment and at least 50 per cent casualties were likely. But at all costs [Ed Duda](#) must be reached before morning. The advance would begin at 9.30 p.m. The whole operation would be a severe test and would call for the utmost effort from everyone. Only fit men would be allowed to attempt the task; those who for any reason might not make the distance were to be left behind.

The 'I' section under Lieutenant Thodey moved out at once to the start line to lay guide tapes. Company commanders went back to their troops to brief them for the operation; reserve ammunition, anti-tank rifles, etc., were loaded on to a company truck. The 3-inch mortars were carefully packed on Bren carriers and, with all preliminary work done, the 19th settled down to wait for zero hour.

The wait was not free from apprehension, though there was a good omen for the attack when a German reconnaissance plane was shot down in Taranaki Company's area, on the extreme left flank of the battalion position, as that company began to move in. By 9 p.m. all companies were on the start line, and during the cold half hour spent there three shells landing right on the tape made it appear as if the attack had been spotted before it had begun. It was a chilly night and the troops, lying behind a low sandy ridge, were unusually silent. Except for the sound of blowing on cold hands and the impatient whirring of the engines of the ten Bren carriers and the fourteen tanks, there was a complete absence of the usual sounds associated with so large a body of men. It was an eerie wait.

The suspense seemed to increase determination, for when in bright moonlight the first three Matildas of 44 Royal Tank Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel Yeo) set off into the night, the din of their rattling, rumbling advance made martial music which stirred the blood of the battalion. When the second wave of tanks started up, the unit shook out into extended order and stumbled forward in their wake. On the flanks and in the rear the unit Bren carriers (Lieutenant [Semple](#) <sup>16</sup>) gave protection to the advancing



19 Battalion advance to Ed Duda, night 26-27 November

**19 Battalion advance to Ed Duda, night 26-27 November**

infantry. At zero hour artillery opened up with a concentration on the German positions on the left front of the attack, but thereafter fired only every ten minutes, when a troop salvo on a series of selected points off the path of the attack gave a check to direction to those who had the difficult task of keeping the battalion on its bearing once the fighting started.

The experiences of those who took part in this attack varied considerably. Some encountered brief but fierce opposition which was dealt with by bayonet charges; some saw numbers of prisoners surrender; some stumbled over an enemy artillery position; others saw no action at all except the criss-crossing of tracer on their flanks and in the rear. As the advance went on it was evident that the roar of the oncoming tanks had chilled the spines of the enemy; their opposition was negligible and their firing wild. In underground shelters the 'invincible German infantry' and their Italian allies cowered, too demoralised in many cases to come out when called upon to surrender. Those off the main axis of the advance waited till the tanks had passed then fired frantically into the rear, expecting (as was normal) that the infantry would be following some distance behind.

The enemy casualties were considerable—ours were nil. Though there was no time to stop or to go back to mop up, bayonets were used effectively throughout the advance, and grenades were tossed into each trench or dugout and under each enemy truck. The prisoners were all disarmed and waved back towards Zaafran. On the way some New Zealanders, plus a few men from armoured units, were released

from an enemy PW cage. Much equipment was destroyed en route; in fact, the only halt made during the long march was to put out of action eight large-calibre field guns whose barrels loomed up suddenly in the track of Wellington West Coast Company. These presented a problem for the infantry, until with sledge-hammers borrowed from the tanks, they made short work of sight brackets, traversing handles and the breech-block threads.

By 1 a.m., breathless and almost unbelieving, the battalion found itself at [Ed Duda](#). The moon had sunk, the night was pitch black and bitterly cold, but contact was made immediately with 1 Essex Battalion's forward posts.

Lieutenant [Hodge](#)<sup>17</sup> said of his platoon (No. 12) during the attack:

Tense, but eager to come to grips with the pockets of resistance likely to be encountered in the line of advance, we moved steadily forward. The sight of an ammunition dump going up on the ridge to our right was an inspiring one, but the advancing troops did not waver, nor were they to be deflected from their course. The fire had become heavier, and tracers pierced the advancing troops from numerous positions on the flanks.

There came the time when flanking fire had reduced in intensity, and I felt, as those who were with me felt, that we had come through and all that remained for us to do was to strike hard and fast. Small groups of prisoners appeared at odd intervals. These we pushed behind us, stopping only to blast the interiors of cut-and-covers from which stray shots were fired.

Then we literally blundered on to a group of big guns, whose barrels made grotesque outlines in the darkening sky. Bayoneted men bore grim testimony to the fact that they had been dealt with by the flanking platoons. Spiking of the guns did not hold us up for any great length of time, and we moved on.

It was very late when we formed up on the ridge at [Ed Duda](#), it may have been about 1 o'clock in the morning, and it was bitterly cold. That morning we dug in on the reverse slope of the ridge, close to what later became Tank HQ. Almost before we had time to accustom ourselves to our new surroundings, we were being heavily shelled from the escarpment in the direction of [Sidi Rezegh](#).

The tanks had opened up the way well. They had done no firing for the flashes from their guns would have marked them out for the German anti-tank guns. Now they were on the spot to give support should the battalion be counter-attacked, and the smooth success of the operation had done much to engender confidence between our infantry and armour. In the dawn as the 19th dispersed and dug in along the east of the escarpment, each passing tank was cheered by the elated troops. The unit, tired but triumphant, now literally joined hands with the Tommies who had so recently broken out of the long-beleaguered fortress. There was some shelling immediately dawn broke and the position showed grim signs of earlier fighting on the ridge and along the [El Adem](#) road below. No time was lost in digging in. This done, almost the first order received was to clean up the litter in the area.

A quiet day was spent on the 27th. Enemy shelling and mortaring of the battalion's positions was kept down by retaliation from [Tobruk](#), where the British artillery replied with an effective programme of counter-battery fire. The Germans at this stage were using some heavy-calibre guns, and during the afternoon a 210-millimetre shell failing to explode on impact ricocheted round the wadi in [Wellington](#) Company's area, then finally rolled down the slope to come to rest underneath the company truck loaded with reserve ammunition. Private Trevor [Gill](#) <sup>18</sup> without hesitation jumped in, started up the engine, and very gingerly eased the truck away while the rest of 9 Platoon waited in their slit trenches with bated breath. However, the shell was apparently a dud for it lay dormant in the area for the rest of the unit's stay at [Ed Duda](#). Fragments from one of these heavy shells also damaged two of our Bren carriers and wounded Sergeant Earl [Coleman](#) <sup>19</sup> and Private John [Rippin](#) <sup>20</sup> (later died of wounds). The two carriers were recovered next day by Private Brian [Buchanan](#), <sup>21</sup> who worked on them for four hours. During the whole of the time the position was under enemy fire, and Buchanan's cool performance out in the open not only added the carriers to our strength but gave strength to the morale of the troops in whose area this outstanding job was done.

During the day defensive positions were dug and prisoners rounded up; the day's bag totalled 265 Germans and Italians. They no longer showed any stomach for the fight and almost eagerly hurried off to the PW cage. One of the more notable captures was a British major who had been showing considerable interest in Taranaki Company's positions. Corporal V. C. [Gordon](#), <sup>22</sup> suspecting him of fifth-

column activity, marched him ignominiously to Battalion Headquarters. The tank brigadier happened to be on the spot at the time and recognised the prisoner as one of his squadron commanders. He was forthwith released.

By nightfall the situation was firm. Taranaki Company was entrenched in a covering position above the roads running from [Ed Duda](#) and the [Bardia- Tobruk](#) road, while the rest of the unit dug in (or rather built stone sangars as the position was on solid rock) alongside the Essex Battalion. At [Zaafran](#) 19 Battalion's B Echelon transport, with the remainder of the brigade transport, prepared to move into [Tobruk](#).

At [Ed Duda](#) there had been many amusing incidents during the first day of occupation. The enemy was clearly unaware of just what had taken place, and there was considerable confusion among his transport using the route along the Trigh Capuzzo. The second-in-command Wellington Company (Captain Les [Dugleby](#)<sup>23</sup>) took the company cooks out on a patrol and returned shortly afterwards with a German truck, complete with driver. The unsuspecting Jerry was held up and captured as he drove blissfully along what had apparently been considered a safe route. He was only one of a big bag of 550 enemy who fell into the hands of the brigade as a result of the 19th's night attack.

Meanwhile, five miles away to the south, another act in the bloodiest and most exhausting phase of a hard campaign was being carried through by the battle-weary battalions of 6 Brigade. Cold steel decided the issue, and despite the stubborn resistance of the well-sited, well-entrenched, and well-armed German and Italian infantry, after four days of incessant fighting they broke. [Sidi Rezegh](#) was once more clear of the enemy.

The New Zealand Division now occupied the two larger of three escarpments that stepped back from [Tobruk](#). Fourth Brigade was established on the high ground stretching from [Zaafran](#) to [Belhamed](#), then across the [El Adem](#) road, and was in contact with the [Tobruk](#) forces on Ed Duda. Sixth Brigade at great cost was holding Point 175 and [Sidi Rezegh](#) on the second escarpment. But from the third, southernmost escarpment the enemy still threatened these positions. His observation was good and his artillery very active, but his infantry were not happy. Intercepted wireless messages from the German commander recorded his urgent

requests for armoured support. It soon became clear that Rommel and his panzers were returning from their raid into [Egypt](#).

Fifth Brigade, still around the [Bardia](#) sector, had passed from the Division's command and was out of wireless touch. Its determined stand on the 27th and the overrunning of its headquarters by the German armour at Sidi Azeiz were not learned of till later.

On the 28th the first German panzers attacked British armour protecting the southern flank of the Division, and the armoured battle swung southwards. Lorried infantry attacked the Division late the same afternoon. On the 29th the capture of General von Ravenstein by the 'I' section of [21 Battalion](#) led to a clear appreciation of what was in store. The General's marked maps and official documents gave away the enemy's intention. The captured plans showed that there was little time for counter preparation, and the situation in the area held by 6 Brigade, whose decimated units were battalions in little more than name, was extremely grave. The success of 4 Brigade's operations had removed the immediate threat from the north, but from the west, south, and east the whole sector was open and vulnerable to the enemy's renewed offensive.

On the morning of 28 November orders were received by liaison officer from [Tobruk](#) Force headquarters to the effect that the enemy was using a desert road between the Trigh Capuzzo and [Ed Duda](#) and that [19 Battalion](#) would, with the assistance of a squadron of I tanks, deny him this route. Accordingly, at 10 a.m. a force commanded by Major McLauchlan and consisting of Wellington Company (Major Woolcott) and Wellington West Coast Company (Captain Williams), plus some headquarters personnel, set out with three I tanks in support to cut the Trigh Capuzzo and establish a 'box' across the route. By 11.30 the force had advanced towards [Sidi Rezegh](#) and was in sight of some troops which were believed to be part of 6 Brigade. Just before contact was established a wireless message was received calling off the operation and ordering the force to return to [Ed Duda](#) with all speed. From the headquarters position at [Ed Duda](#) a large enemy concentration, including armour, was seen moving west. It was quickly decided that McLauchlan's force should come in, not only for its own protection, but also because it would be needed if an attack developed against the [Ed Duda](#) position.

During the march back enemy artillery and mortars fired on the force, and Captain Williams, marching at the rear of his company, was killed. The same shell also wounded his orderly-room clerk, Lance-Corporal [Green](#),<sup>24</sup> who subsequently died in hospital in [Egypt](#). The death of Errol Williams was a severe blow to the unit. He had been the 19th's first adjutant. His own rigid standards of duty and discipline, his superb physical fitness and the jealousy with which he guarded it, were an inspiration to the 800-odd men over whom, by personal example and official appointment, he was able to exercise so splendid an influence. An officer of the New Zealand Staff Corps, he epitomised the highest qualities of the traditional British soldier, and as a man amongst men his code and character earned for him a respect far deeper than that derived through mere rank. His company buried him in the open desert at [Ed Duda](#) and, together with the whole unit, mourned the loss of a leader and a friend. His unselfish and unswerving devotion to duty and to the unit he loved left a permanent mark in the battalion which, collectively and individually, was richer by reason of his service with it.

His dog 'Major' maintained a pathetic vigil below the ridge over which he had last seen his master disappear. He refused to be moved until at last word came for withdrawal to [Baggush](#), then he took his accustomed place on the Company Headquarters' pick-up and for the rest of his service stayed staunchly loyal to Wellington West Coast Company. On return to [Ed Duda](#) the company was taken over by Captain Les Dugleby.

The afternoon of 28 November began with a confusion of orders and counter-orders, for it became apparent that the German counter-offensive was developing and reports of enemy troop concentrations were beginning to pour in from all points. The sally made towards [Sidi Rezegh](#) during the morning had revealed a strong movement of German artillery from west to east above that feature. Large concentrations of enemy armour were reported both from the north-east and south-west. Rommel was about to strike.

At 3 p.m. sudden orders were issued for a force from the battalion to move to the north of [Belhamed](#), to be ready to occupy a position on the high ground around [Zaafraan](#). Hawke's Bay and Taranaki Companies were hurriedly taken out of their areas and, together with part of Headquarters Company and Battalion Headquarters,

set off under command of Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell for the new area. They pulled out in small groups for the enemy was shelling the area steadily, and the obvious withdrawal of a large force might have had disastrous results had it been observed. Once beneath the escarpment, however, the force was joined by tanks and shook out into a dispersed formation. The tanks led, Hawke's Bay Company followed at 600 yards distance, then came Battalion Headquarters, Taranaki Company, and the Headquarters Company detachment. At 5 p.m. a halt was called and a defensive position laid out below the escarpment north of [Belhamed](#).

Some nearby caves provided part of the force with the best and most comfortable cover the tired men had encountered throughout the campaign. They crowded in, brewed up, and settled down for a well-deserved sleep—but their rest was shortlived. At 10 p.m. a runner arrived from Brigade ordering the move to [Zaafran](#) without delay. The enemy's armour was known to be approaching the area in which the battalion was lying up, so rubbing the sleep from their eyes, the troops stumbled on once more towards the 4 Brigade position, arriving just after 1 a.m.

For the rest of the campaign the 19th was divided into two groups. Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell's force at [Zaafran](#) was known as 'Zaaforce', and those left at [Ed Duda](#) under command of Major McLauchlan as 'Dudaforce'.

'Zaaforce' had scarcely completed moving off when, at 3.13 p.m., the German artillery put down a heavy 'stonk' on the [Ed Duda](#) positions, and this was followed by an attack with tanks and infantry. The main weight of the assault, which was kept up till 7 p.m., was taken by 1 Essex Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel E. Nichols, DSO, MC. Their positions, laboriously constructed in solid rock, gave poor protection, but from them they fought gallantly until, after a period of fierce shelling by the tanks and the artillery, their FDLs were penetrated. The enemy success was shortlived, however, for during the afternoon two companies from a veteran Australian battalion from [Tobruk](#) were moved up, and at 9 p.m., supported by Matilda tanks, went in with the bayonet and dislodged the enemy. During the engagement [Wellington](#) and Wellington West Coast Companies were switched into the areas vacated by 'Zaaforce', which meanwhile had got into position on Trigh [Zaafran](#) in reinforcement of the main 4 Brigade Group.

The German counter-attack on the [Sidi Rezegh- Belhamed](#) sector was building



up to a climax. The prospects facing the defenders were not good. Supplies of 25-pounder ammunition were desperately low and both 4 and 6 Field Regiments had had considerable casualties. The 1st South African Brigade which was expected to relieve the remaining battle-weary troops of 6 Brigade had not arrived. [General Freyberg](#)'s report to the Corps Commander stated that 'the situation was most difficult.' The rearrangement of the small forces to meet the expected assault was undertaken during the night, which passed quietly, but by the light of his many flares it was obvious that the enemy was busy with preparations for an offensive on the following day.

At [Ed Duda](#) 29 November was a slack day. There was little shelling and the enemy did not put in an appearance. At Point 175, however, the enemy struck and by a ruse overwhelmed the remnants of [21 Battalion](#). At [Belhamed](#) the timely arrival of a convoy of 300 vehicles, including tanks, under command of [Colonel Clifton](#) put fresh heart into the defenders and built up the depleted supplies of ammunition urgently needed by the whole Division.

That afternoon Battalion Headquarters personnel with 'Dudaforce' co-operated with the tanks and rounded up 350 prisoners, said by the Italian major captured with them to be the remnants of a battalion. The roar of British bombers and fighters passing overhead during the day cheered the troops in all sectors. The panzers moving into position to attack were not being permitted to manoeuvre unmolested. From Corps Headquarters came orders which concluded: 'The corridor [to [Tobruk](#)] will be kept open at all costs.' The initiative lay with Rommel. His artillery now harassed all sectors, but his probing thrusts that evening against [Ed Duda](#) and [Belhamed](#) were driven off.

At [Ed Duda](#) during the evening an attempt was made by [Wellington](#) and Wellington West Coast Companies to relieve the Australians who had successfully dealt with the German break-in the previous day. The shelling, however, was too intense and the changeover did not take place until next day. These two companies of [19 Battalion](#) then passed to the command of 1 Essex Battalion. The unit mortars (Lieutenant Simpson) and Bren carriers and two anti-tank guns were then grouped as a light mobile force under Major [McLauchlan](#) and stood by to assist wherever required.

'Zaaforce', now back on one of the positions the battalion had held earlier at [Zaafran](#), took under command two platoons of Buffs (Major Lewis), five anti-tank guns of an English artillery regiment (Major Foster), the remainder of [5 Field Park Company](#) NZE (Captain Dick [Pemberton](#) <sup>25</sup>), plus some Brigade Headquarters personnel.

At daylight on the 30th the [Ariete Division](#) appeared over the escarpment en masse; it halted and for some time was thought to be the long-expected South African brigade. When the force was recognised, however, the gunners fired a divisional concentration, and the huge congestion of transport was mercilessly hammered. The Italians fled in precipitate confusion, leaving behind a collection of burning trucks and a couple of brewed-up tanks. Several enemy approaches towards the [Belhamed- Zaafran](#) position during the day were put into reverse by the excellent work of the guns. But the enemy artillery now had good observation of the New Zealand Division's defences and kept all areas under fire.

That afternoon Rommel struck in force. After a desperate fight 24 and 26 Battalions were overrun and Sidi Rezegh fell before the overwhelming weight of the attacking armour. Features which dominated the Trigh Capuzzo were now in the hands of the enemy; it remained only for him to eliminate the 4 Brigade positions and so cut the corridor to [Tobruk](#). As the German-Italian forces were moved into position, 4 and 6 Field Regiments dealt with anything coming within range of their guns. The New Zealand Artillery in this campaign earned a reputation for courage, fortitude, and professional skill which every infantryman who fought with them endorsed. Against all odds—and the odds were tremendous—they served their guns and, if need be, kept them firing till the last round and the last gun. At [Zaafran](#) their guns were sited right among the forward posts and this was the first opportunity that many infantrymen had had to watch the gunners at work.

Next morning the German tanks and infantry returned early to the offensive. At daybreak 'Zaaforce' repulsed a sharp attack by enemy armour. At 7.15a.m. more tanks were seen approaching [20 Battalion's](#) lines and both tanks and infantry were attacking north from [Sidi Rezegh](#) towards [Belhamed](#) spur. By 7.30 the enemy had overwhelmed the 20th, which had suffered heavily in the repeated attacks. The end came about twenty-five minutes to eight when a wireless message advised: 'We are

surrounded. Send ....' The call was never finished. The infantry were then engaging tanks at close range in an endeavour to stem an attack that would drive a wedge into the line between the feature and Brigade Headquarters. The majority of the survivors were taken prisoner, including Brigadier Miles, CRA NZ Division, who had been wounded.

The German armoured attack took in the 6 Brigade advanced dressing station and 6 Field Regiment's gun positions and Divisional Battle Headquarters on the slopes of Belhamed. Battle Headquarters hastily evacuated to 4 Brigade Headquarters at Zaafran but had many casualties. The situation rapidly deteriorated, and at 10.30 a.m. 4 Brigade Headquarters joined 19 Battalion at Zaafran. 'Zaaforce's' B Echelon and the 4 RMT vehicles attached to the battalion were sent off to Tobruk, and the position was organised for all-round defence. The area was under constant shellfire, but excellent shooting by the guns of 4 Field Regiment discouraged any further enemy advances, though tanks in hull-down positions harassed the defenders with accurate and devastating fire.

It was during this difficult period that that diminutive but indomitable despatch rider Ken Rieper<sup>26</sup> happened, when delivering a message to one of the companies, to hear a call for a stretcher-bearer. Without hesitation he went out and helped to bring in the wounded man, then went away on his official duties back to Battalion Headquarters. This prompt action was typical of his deeds in earlier campaigns, where his cheerfulness and complete disregard for his own safety had already made him a popular figure throughout the battalion. He was awarded the MM in recognition of this and similar exploits.

At this critical juncture a large force of tanks was seen advancing down Sidi Rezegh escarpment, and while the hard-pressed New Zealanders still debated their identity, enemy artillery went into action against them. It was now possible to recognise, through the thick pall of dust enveloping the movement, the double pennant recognition signal of the British armour. These tanks came right in to 6 Brigade Headquarters' area and the situation in that sector was instantly transformed. The remnants of that hard-fighting brigade rallied to a man. Infantry, gunners, drivers and orderlies from the brigade's B Echelon surged forward ready to attack.

Then the British armour came to a halt. With dismay Brigadier Barrowclough<sup>27</sup> heard from the tank brigadier that his orders were to cover the withdrawal of 6 Brigade. Orders were orders. Barrowclough was forced to accept the position and the withdrawal to [Zaafran](#) began. The tanks took complete control of the retirement, and it was unfortunate that they chose as the route out the wadi between Point 175 and the blockhouse on [Sidi Rezegh](#), for the brigade suffered heavy casualties before it got back on to the safe route and finally arrived at [Zaafran](#). Coming through the [19 Battalion](#) area the indomitable group clearly demonstrated that they were still cheerful, full of fight and in good order.

About midday a column from the [Ariete Division](#), which earlier had fled under the battering it had received from our artillery, approached from the east. It was led by an officer on a motor-cycle who, when captured by one of our Bren carriers and taken to Taranaki Company's forward position, admitted that his convoy was lost. Dividing into two groups, this column demonstrated convincingly that it had no hostile intention. One group was content to continue on in the direction of the battalion positions. Of these, twenty-four trucks were captured while others escaped to the east again. The other group pushed on southwards and eventually lost fifteen large covered trucks to the Divisional Cavalry.

With the withdrawal of 6 Brigade complete [General Freyberg](#) conferred with his infantry brigadiers and it was decided that the Division should take advantage of the protection afforded by Brigadier Gatehouse's tanks and break through to the south-east in the direction of [Capuzzo](#) in search of some safe area where it could regroup. The enemy was still maintaining a solid pressure on the eastern slopes of [Belhamed](#) where the remnants of 4 Brigade had been kept in action all day, but at nightfall no new activity developed and the division was able to form up in desert formation and begin its move to the south-east. The enemy made only half-hearted attempts to prevent the withdrawal, and 6 Brigade, which acted as rearguard, had little difficulty in disengaging and joining the column. The night march was without incident, and after crossing the escarpment the Division came within the protective screen of the British armoured brigade patrols. So ended the Libyan campaign of 1941 for the main body of 4 and 6 NZ Infantry Brigades.

The Duce's men had lent an ironical turn to the closing stages of the [Sidi Rezegh](#)

drama. While the New Zealanders were waiting in their positions at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [Belhamed](#) for the final blow to fall, many weary, browned-off Italians struggled into the lines to give themselves up before they became further involved. They had had enough. The crowning touch was added by the Italian prisoners held by 6 Brigade at the time the final withdrawal was ordered. With barely sufficient transport to carry the diminished strength of the two New Zealand brigades, it was decided to turn all prisoners loose. Their own forces were but a short stroll away on [Belhamed](#), and just before the move they were liberated. Next morning, after a long night march, the brigade awoke to find some of its erstwhile guests still with them. Before the New Zealand column was lost to sight in the darkness, the Italians had set to work on a damaged enemy truck and trailer and, quickly putting them in running order, set off in pursuit of their captors, determined to stay with them rather than face further hostilities.

It was a bitterly cold night, but it is doubtful if many of the occupants of the crowded three-tonners were more than faintly aware of it. Tired bodies gave up the struggle as soon as the trucks began to move. Enveloped by sleep so sorely needed, they were oblivious to the cold and the rough route over which the columns jolted.

The Division's withdrawal had been made in nine columns 30 yards apart. Taranaki Company led the battalion, and when 58 miles had been covered in wind and rain a halt was made at [Bir Gibni](#). The plan from then on was to continue the march until the original area in the [Baggush Box](#) was reached. The next four days were spent on the move. On the first night the column laagered four miles east of the Wire and from then on the route was through Bir Khimia and Bir Haquna, on through Mersa [Matruh](#) and so to [Baggush](#). For the spent troops crowded in the trucks it was a cold, weary, and uncomfortable journey, but nevertheless it was also a sterling performance on the part of the drivers.

The 19th Battalion regained its position east of the tank trap in J sector in the middle of a vicious winter sandstorm. Its area had been wrecked and stripped by other units settling in elsewhere. It was a disheartening homecoming to the tired troops, and the first few days were spent in re-erecting shelters so vital to health and comfort in the severe winter weather and in preparing for the reception of the rest of the unit which had remained at [Ed Duda](#).

The union of British and New Zealand troops under one command at [Ed Duda](#) was an historic one and the 19th's association with the [Essex Regiment](#) was most happy. Lieutenant-Colonel Nichols kept his command constantly active, and though for the remainder of the stay at [Ed Duda](#) it was not destined to play an important part in the campaign, 'Dudaforce' of the 19th saw plenty of action and took its part in beating off the waning enemy attacks against the garrison of [Tobruk](#). Offensive patrolling by day and night and work on improving their defensive positions kept the companies fully employed. On 1 December mines and wire were put out in front of the positions. Many of these mines were without primers, and though they stopped no tanks several trucks came to grief on the live ones. The following day, despite the fact that [Ed Duda](#) was being shelled from 270 degrees of the compass, patrols from the battalion were successful in destroying some enemy vehicles and capturing fifty prisoners.

At 6.45 a.m. on 3 December the enemy, under cover of artillery, launched an attack against the Essex positions. Assisted by machine guns of the [Northumberland Fusiliers](#), the [Essex Regiment](#) inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers, who withdrew three hours later. At three o'clock that afternoon the German infantry again returned to probe the [Ed Duda](#) defences. They pushed up between the left flank of the [Border Regiment](#) and the right flank of 18 Battalion. The Border Regiment put in a valiant but unsuccessful counter-attack, and it was not until evening that the arrival of a squadron of I tanks forced the enemy to withdraw. During this engagement the armour was severely handled by the enemy 88-millimetre anti-tank guns and lost ten tanks.

This attack was the last real enemy threat to the position. That night rum (the first [19 Battalion](#) had had during this campaign) was issued to all ranks. Thereafter at [Ed Duda](#) the rum issue was regular, and though at first welcomed, much was finally left untouched for our men found that the poor rations gave an inadequate foundation for strong waters, and many preferred to leave their issue rather than risk a bout of indigestion.

From 4 to 6 December the [Ed Duda](#) position remained stable though the enemy shelling was continuous. It was obvious that the enemy was withdrawing westwards. Their vehicles were continually engaged by our artillery and machine guns, while our

infantry and Bren carrier patrols did good work and brought back a constant stream of prisoners. An abandoned enemy base camp towards Trigh [Capuzzo](#) yielded good bags, for from time to time German foraging parties attempting to retrieve rations and supplies were rounded up by our men, who pushed out patrols 6000 yards south of their position and kept constant pressure on the retiring enemy forces. Naturally these patrols too foraged effectively and were able to bring back a good deal of enemy food. Water—the most pressing need—was unobtainable, but they did collect many bottles of Italian eau-de-cologne. This made a most refreshing sponge down—always provided that the scented variety was avoided.

From this abandoned German camp came a small dog which was in time to become a battalion personality. 'Duda', bewildered, deserted and very hungry, was brought back by a patrol, fed, petted and comfortably accommodated. She displayed nothing but gratitude and obviously had no qualms of conscience about changing sides. In time her offspring were spread throughout the whole Division, for she had numerous litters. Whether any of these were sired by 'Major' was never really proved—at all events she was discouraged in any attempts to fraternise with officers. 'Duda' was an ORs' dog; in status, sex, and official standing she could not compare with the No. 1 Dog of the Division, but she did outlive him and was brought home to New Zealand, where she ended her days in the care of her last custodian at his home in Dunedin.

A patrol from Wellington West Coast Company going out on the morning of 7 December located enemy infantry along the escarpment to the west of [Ed Duda](#), and an attack by the [Border Regiment](#) and the [Durham Light Infantry](#) dislodged them. Thereafter the area was quiet and next day all enemy action against the position ceased. Some of our men now visited the scene of 6 Brigade's valiant stand at [Sidi Rezegh](#). Grim evidence of the fury of the fighting could still be seen. The dead were unburied; many were still in their fighting slits surrounded by empty shell and cartridge cases. They had fallen with their weapons still in their hands. The gallant stand by this New Zealand brigade had cost the enemy casualties from which he never recovered; the doggedness and bravery of our men had contributed largely to the retreat of the Axis forces.

After two days of well-earned respite 'Dudaforce' came under command of [18 Battalion](#). In saying goodbye, the CO of 1 Essex spoke highly of the work our men

had done, and later Colonel Hartnell received the following letter from the Colonel of the [Essex Regiment](#):

United Services Club,  
London

Commanding Officer,  
[19 NZ Battalion](#),  
Middle East Forces.

Dear Colonel Hartnell,

I have just received an account from the Commanding Officer of the 1st Bn, the [Essex Regiment](#), of the operations carried out at the end of November and the beginning of December last year at Ed Duda.

Colonel (now Brigadier) Nichols tells me how greatly indebted he is to you and the men of your Battalion for the great assistance given him at a critical period of the operations.

As Colonel of the [Essex Regiment](#) may I thank you very much indeed for what you and your Battalion did, and may I add the hope that this intimate connection between you and my Regiment, born on the battlefield, may be continued in years to come under peace conditions.

Wishing you all good luck, and with kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

(Sgnd.) G. W. Howard, Lieut.-General,  
Colonel of the [Essex Regiment](#).

(Lieut.-General Sir Geoffrey W. Howard, KCB, CMG, DSO.)

All ranks of the 19th who were associated with the Essex Regiment held them in very high regard, and the unit's small part alongside the defenders of [Tobruk](#) is an episode of which it is justly proud. It was a privilege to work with these gallant British troops and there were many incidents during the stay at [Ed Duda](#) which lightened the tension of the desert battle. The 'Vicar of [Tobruk](#)', Padre Quinn, MC,



was a regular visitor to the lines, holding divine service in the area and distributing copies of the Tobruk Truth. The battalion's collection of war souvenirs was good, and all ranks had some trifle once belonging to the [Afrika Korps](#) to remind them of the Axis' defeat. The heavier items included several of the distinctive German motor-cycle combinations.

So ended the [Ed Duda](#) episode. With [18 Battalion](#), 'Dudaforce' was withdrawn to the eastern perimeter of the fortress where, picking up the transport which had been held back for it, the journey to [Baggush](#) began. The column left [Tobruk](#) on 11 December and rejoined the battalion two days later.

\* \* \*

For the two New Zealand brigades, who with the British armour and attached troops had at the approaches to [Tobruk](#) defied 15 and 21 German Armoured Divisions and the Axis infantry, it had been a memorable campaign. Though they had eventually lost [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [Belhamed](#), the New Zealanders had wrought such havoc in the ranks of Rommel's forces that his temporary advantage was not worth the final cost. [Tobruk](#) had been relieved; the campaign was closing, and of the New Zealanders only 5 Brigade remained in the Desert engaged in final clearing-up operations. Both sides were now back on the defensive, preparing to face as best they could the formidable problems of the next round.

The high hopes held early in the campaign were realised only in part and only after very heavy sacrifices. The battles so largely dominated by armour showed clearly the disadvantages under which our army was fighting. The panzers' system of field maintenance and recovery was superior to ours, and the anti-tank guns which supported the German armour had caused many casualties among our tanks which, once hit, could seldom be recovered. It was clear that these material factors, plus the enemy commander's appreciation of the high importance of the principle of concentration of force and his skilful integration of all arms in battle where armour was employed, had given him a distinct advantage over [Eighth Army](#).

To the individual soldier the campaign had been more confused even than [Crete](#). Lack of knowledge of what was taking place, not only in other areas but even between units in the same brigade, left little individual appreciation of real

objectives. There was bewilderment over many of the moves backwards and forwards across the battle area. Nevertheless the New Zealand Division had every reason to be proud of its performance. The actions fought during the advance and the difficult days spent at [Sidi Rezegh](#), [Belhamed](#), [Ed Duda](#), and [Zaafran](#) had clearly demonstrated both its efficiency and doggedness. The Germans themselves, writing of the campaign, referred to 'the skilful New Zealanders'.

The swift succession of events; the lack of pattern; the uncertainty of identification, indecision, then sudden, hurried movements; all these made the campaign a mad, disjointed medley. These highlights and shadows will remain always with those who took part: the grand moves of MT; the comforting roar of [RAF](#) aircraft in the skies; the misery of bitter nights and days spent on the defensive in the unfriendly wastes; the scanty and almost undrinkable water; the sorry plight of the prisoners; the mad scramble behind tanks during the attack and the indomitable spirit which pervaded the whole force even on the most difficult days. It was clear to all that this round had been indecisive. Rommel's difficulties, aggravated by lack of adequate air support, tended to offset his advantage in armour. The [Afrika Korps](#) was respectfully regarded for the skill and stamina it had shown in the fight just ended. But at [Baggush](#) as the 'sitreps' followed the enemy's retreat, few doubted that Rommel would come again.

Four thousand five hundred and ninety-four New Zealanders—almost a quarter of the force that passed through the Wire into [Libya](#) on that bleak November night, were lost in the campaign. The 19th Battalion had been most fortunate; it suffered less than any other infantry unit in the Division. Thirteen men of the battalion gave their lives: seven were killed in action, and six died of wounds or went down in the [Chakdina](#) when this ship, carrying wounded from [Tobruk](#), was sunk by air attack while en route for [Alexandria](#). The roll of wounded totalled only seventeen, and when the unit check-up was complete there were none of the 19th men unaccounted for. The untiringly cheerful and courageous work of the RMO, Captain Bill Carswell, not only in this campaign but during [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), earned him the respect and confidence of all ranks. His award of an immediate MC was a popular and well deserved decoration.

In this campaign the Division had demonstrated its ability as a hard-hitting, mobile striking force. Transport had naturally played a most important part, and the

New Zealanders in [Eighth Army](#) earned an excellent record for the handling, care, and recovery of their vehicles. In this regard it is notable that [19 Battalion](#) operated throughout without one truck leaving the unit for write-off or repair. The MT personnel worked hard—they also worked miracles—for 'Baldy's Circus' were a stout team. Some attributed their stamina to a sack of onions captured at [Gambut](#) by Private Jim Kellor,<sup>28</sup> which thereafter became a savoury and appetising addition to their bully and biscuit ration. At all events Captain F. M. Stewart, Staff-Sergeant 'Baldy' Williamson,<sup>29</sup> Sergeant Mick [Castelli](#),<sup>30</sup> Corporal 'Pop' Luckin,<sup>31</sup> Privates 'Bull' Scott,<sup>32</sup> Johnny [Trye](#),<sup>33</sup> Frank [Beresford](#)<sup>34</sup> and each truck driver gave stalwart service under most trying conditions: they toiled skilfully and slept little and so kept every 19th truck in going order for the duration of the campaign. The 4th RMT drivers, too, attached to the unit with their three-tonners, added to the already high regard in which the 'Colonial Carrying Company' was held by the infantry.

Back at [Baggush](#) discussion over the last fortnight's events was spirited and healthy. At Divisional Headquarters conferences of senior officers studied the campaign in retrospect; in dugouts in unit areas, officers, NCOs, and men met officially and unofficially to the same end.

[General Freyberg](#)'s order of the day struck a note which echoed the sentiments of the whole of his Division:

The test for troops is whether they can 'take it' and fight back. For the first time in this war, the odds were almost even, and we had a chance to fight back. Nobody, I hope, doubted it. This is the acid test of war, a test the Germans have still to go through. An interesting phase has been reached in the struggle for history appears to be repeating itself. The last war was an arty war. Then as now the Germans had a long start and during the earlier years they hammered us unmercifully. Later on when we had the guns and the men, the Germans became the receivers and took refuge underground like rabbits. They could not 'take it'. This time it is a tank war in which they again had a big lead in the equipment race. But the time is coming when the tide will turn. When it does the Germans will have to show that they can 'take it'. The experience of this campaign makes me feel certain that they can't.

Rommel's retreat was followed with satisfaction by all ranks and the published accounts of the battles in the past campaign were eagerly read in the NZEF Times.

This newspaper supplied a marked want and every feature was read, studied and discussed. Still, the overall picture—the actual reason for the enemy's withdrawal—was none too clear to the individual soldier, and the summing up of one man, though somewhat sweeping, gave a synopsis of the campaign which quickly found almost universal approval and was widely quoted: 'Jerry was mucked about and we were mucked about, but we were more used to it!'

As for the lessons from the campaign (which had been but another chapter in the long [Western Desert](#) war), the following were published immediately after the Division withdrew to [Baggush](#):

1. The Germans always make to the highest ground and once there it is very difficult to push them off for they dig in and deploy large numbers of anti-tank weapons.
2. It was found that motorised columns could move under desert conditions over long distances by night—we always caught the enemy unprepared and created favourable opportunities for the use of armoured forces but we were never sufficiently strong to follow them up.
3. There is in our view a general demand for an armoured gun for close support of tanks, in a tank or on a chassis which can keep up with tanks. It was found that the enemy destroyed our tanks before his were within our effective range (800 to 1,000 yds). He was penetrating our tanks at 1,500 yds.
4. Owing to the heavy armament of the Germans our tactics have been on the hit and run principle. To be able to deal effectively with German armoured Divs we require an armoured gun and a tank mounting a heavier weapon than a two-pounder.

Truly 'death was a difficult trade', and if we appeared to lag in the learning it was only because twenty years of peace had led to a lack of material preparation. So far the progress of the war had been little to our liking and not often in our favour. As the second phase of the Desert campaign was closing, [Japan](#) joined the Axis, but her attack on [Pearl Harbour](#) brought to the British side a formidable ally. On 8 December the [United States](#) declared war, but Great Britain, whose arms had for two years withstood the assaults of the enemy in [Europe](#) and North Africa, had still to face hard times on many fronts.

The battalion's stay at [Baggush](#) in uncomfortable conditions and execrable weather was a provoking experience. After action, the bright lights of [Cairo](#) and the comforts of Base were beckoning. Leave was hoped for, even expected, but the [Western Desert](#) operations were not yet over and [Baggush](#) was still a defence area

across the route to [Cairo](#). The Box must be manned, and meanwhile training began again with only a brief interruption for Christmas and New Year celebrations.

Christmas was an unqualified success for the preparations made had had no parallel in any previous feast planned by the unit. Firstly, there was a seemingly inexhaustible stock of Australian beer, then the unit funds were generously used to acquire supplies of victuals fit to grace the occasion, and finally [National Patriotic Fund Board](#) parcels arrived.

On Christmas Eve a brisk 10-mile route march whetted the thirst of all ranks, and when the battalion returned to [Baggush](#) that evening there was an auspicious opening to the celebration. Next morning was dull and overcast; a morning of hangovers and no reveille. For most men Christmas dinner was their first meal of the day, but the cooks had excelled themselves and the fare they provided was attacked with zest by those who had for several months found sustenance chiefly from a bully-beef tin. Pork, turkey, Christmas pudding, nuts, cake, and all the traditional trimmings were served. The helpings were large and returns were welcomed. It was an occasion of good fellowship among all ranks, rich in the true spirit of Christmas and losing nothing by reason of its incongruous surroundings.

Boxing Day brought a reluctant route march and the rest of the month passed with routine training and work as usual. Revelry, however, broke out again on New Year's Eve, and the New Zealand sector of the [Baggush Box](#) turned on a midnight mock battle which roused neighbouring units into frenzied preparations for repelling an unexpected enemy attack. All offensive weapons from the 25-pounders of the artillery to the rifles and pistols of the infantry were fired frantically into the night as a welcome to 1942.

So the New Year dawned, and in the Egyptian Desert as the din died down many men from New Zealand spent the first hours of 1942 linked in thought with home. Hopes for the future were high, but fate and the Axis had not yet finished with the unit.

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<sup>1</sup> [WO I J. B. Coull](#), m.i.d.; Midhurst; born [Scotland](#), 26 Feb 1916; driver; wounded May 1941.

- <sup>2</sup> Cpl K. A. Welsh; Wanganui; born NZ, 23 Oct 1915; clerk.
- <sup>3</sup> Lt T. F. Hegglun; Blenheim; born Marton, 29 Jul 1915; builder and bridge contractor; wounded 3 Dec 1943.
- <sup>4</sup> Capt C. H. Upham, VC and bar, m.i.d.; Conway Flat, Hundalee; born Christchurch, 21 Sep 1908; Government land valuer; wounded May 1941; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.
- <sup>5</sup> Left out of battle.
- <sup>6</sup> Lt R. S. Liddell; Napier; born Hawera, 22 Aug 1916; lorry driver.
- <sup>7</sup> Sgt A. G. Rundle; Linton MC; born NZ, 29 Nov 1917; stock clerk; wounded 28 Jun 1942.
- <sup>8</sup> Capt W. R. Blanch; Wellington; born Scotland, 18 Mar 1909; insurance clerk; wounded 15 Jul 1942.
- <sup>9</sup> Capt I. J. Simpson; Dannevirke; born NZ, 19 Aug 1914; farmhand.
- <sup>10</sup> Lt-Col A. M. Everist, DSO; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 31 Oct 1912; accountant; wounded 28 Jun 1942; CO 19 Armd Regt 1 Aug-6 Nov 1944, 17 Mar-18 Dec 1945.
- <sup>11</sup> Lt-Col J. W. Moodie, DSO, ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1907; warehouseman; battery commander 4 Fd Regt Nov 1942-Apr 1944; wounded 26 Nov 1941; comd 16 Fd Regt (K Force) Aug 1950-Apr 1952.
- <sup>12</sup> Maj A. D. W. Woolcott; Henderson; born Auckland, 22 Nov 1906; school teacher; company commander 19 Bn 1941-42.
- <sup>13</sup> 2 Lt F. V. England; Christchurch; born Wellington, 21 Jun 1914; company secretary.

<sup>14</sup> Capt J. P. Quilter; Mataura; born Mataura, 10 May 1910; cordial manufacturer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>15</sup> Sgt F. M. Newton; Utiku; born England, 27 Jan 1914; bushman and farmhand; twice wounded.

<sup>16</sup> Capt J. H. R. Semple; Wellington; born NZ, 16 Oct 1906; traffic inspector.

<sup>17</sup> Capt D. W. Hodge; Christchurch; born Wanganui, 30 Jul 1920; salesman; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped Modena, Sep 1943; served with partisans for seven months before recaptured.

<sup>18</sup> L-Cpl A. B. T. Gill; born Christchurch, 2 Aug 1918; grocer.

<sup>19</sup> Sgt E. P. Coleman; Huinga; born NZ, 30 Jul 1915; labourer; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

<sup>20</sup> Pte J. Rippin; born Bradford, England, 30 Jul 1918; salesman; died of wounds 30 Nov 1941.

<sup>21</sup> Sgt B. M. Buchanan; Wairoa; born Wairoa, 7 Sep 1918; driver.

<sup>22</sup> Cpl V. C. Gordon; Marton; born Marton, 21 Apr 1915; timber worker; wounded 20 May 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped Ancona, Sep 1943.

<sup>23</sup> Maj L. W. Dugleby, m.i.d.; born Wairoa, 6 Jun 1914; clerk; killed in action 13 Apr 1943.

<sup>24</sup> L-Cpl R. N. Green; born NZ, 11 Apr 1918; clerk; died of wounds 19 Dec 1941.

<sup>25</sup> Lt-Col R. C. Pemberton, MC and bar, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Christchurch, 23 Mar 1915; engineer; OC 8 Fd Coy 1943; CRE 2 NZ Div Jul-Aug 1944; twice wounded.

<sup>26</sup> Tpr K. R. Rieper, MM; Napier; born NZ, 17 Jul 1918; student; wounded May 1941.

<sup>27</sup> Maj-Gen Rt Hon Sir Harold Barrowclough, PC, KCMG, CB, DSO \* and bar, MC, \* ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US), Croix de Guerre \*; Wellington; born Masterton, 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (CO 4 Bn); commanded 7 NZ Inf Bde in UK, 1940; 6 Bde, 1 May 1940–21 Feb 1942; GOC 2 NZEF in Pacific and GOC 3 NZ Div, 8 Aug 1942–20 Oct 1944; Chief Justice of New Zealand.

<sup>28</sup> F. J. P. Kellor; Nelson; born NZ, 11 Apr 1907; labourer.

<sup>29</sup> WO II J. F. Williamson; Gisborne; born NZ, 18 Mar 1908; lorry driver.

<sup>30</sup> Capt A. Castelli; New Plymouth; born England, 23 Jun 1918; mechanic.

<sup>31</sup> Cpl M. H. Luckin; Opunake; born NZ, 31 Aug 1910; gunsmith.

<sup>32</sup> Pte F. H. Scott; Greymouth; born NZ, 17 Mar 1913; winchman; wounded May 1941.

<sup>33</sup> L-Sgt J. S. Trye, MM; Putaruru; born Rahotu, 16 May 1909; transport driver.

<sup>34</sup> Sgt F. Beresford; Omata; born England, 27 Sep 1910; labourer; wounded 24 May 1941.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 13 – BAGGUSH TO SYRIA

## CHAPTER 13

### *Baggush to Syria*

The latter end of a fray and the beginning of a feast.

—Shakespeare

On Tuesday, 6 January 1942, the battalion left [Baggush](#) and in the chill early evening crammed into cattle trucks to begin the rail journey back to [Maadi Camp](#). The troops were in high spirits, the uninviting means of transport did nothing to depress them, and the night passed with a good deal of skylarking plus such snatches of sleep as the noise and discomfort allowed.

At seven o'clock next morning a stop was made at [Amiriya](#). Hot stew and scalding tea were waiting, trains were changed, and in the comparative comfort of Egyptian State Railways' third-class coaches the journey was resumed. At the familiar Digla siding in the early hours of the 8th the battalion detrained, clambered aboard unit transport, and finally arrived 'home' just as dawn was breaking. Pay and leave followed, and peace to enjoy them was permitted for the rest of the week.

On Monday the 12th training was resumed in earnest; the emphasis was on range practices. Once again the comments of the weapon training officer made doleful and disturbing reading: the battalion as a whole did not excel at the butts. 'With the exception of a few good individual scores the shooting was mediocre,' read the official report. Thereafter officers and NCOs concentrated on coaching and the reiteration of the fundamentals of good shooting. It was something of a paradox later, when the brigade competition results were announced, that A team from Headquarters Company—not from a rifle company—was the best rifle team in 4 Brigade.

In contrast to the unit's poor performance at the range, its programme of short vigorous marches by platoons and companies was profitable and popular. These brisk tramps across the familiar wastes where the battalion had done its first work in the [Middle East](#) were greatly enjoyed. The weather was still pleasantly cool; there was singing en route and cigarettes for the halts; while at the end of the march were showers and the canteen. Of all army activities route-marching ranks first for

limbering up morale: 'The tonic of a wholesome pride' where the team spirit and fine companionship found among the men in each section is magnified until it encompasses the platoons, the companies, and finally the whole battalion.

The stay at [Maadi](#) was brief; on 22 January, a fortnight after its arrival from the [Western Desert](#), the battalion with full packs up marched to the village, had lunch by the roadside, and at 12.30 p.m. boarded the train for [Kabrit](#). With memories of the previous visit still green, the move to the Combined Training Centre on the Canal, despite the attractions of [Cairo](#), was popular and the journey pleasant. Many men had used accumulated pay to buy portable radios and almost every carriage listened to music and to the [BBC](#) news while travelling. The train arrived at [Geneifa](#) at midnight, and after a mug of tea the journey was completed in MT and the battalion reached its new camp in the early hours of the morning. The day was spent settling in.

In the [Western Desert](#) the fighting had subsided with both sides almost exhausted. [Halfaya](#) had surrendered on 19 January, but on the 21st Rommel, who had withdrawn his forces to [El Agheila](#)—too far away for our depleted army with its strained supply lines to give chase—had launched a counter-offensive. Almost the whole of the Division was now withdrawn from the battle area, and [General Freyberg's](#) headquarters were set up at [Fayid](#). Sixth Brigade arrived at [Maadi](#) as the 4th moved to [Kabrit](#), while 5 Brigade moved from [Kabrit](#) to the [Sweetwater Canal](#) area. All formations were being brought up to battle strength once more.

When the Axis offensive reopened the New Zealand Division immediately came under command of Headquarters British Troops in [Egypt](#) for internal security duties in [Cairo](#) or in the Delta. Meanwhile training was pressed forward, for in all units new equipment and new methods had to be mastered: mine detection, infantry wireless procedure, tank recognition, the sticky bomb—their effective use had still to be learned.

At [Kabrit](#), in addition to normal infantry tasks and tactics, 4 Brigade toiled to perfect its training in handling ALCs (Assault Landing Craft) and in surmounting the wire obstacles which bristled on the beaches where they were landed daily. A raid from the sea cutting the long, single artery of the Axis supply line in North Africa might well prove decisive to the British operations in the Western Desert. The troops

found this training exhilarating and the programme novel. After the dour desert campaign the visit to [Kabrit](#) was a happy interlude.

On the 28th, having attended a screening of a film on combined operations, the battalion began its first full-scale exercise, embarking the following morning on ALCs for a daylight attack on 'D beach' on the far side of the Great [Bitter Lake](#). Wellington West Coast and Hawke's Bay Companies were landed first, and formed a bridgehead through which [Wellington](#) and Taranaki Companies and Battalion Headquarters passed and attacked 'Gravel Ridge', approximately two miles inland. On completion of the landing operations and the attack, the 19th laid out a defensive position on its objective and at three o'clock the following morning sent out patrols to harass [20 Battalion](#), which was then landing prior to attacking the position.

On the night 30–31 January a practice withdrawal and evacuation from the beaches was carried out. The 20th Battalion acted as enemy and the position on 'Gravel Ridge' was slowly thinned out, a bridgehead again formed, and under the protection of a rearguard the unit embarked in a TLC (Tank Landing Craft) and returned to [Kabrit](#)—after enjoying a pantomime performance which involved a stranded ALC, two very junior RN midshipmen, and a grizzled RNR skipper. It had been a useful and strenuous exercise in which each component in the battalion had been called upon to play its part. During the following forty-eight hours another similar exercise was undertaken.

Another night operation of a different character took place when a mob of inebriates with criminal tendencies tried to take the canteen cash from its small but capable custodian, Corporal [Gibson](#).<sup>1</sup> The noise of the ensuing battle brought some of Headquarters Company running to the spot and the would-be robbers—with one exception—fled. The exception happened to be the largest of the band and he was unwise enough to mix it with the redoubtable 'Hoot'. All he collected for his pains was a broken jaw and various abrasions; he certainly got no booty—not even a loser's purse. The canteen cash balanced to the last piastre.

The 19th remained at [Kabrit](#) until 3 March. February was filled by a programme of intensive training and sport, the success of which was soon reflected in the fitness of all members of the unit. Regimental funds were used to buy a considerable amount of sports gear and inter-company competition became very keen. On the

11th the battalion rowing contest was held, and though on an unfamiliar medium for the infantry soldier, the crews handled their craft well. Headquarters Company A team were the winners with Taranaki A team second. Hockey, too, was a popular pastime and the unit fielded several teams in inter-company and inter-unit matches. 'Major' was a keen barracker for the battalion, and on 27 February Routine Order No. 44 carried a notice of the dog's well deserved promotion to the rank of captain.

During the month the battalion was bereft of its 'wheels', thirty-eight vehicles being temporarily handed over to other formations. The dismounted drivers came in for their full share of drill and route-marching. Stung by the unkind remarks and undisguised amusement of the rest of the unit, they were soon on their mettle and demonstrated that they were not without prowess in the more mundane if less mechanical side of soldiering.

In the middle of February the BBC announced the fall of Singapore. This was dreadful news indeed. It is worth recording that in the subsequent exercises at Kabrit the Japanese replaced the usual Italian and German 'enemy'. Shortly afterwards the airmail to New Zealand was suspended, and to relieve anxiety over events in the Pacific General Freyberg issued a statement to the NZEF which gave information about defence preparations in New Zealand and greatly allayed the men's fears.

On 13 February the second anniversary of the arrival of the First Echelon in the Middle East had been fittingly, if unofficially, celebrated in the battalion by those who were still serving. The tally of 140 dozen bottles of beer consumed in the Naafi that night was testimony to the thirst acquired in the months spent in the dusty desert.

On 1 March the advance party, commanded by Major C. L. Pleasants, pulled out on its way to Syria. The rest of the battalion followed two days later.

Reveille was sounded at 2.30 a.m. on 3 March. It coincided with an air-raid alert which soon developed into a heavy attack. By the time the planes arrived the companies had sorted themselves out and, despite the pitch darkness, were ready to board the RASC transport which had reported in to carry them from the camp to Geneifa railway station. The first bomb caused an automatic and effective dispersal

and, in attitudes acquired through long practice, each man lay low while the [Luftwaffe](#), which had timed its approach to coincide with an eclipse of the moon, bombed and machine-gunned the RN and [RAF](#) installations on the Canal. Fortunately the 19th Battalion area escaped their attention and the raiders left when the moon reappeared.

At 4.30 a.m. the interrupted move was resumed, and the train with the battalion aboard left [Geneifa](#) at 6.5—only five minutes behind schedule. Three hours later the canal ferry carried the unit across to Kantara East, where a hot meal was waiting and where trains were changed for the trip across the [Sinai Desert](#) into Palestine and thence to [Syria](#).

The daylight hours were spent travelling through an almost unbroken procession of rolling sand dunes, the picture postcard desert which up to now was new to most of the troops, whose campaigning in [Libya](#) and [Cyrenaica](#) had been done on a vastly different type of terrain—a desert of stone-strewn wastes and rocky outcrops. To the travellers, however, the effect was similar; and as in the long train trips across the [Western Desert](#), the scenery soon proved somniferous and the majority slept or dozed. Shortly before 1 a.m. the orderly officer made his rounds and roused all ranks in preparation for the stop and a four-mile route march ahead.

At a siding south of [Haifa](#) the troops, stiff from eighteen hours' travel, streamed out of the coaches, wrestled in the darkness with their gear, then set off for the transit camp. It was still dark when the marching columns reached their tented lines at At Tira and, thankfully dumping kitbags and equipment, unpacked their mess tins and queued up at the lighted cookhouse for a welcome hot meal.

Dawn disclosed a pleasant camp set among olive groves and reminiscent of some of the battalion's bivouacs in [Greece](#). The spot was in sharp contrast to most of the resting places of the past few months. Once settled in, the men were granted afternoon leave to [Haifa](#) and Tel Aviv. Many of the men were visiting Palestine for the first time and the break was popular. Three roysterers who attempted to capture and drive one of Palestine Railways' locomotives back to camp created a breeze of official displeasure.

The wet weather which began on the afternoon of the 5th showed no signs of

letting up the following morning when the move to [Syria](#) was scheduled to resume. But the rain was of small moment, for the mode of travel was found to be both novel and de luxe. Civilian buses with seats upholstered in red plush were awaiting the astonished troops at the end of their short but muddy march from the transit camp.

This unusual convoy moved off at 9.30 a.m. The pace was fast and the troops in each vehicle, exploiting the characteristic recklessness of the Arab drivers to the full, urged them to greater speeds until the move became a race in which overtaking and passing, without scruple for traffic rules or convoy procedure, were common practice. At noon when the first halt was made the vehicles were in anything but their original order. Many of the hindmost were now up with the leaders for these modern Jehus were devoid of fear, and the normal caution usually observed on narrow stretches or sharp corners was not in their make-up. Three buses went off by a route of their own and arrived at the Syrian frontier some time ahead of the main body. They were held up there by the frontier guards until the column arrived, then much to the chagrin of the drivers were compelled to take their original places in the line of traffic.

The countryside was populous and the scenery beautiful. The troops enjoyed the trip. Passing through [Tiberias](#), the convoy travelled along the shores of the Sea of Galilee before climbing steeply out of Palestine and into [Syria](#), where at the village of Rosh Pinna the first signs of war were seen. Recently used trenches and bullet-scarred signposts were evidence of a last year's engagement against the Vichy French forces. The whole of the countryside, however, was now at peace and the coming of spring added colour to the surroundings. Hebron and [Damascus](#), of Biblical fame, were passed and at 6 p.m., just off the [Damascus- Baghdad](#) highway, the leading vehicles turned into a hutted transit camp and stopped. Three hours later straggling buses were still coming in.

The night was cold and showery but the accommodation was good, and almost all took advantage of this and turned in early for a sound sleep. Some of the battalion officers, however, made the most of their first meeting with members of the [United States Forces](#). Some officers of the American Field Service had just arrived in the mess and a pleasant evening's fraternising followed. The United States Army would before long serve side by side in battle with New Zealand troops, but it was with mixed feelings that the men some months later learned of the presence of the United States Marine Corps in New Zealand.



Next morning (7 March) the battalion moved by ASC transport to [Zabboud](#), where the advance party from the



**Eastern Mediterranean**

battalion which had left [Kabrit](#) on the 1st had already arrived. During the afternoon companies were allocated to Nissen huts, and in the evening the men explored the amenities of a camp which will remain as one of the most popular encountered by the battalion in its six years of service. The week spent there was all too brief, for the camp was comfortable, the environs interesting, and the snow-capped mountains of [Lebanon](#)—which made a magnificent

backdrop to the pleasant [Bekaa](#) valley below—beckoned to those whose enthusiasm for climbing and skiing had had but barren outlets since leaving New Zealand.

The whole area was rich in history, and in his service the following day (Sunday the 8th) Padre [Forsman](#)<sup>2</sup> gave an interesting sermon on its Biblical importance. [Baalbek](#), with its impressive fragments of the work of the Greco-Roman civilisation, had many visitors during the unit's stay in [Syria](#).

[Zabboud](#) camp was sited at 3000 feet and the crisp mountain air, the sharp spring weather, and the exhilarating exercise afforded by route marches and

climbing had a marked effect on every man's appetite. The cooks found it difficult to satisfy the hungry unit. Football matches began immediately and were played in traditional weather, on grass instead of stones and sand, and with zest and enjoyment by all who took part. So the week passed pleasantly, and early nights and sound sleep were every man's experience.

Ten members of the battalion were sent from [Zabboud](#) to a ski course at Les Cedres and all performed well, Lieutenant Carryer being retained by Ninth Army Ski School at the conclusion of the course as an instructor.

But the unit did not come to [Syria](#) to spend its days unprofitably. [Zabboud](#) camp was strategically sited, for below in the [Bekaa](#) valley lay the route from the north which since ancient days had been regarded as of prime importance by the armies which sought to invade Palestine and [Egypt](#). The [Djedeide](#) fortress was now being made and manned lest the Germans should break through the Caucasus or cut through [Turkey](#) in an attempt to isolate our forces in the [Middle East](#) and gain control of the [Mediterranean](#). The task of the New Zealand Division was to deny the enemy the use of the main routes from the north to southern [Syria](#). Work on the defences began at once.

On 11 March the Commanding Officer and company commanders went across the valley to the Buffalo feature on the slopes of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, where 19 Battalion's sector of the fortress was to be sited. Two days later the move out to the reconnoitred areas began when Wellington Company went by MT to its location, which later became known as 'Willis Street'. Heavy rain during the night made the move difficult, and the company's welcome to their new home was frigid indeed. Gear had to be dumped in the snow and deep drifts made unpleasant traps for the unwary. By nightfall tents were pitched on the steep slopes, and the company cooks had set up their establishment and had a hot meal ready for the hungry troops. The local mutton was not up to New Zealand standard but the liberal addition of curry powder to the stew was found to disguise the musty flavour of ram, for the majority of the beasts sold for food were the worn-out progenitors of the village flocks. Fresh meat being a luxury, this mutton could not be condemned because of a slight taint, and so, suitably cooked, these hoary sires of Syrian flocks were served and eaten with relish by men who once had fussily picked over the choicest cuts of prime Canterbury lamb.

Next day (the 14th) Wellington West Coast Company moved out and took up a position to the north. They were followed at daily intervals by Hawke's Bay, Taranaki and Headquarters Companies. Company administrative and defence areas were soon shaped and the weather during these preliminary operations behaved well. Two companies, [Wellington](#) and Wellington West Coast, were taken out for an urgent road-construction job and the whole battalion was kept busy with pick and shovel. Supplies were brought up to the battalion by mule train, a section of 6 Cypriot Pack Transport Company being attached to the unit for this work, for Taranaki and Hawke's Bay Companies could not be catered for by MT.

At the foot of the mountains the Q and transport area clustered in a hollow rimmed by the steeply climbing main road. 'Teds' Town', as this cheery caravanserai was soon called, was a welcome sight to those whose weary upward way would be helped by the hot mug of chai always available there to all visitors any hour of the day or night.

On 21 March a bitter wind rose and hail and sleet held up work while the battalion cowered in the slender shelter of its precariously pitched tents. Just as night was falling a report came in from 4 Brigade Headquarters that a parachutist had been seen landing in the battalion area. Patrols went out immediately, but in the gathering darkness they failed to find anything and at last returned, cold and querulous, to their respective bivvies, where their dripping forms were anything but welcome.

It now began to snow heavily and tents soon sagged with the ever-increasing weight. More patrols were called for, this time to rake the snow off the straining canvas. Before they got going properly, however, several tents collapsed and the struggling inmates emerging from the wreckage were faced with a pretty puzzle. There was no spare timber in the area and a broken tent-pole presented a problem of no mean proportions. By the 22nd the whole of the position was thickly covered. Water, wine, and even eggs froze solid. There was an extreme shortage of fuel and any item which would burn—including tent pegs—had to be carefully guarded. In one bivvy, where two of the occupants had been fortunate enough to acquire a wooden stretcher each, the legs were sacrificed for firing at the rate of two inches a night in the interests of warmth and comfort.

The 23rd brought no improvement, but a well-timed issue of rum prescribed by the Brigade Commander, plus a leather jerkin, scarf, balaclava and an extra blanket handed out by the Quartermaster, restored sluggish circulations and revived the drooping spirits of the troops, so much so that some hardy specimens indulged in snowballing. The silent flight of these missiles was a menace to men caught in the open during daylight.

By the 26th the storm had blown itself out; the ground began to thaw and work was at once resumed on defences and road construction. As a precaution against trench feet cottonseed oil was issued to companies. [Wellington](#) Company's cook, mistaking this for cooking oil, put a liberal portion in a bully stew and the whole company spent a painful and busy night. Despite the ministrations of the MO few were fit for work next morning. However, the programme of pick-and-shovel work went on without further interruption till the end of the month, when General Auchinleck and the GOC paid a short visit of inspection to Jebel el Emside and the battalion's sector of the [Djedeide](#) fortress.

April opened auspiciously with a series of bright sunny days and the scenery took on all the charm of a New Zealand high-country spring. Work on the defences progressed; construction parties sang at their tasks, while in the evenings organised and unorganised entertainment was contrived collectively by companies or spontaneously by small groups. Card tournaments, housie, boxing, even voluntary classes of instruction in German and other outlandish tongues, all had their adherents.

Easter approached and with it came memories of [Servia](#) and the battalion position of a year earlier. The present area was not dissimilar to the craggy heights in [Greece](#) where the 19th first faced the enemy. What would the stay in [Syria](#) hold? The portents were not clear, but the defence position that grew daily with the aid of explosives and hard manual labour inspired the same confidence as had the more hurriedly constructed posts of the previous year. The altitude and the solid stone of the mountains gave a feeling of security. Here was a position which appeared wellnigh impregnable. The ribbon of road in the valley below could be commanded from every angle.

Good Friday was bath day for the battalion and all ranks went by transport in

batches to [El Aine](#), where the mobile bath unit operated an efficient and much appreciated service. The bath, though hardly designed for individual enjoyment, at least allowed fifteen minutes of mass pleasure as the hot jets played on the assorted shapes of a platoon or so of pink bodies crowded on the slats below. The man operating the stopvalve was accused by each successive batch of cutting down the time allowed, for never did a quarter hour pass more quickly. The ministrations of these mobile bath units were one of the less spectacular but most appreciated of all services in the army.

Saturday 4 April marked the inception of anti-malarial precautions. Mosquito nets were issued to all ranks, and those whose duties took them out at nights were made to wear gloves and hoods so that the evening guard parade resembled a gathering of the [Ku Klux Klan](#). From constant spraying tents and blankets soon reeked of flytox, but the precautions were well worth while and the malarial rate among New Zealand troops was kept remarkably low.

Weekends were spent in many varied ways. The sightseers in the unit who still retained an affection for ruins or relics strongly supported Padre Forsman's conducted tours. The first excursion was to Krak des Chevaliers, one of three tremendous Crusader castles which in ancient days defended the pass that runs almost at sea level between the [Lebanon](#) Mountains: a pass as important in the present war of Dictators versus Democracy as it was in the far earlier struggle between Christian and Mohammedan. Krak des Chevaliers, standing massive and gaunt, was still complete enough to capture the imagination of the romantic and to impress the more practical on whom the parallel of the commanding castles of the Crusaders and the present construction work on the [Djedeide](#) fortress was not lost.

It was appropriate that during this delightful spring and in the lovely setting of the ancient city of Jerusalem, the first wedding of a member of [19 Battalion](#) should be solemnised overseas. The preliminary military formalities having first been complied with and permission (the Army's) having been granted, Captain David Thomson was wedded to Miss June Adams at Christ Church, Jerusalem, by Captain Innes, CF. Several days before the event the tall, debonair OC Wellington Company was host and guest of honour respectively at pleasant functions held in the unit messes. By training and character a punctilious and efficient officer, Captain Thomson could, however, under the circumstances be pardoned the error in dates

which occurred in his official application for permission to marry; in fact, the office work for so unusual an occasion evidently put the whole of Battalion Headquarters in a dither. Even after the wedding had been solemnised and Captain and Mrs Thomson had received the congratulations of the unit and departed on a brief honeymoon, an official signal was received at Brigade Headquarters giving the time of the wedding ceremony as 0230 hours.

The month progressed with the battalion still hard at work on its defensive position, into which, on the 17th, came a troop of guns from 14 Light AA Regiment. The arrival of the gunners in a fortress area was always a welcome sign for it marked a stage in the work on a position which now became of definite military importance. Road construction was far enough forward to get the artillery pieces in and out. The infantry now turned from digging to tactical training once more.

Companies in turn began a round of four-day manœuvres in the mountains, manœuvres which were designed to give officers and men exercise in movement and use of weapons across the tough terrain where any action which might eventuate in [Syria](#) would take place. Night patrols, too, were instituted, each company supplying a detachment for this training twice each week. The break from digging was welcomed and the company stunts were highly successful, a feature being the supply system. For each exercise transport was limited to pack mules and water had to be found and tested before drinking. Field firing, grenade throwing, practices with sticky bombs, etc., were all part of the programme, and each platoon commander submitted a full report on the work of his command. Excellent work was done by all companies, and the area of rough country in front of the defended position was well explored before the series ended.

Late in April the unit discarded battle dress and was issued with khaki drill and topee. Shortly afterwards Routine Order No. 48 carried the following paragraph: 'All ranks are warned that shorts long pattern will NOT be converted into shorts short pattern.' As protection against the malarial mosquito, ' [Bombay](#) bloomers', which transformed every man into a comedy character, were issued, for those who resented joining the ranks of the ridiculous had been in the habit of lopping off the extra bloomer length and risking the consequences.

An intriguing variety of liquor found its way into the camp—even the official

issue of beer included several strange brands. As the demand for all strong drink always exceeded the supply, some of the more scientifically minded managed to rig up a still, but its capacity was very limited and distilling could only be done when circumstances were favourable. The product, derived from potatoes, though potent was an unpleasing pale blue colour and required a highly flavoured base before it could be made palatable.

As the month ended the rumble of blasting on the defence works had its echo from far New Zealand, where feverish preparations were also in progress: preparations which embraced almost every male from sixteen to sixty. To help train and command this new force veterans from [2 NZEF](#) were withdrawn and sent back home. The 19th Battalion learned that those chosen from its ranks were RSM Jim Coull, RQMS Ted Berry, the CSM Taranaki Company, Nigel Hunter, MM, and the signal platoon's Sergeant Denny [Lindsey](#),<sup>3</sup> all four First Echelon men whose efficiency and devotion to duty in the field and during training fitted them for the role they would be required to undertake back in New Zealand. Though they left amid one of the customary cheerful celebrations which marked important occasions within the unit the battalion regretted their going. Events in the [Pacific](#), however, were watched with acute anxiety, and those left in the [Middle East](#) drew comfort from the fact that the New Zealand Army authorities were anxious to employ experienced men from the ranks of units whose service abroad entitled them to a place in the defence of their homeland. Two more [19 Battalion](#) men who had earlier returned temporarily to New Zealand were WO II Bert Steele and Sergeant Jim McClymont.<sup>4</sup> They, with Sergeant Lindsey, came back to the [Middle East](#) with the 10th Reinforcements in August 1943.

May signalled the sun's return to some strength and the withdrawal of two of the five blankets on issue to each man. Open-air concerts in the calm, lovely evenings were also a feature of this month. Some excellent performances were given. Concert parties, headed by the gay [ENSA](#) show 'Girls in Uniform', came in rapid succession: [10 Corps](#), the UDF, the Kiwi concert parties; and last but by no means least, the New Zealand YMCA Mobile Cinema visited the area.

Summertime began officially on 11 May. Reveille was put forward to 5 a.m. and work began at 6.30. The programme was still mainly construction but now 'I' section

and other battalion sub-units began to fulfil their specialist functions. The signals hook-up radiated from a well-sand-bagged and solidly built signal centre which housed the exchange and duty personnel. At Battalion Headquarters maps and diagrams of the defensive area were prepared. The 'I' section did excellent work here and the large-scale maps they made were highly praised by the Brigade Commander. In company positions communication trenches linked section posts and weapon pits, while each section prepared range cards on which its front was accurately plotted down to the last detail.

On the commanding heights of the Lebanons the Australians were similarly entrenched, while British and Free French forces manned positions on the far slopes on the Anti-Lebanons. The New Zealand Division, with 5 Brigade based forward at [Aleppo](#) in a delay-and-demolish role, was now firmly fixed in its fortress.

Gas training, with practical tests in a gas chamber and lectures and demonstrations by the Ninth Army mobile gas unit, reopened a subject which had been in abeyance for some time. The inconvenient respirator, heartily detested by all ranks, was resurrected once more and from now on encumbered every man at his work or recreation.

Divisional boxing and wrestling championships and 4 Brigade's sports meeting, at which the 19th distinguished itself by gaining the greatest number of points, were held in the middle of the month. Another event was the visit of the New Zealand Mobile Broadcasting Unit which arranged for fifty balloted men from the battalion to record personal greetings to their folk back home. In several of the companies First Echelon men were accorded the courtesy of first refusal for the limited places available, and all who were fortunate enough to broadcast greatly appreciated the privilege.

On the 20th a ceremonial parade in honour of HRH the Duke of Gloucester was held along the main road between [Laboue](#) and [Baalbek](#). The day was gloriously fine and the parade precise and impressive. The Duke paid high tribute to the 'appearance and bearing of the magnificent veterans of four campaigns'.

The following day (21 May) one of the most memorable exercises ever held by 4 Brigade began with a general move to [Forqloss](#). A platoon of 4 RMT carried the



companies, and two officers (Major C. Kolocouris and Captain C. Staroularis) from the Greek Army attended as observers and were attached to the battalion. Mass MT manoeuvres marked the first two days, and the drivers' high degree of efficiency in keeping desert formation clearly demonstrated that past work had not been forgotten. In the afternoon of the 23rd, with the imaginary enemy dispositions given in a [10 Corps'](#) summary, the brigade began a tactical move along the [Tripoli](#) pipeline. The 19th Battalion led and directed this move. After travelling 11 ½ miles a Divisional Cavalry screen operating out in front reported the presence of the enemy. For the infantry the joyride was now ended and the next two nights and days put every man to the test. Approach marches and attacks during darkness and in daylight kept companies constantly on the move. Some of the ground was difficult and the forced pace gruelling, but the unit worked well. Features of the exercise were the excellent control made possible by the use of the No. 18 wireless set and the close co-operation achieved with the aircraft in support.

The manoeuvre ended in exceptionally hot weather and the troops, thoroughly tired, embussed once more and returned to the brigade area, arriving in the evening of 26 May. The following day was an army holiday, interior economy being the only duty.

By the end of the month day temperatures were becoming torrid, but the altitude ensured cool nights and the whole unit was at the peak of physical fitness. The Syrian climate, the plentiful food, the solid navvying, the sports' programme and the mountain marches had all been excellent tonics. But the pleasant Syrian interlude was soon to end.

By June the positions on the Jebel el Emside were almost finished. Battle headquarters for Battalion and companies had been built, and wiring and mining the approaches were the next items on the construction programme. Meanwhile the new road from the foot of the Spiral to the Battalion Headquarters' area was creeping upwards. The Engineers were busy with water supply problems and substantial concrete tanks were being built. Supply dumps for reserves of fuel and ammunition were already established. Among the gangs of civilian labourers employed by the sappers were many Syrian women, a fact which at first caused much astonishment to the troops, who when passing the toiling parties were always ready to hurl derisive comments at the RE supervisors for their lack of chivalry in permitting

women to perform this solid manual work.

With the area now well under way to completion leave facilities were extended, and many took the opportunity to see [Syria](#) both by visits to the official leave centres at [Baalbek](#) and [Zahle](#) and in unofficial excursions into the numerous villages dotted over the surrounding countryside. The wild flowers of spring had now disappeared but the weather, though hot in the afternoons, was still cool in the evenings. Harvest time in vineyard and cornfield was approaching, and the peasants, robbed of much of last year's yield by the military operations against the Vichy French, were now without reserves. Selected men from the Division took over the roles of grocer and policemen. Flour was distributed to the poverty-stricken villagers, and steps were taken to prevent hoarding and to ensure the equal distribution of the new harvest.

During this period [Palmyra](#), [Aleppo](#) and [Damascus](#), cities of almost legendary fame, were visited by many men, for all were eager to shop in the bazaars which had once yielded the lamp of Aladdin and to see where Haroun el Raschid had ruled in pomp and oriental splendour. Like the countryside, the villages and the cities took on a rich texture, a texture as vivid and romantic as the tapestries which made up so many of the soldiers' parcels sent to New Zealand at that time.

The inhabitants were friendly and their traditional costumes colourful. The uniforms of the French forces, too, lent an air of storybook unreality to the place. Peace and the leisure time to spend sightseeing and letter-writing yielded rich experiences which the soldier shared through letters and souvenirs sent to his family back home. The first fourteen days of June were enjoyable days. Then on the 15th came a bolt from the blue: orders to move—destination undisclosed—action immediate.

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<sup>1</sup> [Sgt A. R. Gibson](#); born [New Plymouth](#), 3 Apr 1917; carpenter's apprentice.

<sup>2</sup> [Rev Fr E. A. Forsman](#); [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 20 Mar 1909; RC clergyman.

<sup>3</sup> [WO II W. D. Lindsey](#), EM; [Auckland](#); born [Gisborne](#), 13 Mar 1918; warehouseman.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Lt J. D. McClymont; born [England](#), 18 Sep 1915; sheepfarmer; killed in action 15 Apr 1944.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 14 – BACK TO THE WESTERN DESERT

## CHAPTER 14

### *Back to the Western Desert*

Today is yesterday returned.

—Young

On Jebel Emside the night of 15 June and the day following were loud with the bustle of breaking the camp which in the last three months had been so painstakingly constructed. Carrying, checking and loading equipment, and handing over the position to 1 Greek Brigade were not completed until late in the evening of the 16th; the battalion then settled down under the stars to spend its last night in [Syria](#). During the day the CO had left with an advance party, and before the sun was astir on the 17th the rest of the unit, under Major Clive Pleasants, was on the move also—a move shrouded in secrecy.

Badges and titles had been removed from each man's uniform; the New Zealand insignia had been obliterated from the trucks; the orders were sudden, and extraordinary precautions had been taken to prevent news of the Division's going from leaking out. Despite all security measures, and almost before the battalion had had time to digest the news, a Syrian dealer in mess comforts arrived at Battalion Headquarters to claim his dues and two absentees made a timely return. However, at 5.15 a.m. on the 17th the battalion, travelling incognito, linked up with the other units' transport columns along the [Baalbek](#) road, passed the starting point and, leading the 4 Brigade convoy, headed south.

The troops were in fine fettle and the trip became almost a gala occasion. Each vehicle with its complement of soldiers was a trouper's wagon where tunes, tales, and songs shortened the miles which led to a destination unknown and a role unrevealed. Through a divisional order, all main centres were bypassed. The tall columns of the temples of Jupiter at [Baalbek](#), thrusting up above the trees in the early morning sun, were the last glimpse of a place which will always hold pleasant memories for those who were stationed in [Syria](#). By afternoon the convoy had crossed the border and was in Palestine; skirting the Sea of Galilee, the trucks ran into [Tiberias](#) then on towards the first day's terminus at [Tulkarm](#). Here the brigade laagered for the night at a well appointed transit camp. It had been a smooth and

uneventful run. Two hundred miles had been covered; the trip was still a novelty and the journey had been enjoyable. There were no general duties, and after a meal the battalion slept until 3 a.m.

After an early breakfast the 19th again took up its position at the head of the brigade group convoy and the journey started once more. Within the hour the hard-won fertility of the Palestine of the Jews fell behind and the road ran through arid Arab territory. Lydda, Gaza, then [Beersheba](#), and a halt was made for lunch. Twenty-five years before this inhospitable desert had been the battleground of an earlier generation of New Zealand soldiers, and when the trucks stopped outside the immaculate British cemetery at [Beersheba](#) many men strolled among the graves to stand silent for a moment before the thirty neat headstones which marked the last resting places of their own countrymen.

At Asluj, at still another transit camp, the brigade that night debussed, rushed for the showers and the [Naafi](#), then after a very enjoyable evening slept until 2 a.m. while the trucks refuelled for the next leg of the trip. At 3.30, breakfastless and still sleepy, the battalion scrambled into its vehicles and was at the starting point ready to lead the brigade to a spot opposite [Ismailia](#), which was the destination for the third day's run. There was little interest in travelling now—the rolling yellow sand dunes of [Sinai](#) were the only scenery—and heat, dust, and flies marked the return to Egyptian territory. That evening all spare Syrian pounds were converted into Egyptian piastres, and as a final crushing blow the next day's destination was announced as [Amiriya](#).

At 5.30 a.m. on the 20th the brigade moved off, crossed the Canal, and headed for the [Western Desert](#). Past Tel el Kebir, through the squalid Delta settlements, into [Cairo](#) and then on to the old familiar route past the Pyramids. It was the road which led to battle; along it, some 500 miles away, Rommel's offensive was now rolling towards [Egypt](#).

Rommel had not remained long at [El Agheila](#) after the successful British drive in the last days of 1941. By 21 January 1942 he was again on the offensive, and at the end of the month [Benghazi](#) once more fell into his hands. On 26 May he opened his attack on [Eighth Army](#), which was holding the extended [Gazala](#) positions west of [Tobruk](#). A panzer victory over the British armour on 12 June forced a retirement

towards [Tobruk](#). Now the fortress was once more threatened, and on last year's grim territory around [El Adem](#), [Sidi Rezegh](#), [Ed Duda](#) and [Belhamed](#) the clash was renewed. Hard fighting was already in progress.

At Amiriya transit camp on the night of 20 June there may have been some disappointment about the destination of the battalion, but there was certainly no dismay about the prospect of battle ahead. Despite a scheduled early start for the [Western Desert](#), discussion lasted long into the night when, lubricated by liberal supplies of Australian beer, groups of men made the most of their last opportunity to quench a thirst which would certainly remain unslaked until the end of the next campaign. Fresh from the serenity of [Syria](#), suddenly deposited on the doorstep of a desert battle, the battalion took full advantage of what would be perhaps the last opportunity of mixing together for some time. Sleep could wait; on the long route up to the front there would be plenty of time to snooze in the trucks.

That night the trucks also took on a reserve supply of fluid—forty gallons of petrol per vehicle and two gallons of water per man. The endurance of the NZASC drivers had been outstanding; the battalion considered themselves fortunate to have again travelled in the trucks of No. 4 Company [4 RMT](#). Many of the same drivers who had successfully carried the unit through the campaign in 1941 were still at the wheels. Now, looming up ahead, there was another battle which would further test men and vehicles. Neither would be found wanting.

At sunrise on Sunday the 21st the trek up to the front began and at sunset the battalion convoy stopped just outside the eastern perimeter of the [Matruh](#) fortress. Nine hundred miles had been covered in the past five days. For the first time during the trip picks and shovels came out and slit trenches were dug. When darkness fell there was a distant air raid, and with it an effective anti-aircraft accompaniment from the town. The last vestiges of peace were shattered. 'Today is yesterday returned.' Before the newly dug slit trenches could be slept in orders came to move. Simultaneously the wireless announced the startling news of the fall of [Tobruk](#). Once more the 19th was in the war and once more the situation was serious.

After an uneasy night mainly taken up with moving and digging trenches, the battalion was ordered to occupy a position inside the Matruh Box. The move was watched by an enemy reconnaissance aircraft and it seemed certain that further



attention from the air could be expected. The bombers waited for darkness, and despite heavy anti-aircraft fire dropped a large number of bombs. Fortunately none fell in the unit's new area. Thereafter the raids were regular.

The battalion remained at Mersa Matruh until the afternoon of the 25th, standing to at 4.30 each morning and at 7.30 each evening. During this period the newly formed anti-tank platoon was issued with three two-pounder guns and portées. The pieces were badly rusted up, and before the recoil mechanism could be operated a Bren carrier was required to drag the barrel free of the carriage. The guns were finally restored to working order and later used effectively against the enemy. Battalion Headquarters now caught up with its office work, companies checked weapons and ammunition, and the men relaxed as frequently as possible in the blue [Mediterranean](#). The bathing area was near the 'Lido', a spot at which legend states the alluring Cleopatra once swam and where in more peaceful times the lovelies from [Cairo](#) were wont to emulate their seductive sister.

The four days spent at [Matruh](#) were tense with anticipation, waiting for the battle which all knew to be drawing nearer. For Eighth Army the campaign in the desert was not going well. On the 24th Rommel had crossed the Egyptian frontier, and next day reports indicated that his forward elements were only 40 miles away from [Matruh](#). Down the road from the west the vehicles of the withdrawing forces came nose to tail. Orders were received for the New Zealand Division and other [13 Corps'](#) formations to move out and hold up the Hun as long as possible.

As the battle loomed all preparations were made to meet it. As was now obligatory, one company was chosen for withdrawal to Base. Hawke's Bay drew the doubtful distinction of being left out of battle and, under the command of Major Cyril Latimer, pulled out immediately. Feelings among the men of that company and those they left behind were mixed. All now knew that the battalion would be involved in a situation of unparalleled seriousness. The Hawke's Bay men were loath to go. Yet all of them who had known action, the trials and the terrors of battle and the extreme hardships of desert warfare, would honestly admit relief at this further respite. In a few days they were back in [Cairo](#) enjoying a surfeit of leave in a city now almost deserted by their countrymen. Later, as the wounded began to trickle back to [Helwan](#) hospital, the Hawke's Bay men, always hungry for news of the battalion, became frequent visitors to the wards. Soon the wisdom of the system

which had kept them out of the fray would become obvious.

On 25 June, from midday to 3 p.m., the battalion (less Hawke's Bay Company), in full fighting kit, stood by its transport waiting the order to move. While waiting for final instructions the men watched an amazing display by a lone enemy raider who, defying a torrent of ack-ack shells, cruised around and bombed where he wished; after setting on fire two fuel trucks he flew away, apparently quite unscathed. The pilot was a brave but very lucky man.

Leaving the fortress and heading south, the 19th linked up with the rest of 4 Brigade Group and continued southwards. During daylight formations of Bostons flying west, and returning again in a remarkably short time, were an encouraging sight. Below the air cover the New Zealand columns rolled on unhindered. At midnight the formation laagered. At first light the following morning the battalion took up a position on the left flank of the brigade and faced south-west. The 20th Battalion moved to the right flank and [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#) to the centre, facing north-west. Fifth Brigade was laagered to the north-east of the position, and out in front were reconnaissance patrols. Throughout the morning and for the greater part of the afternoon [Boston](#) bombers were frequently overhead. No sign was seen of the enemy on the ground or in the air.

During the late afternoon the 19th, moving on a bearing of 165 degrees for a distance of about 10 miles, took up a position facing south along a low escarpment. Some excitement soon developed. A strange force including some tanks could be seen on the escarpment further south. They had just been identified as friendly when a flight of thirty-five enemy bombers came out of the setting sun. Fifteen of them peeled off and attacked the battalion position. Their bombs caused only one casualty in the unit though 4 Field Ambulance, to the north of the battalion, suffered more severely. The 19th had its second casualty when, in the confusion caused by the raid, Private 'Darkie' Thompson, <sup>1</sup> who was sheltering in a slit trench, was run over by a 'bug'.

The rest of the night was quiet and at 4.30 next morning the battalion again moved, this time some 1500 yards west to fill the gap between 4 Brigade and Divisional Headquarters at [Minqar Qaim](#). By 8 a.m. the unit was in position, company areas had been defined, and digging then began. At midday the first enemy shells

arrived and a spirited artillery duel developed. The enemy was using captured British 25-pounders to augment his own guns. It was six months since the majority of the Division had been under shellfire. In the battalion the reaction of steady confidence was gratifying—'It's turned out nice again Corp' called an unseen Bren-gunner from a forward weapon pit to his section leader. With the arrival of the first shell the whole of the unit was alert and ready to take on the targets which might follow.

While the artillery roared the enemy moved up concentrations of tanks, guns and lorried infantry. By late afternoon the Division was surrounded and the enemy was attacking simultaneously from the south and north. Five separate assaults were launched and had been beaten off before darkness. The whole of the Division's area was meanwhile raked with every kind of fire, but its own guns were replying effectively and the perimeter was soon ringed by burning enemy vehicles. Its casualties, however, had been considerable and [Divisional Headquarters](#) had suffered severely during the afternoon, the GOC himself being wounded while watching the enemy attacks from a forward position. [Brigadier Inglis](#) left Lieutenant-Colonel [Burrows](#) <sup>2</sup> in command of 4 Brigade and went to take over the Division, which meanwhile kept up its vigorous retaliation until darkness fell.

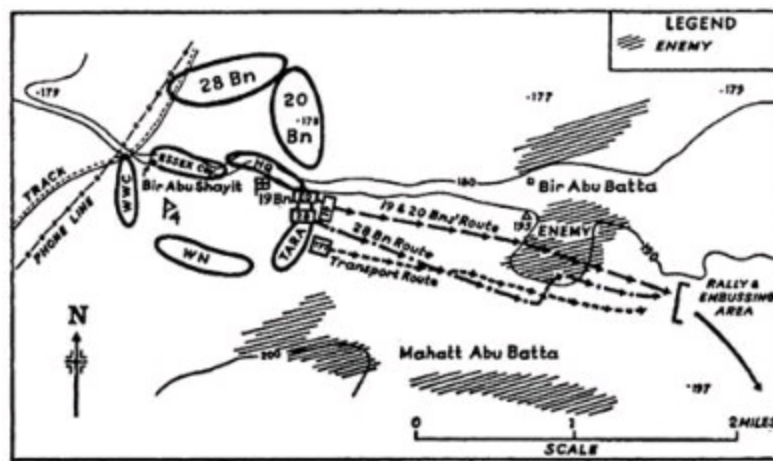
In the 19th area the mortar platoon and the anti-tank platoon had had a busy time. The latter's two-pounder portées were on the move and in action continuously on all sides of the position. All enemy transport was kept at a respectful distance and one armoured car, a motor-cycle, and probably one tank were accounted for. Late in the afternoon an unlucky shot set fire to one of the portées. It caught fire and burnt out, much to the chagrin of its commander and crew. Beneath the seat of the towing truck was an unbroached bottle of whisky.

At nightfall the artillery fire virtually ceased and a British ambulance approaching from the north was permitted to drive in to the battalion area. It was driven by a German who had with him a wounded companion. Companies now pushed out offensive patrols. It was evident that the Division was in a very difficult situation, and the Battalion Commander received verbal orders that an attempt would be made that night to break through the encircling enemy.

At last light a Bren carrier patrol under Captain Frank Stewart and Sergeant Joe [Carmichael](#) <sup>3</sup> made a reconnaissance towards [Bir Abu Batta](#). They were fired on by

enemy tanks and one carrier was damaged and the rest forced to take shelter. Stewart continued on foot to confirm the reported heavy concentration of enemy in that area. At 11 p.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows gave his orders for 4 Brigade to attack the enemy position at the re-entrant south of the cistern: 'Bde night attack in the following order: 19 Bn, front. 28 Bn, right rear. 20 Bn, rear left of 19 Bn, to rest on escarpment. Starting line FDL of Taranaki Coy 19 Bn.' It was to be a silent attack with the bayonet, the tried and proven method which had so often got the New Zealanders out of their difficulties and brought disaster to the enemy.

Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell called the 19th orders group together at 11.15 p.m. and the battle formation of the battalion was laid down as Wellington Company (Captain D. S. Thomson) right front, Taranaki Company (Captain H. G. Wooller) left front, Wellington West Coast Company (Captain W. E. Aitken) right rear, and the company of the Essex Regiment (Captain W. J. Young) attached to 19 Battalion, left rear. The battalion frontage was 300 yards, its depth 200 yards, and the success signal two red flares and a green. The attack was a desperate venture, but on the return of the OCs the companies heard the news and moved out quickly and confidently to the start line. Here there was a long wait and the men lay down in formation as they had been drawn up—a silent, thoughtful pause before battle, with more than the usual anxiety for commanders, for as the minutes ticked by it was evident that things were not going to plan. The Maori Battalion was late. At last the long-awaited order was given and the 19th got up and moved noiselessly forward in good heart, determined, orderly and grim. While the three battalions of 4 Brigade were preparing for the attack, the brigade transport (with the wounded aboard), under Major Pleasants, made ready to move forward on the success signal which was expected within the hour.



Battalion positions at Bir Abu Shayit and route of break-out by 4 Brigade and 28 (Maori) Battalion on night 27-28 June 1942

**Battalion positions at Bir Abu Shayit and route of break-out by 4 Brigade and 28 (Maori) Battalion on night 27–28 June 1942**

It was 1.45 a.m. on 28 June when the brigade crossed the start line. The attack was on and the Hun, still unaware of the movement which menaced him, was sending up only a few routine flares. It was full moon, and at times the advancing men seemed to be going forward in daylight, but their advance was not detected. Approximately 2000 yards had been covered before the first contact was made. Pandemonium then broke loose.

The 19th went in from the west and the Maoris, finding few enemy in their path across the depression, charged over from the south. Simultaneously the 20th dropped down from the escarpment into a wadi on the left. The enemy, with attackers converging on him from all quarters, fired frantically with every weapon he could command, but the attack could not be halted. There were no orders and no urging; the whole brigade surged forward spontaneously, cheering, firing, bombing and bayoneting as though each man was fully aware that the fate of the New Zealand Division depended upon his actions that night. The tornado of fire in the re-entrant did nothing to check the determined rush. The Germans were rattled, obviously taken unawares. Many were still in their blankets, but all fought well, firing wildly from beneath vehicles, from slit trenches, from the tonneaus of cars and the backs of trucks. Some of their transport tried to escape to the north but Bren-gun fire, bakelite grenades, and sticky bombs added weight to rifle and bayonet, and many vehicles and much equipment were destroyed. Firing from the hip our Bren-gunners did devastating work, their bullets penetrating the fleeing trucks. The

enemy tried every trick to get clear: some, climbing beneath the now wrecked transport, wedged themselves in, hiding between axle and tray, but even this method was unavailing and, once discovered, a grenade tossed underneath each vehicle took further toll. Burning petrol now lit up the whole area.

When enemy opposition had almost ceased Captain Thomson, who had boldly led his company to the east of the depression, sent up the success signal. The triumphant roar from the troops was led by the tall figure of Colonel Hartnell who, armed with rifle and bayonet, had gone through with the attack. His headquarters, keeping pace with difficulty with his long-legged stride, heard during that hectic hour but one laconic order—given to a Bren carrier commander—to go ahead and locate the forward companies. Before it could be carried out two red Very lights followed by a green signalled victory; the action was over.

Simultaneously with the success signal the brigade transport convoy moved forward and the attackers, picking up as many as possible of their own wounded, made for the rallying and embussing area. Orderliness now replaced pandemonium. Units and companies quickly sorted themselves out while the trucks came on. A fusillade from the right rear seemed to spell trouble, but the few troops on the transport vehicles, fired at by enemy elements to the north, vigorously returned their shots as the column veered off at speed, turned in again, and finally halted at the prearranged area where the attacking troops were waiting. As the convoy arrived an enemy heavy machine gun, firing on a fixed line from a distance of about 400 yards or so, opened up. One of the 19th Bren carriers went out and silenced it as embussing began. The operation did not go on undisturbed, however, for now long-range anti-tank and heavy machine-gun fire from the north quickly put two vehicles—Major Pleasants' pick-up and Taranaki Company's cooks' wagon—out of action and gave added urgency to the move. Men scrambled aboard any transport handy. Major Pleasants rescued the wireless set from his pick-up and the convoy moved off, heading south-east at its best speed and under the direction of 4 Brigade Headquarters. One of the Essex Company's trucks refused to start but Private Bert Whittaker,<sup>4</sup> driver of the [19 Battalion](#) petrol wagon, stopped, hitched on a tow-line, and the British vehicle and its occupants were brought safely away.

On other trucks the wounded were made as comfortable as possible. Tired troops clung precariously to cabs and portées as the convoy bumped rapidly onwards

across the stony desert. It was a wild, uncomfortable ride and there were times when sharp detours had to be made to avoid enemy concentrations; but the Division was clear of the encircling panzers. Dawn broke three hours later on a strangely impressive scene. For miles and miles, right out ahead to where the desert and sky met in an indeterminate horizon, a moving mass of vehicles fanned out from their nose-to-tail night columns and went forward in open desert formation. After a short halt the brigade did not stop again until darkness fell. The Alamein defences were but a few miles further on.

To the 4 Brigade Group the [Bir Abu Batta](#) break-out from the encircled [Minqar Qaim](#) position is a proud battle honour. The 19th Battalion shares this honour with  $\frac{1}{4}$  [Essex Regiment](#), whose company under Captain Young fought side by side with the 19th companies. This tricky night operation was for some of the Essex men their first action. They fought magnificently and, once back on the embussing area, formed up and marched to their transport in the traditional—and under the circumstances most impressive—parade-ground manner of well-trained British troops. Elated by their share in the general success, they made no secret of their admiration for the battalion with whom they had served, and the men of the 19th were themselves pleased to have had the [Essex Regiment](#) with them. This was the second occasion in which the battalion had been closely associated with the [Essex Regiment](#) in the Desert. In both the 1941 and 1942 campaigns relations between the two units had been happy. At [Ed Duda](#) and at [Minqar Qaim](#) the honours and the hardships were shared equally by troops from the [United Kingdom](#) and from New Zealand.

The night of 28–29 June when the huge convoy halted and laagered was memorable for many things. It was a busy night, yet a night of peace and keen appreciations. The first task was to evacuate the wounded who had stoically endured the long and uncomfortable journey in the bumping trucks. The second was to sort out companies and platoons, with the inevitable roll-call and preparation of lists of killed, wounded and missing. The third, at which the cooks performed miracles, was to prepare a hot meal—the first hot food the men had had for over twenty-four hours. There were the usual slit trenches to be dug, pickets to be posted and vehicles to be tended; and while all this work went on there was conversation—a safety valve to release reaction after the battle. Many stories and experiences

were swapped, for impressions of the battle were still vivid. One, shared by all, concerned the enemy's lavish use of tracer. Some men swore that they were able to step or jump over the streams of bullets that criss-crossed the battlefield. Many undoubtedly owed their lives to the fact that the enemy machine-guns, firing on fixed lines, thus disclosed their positions.

The fate of the wounded who in the darkness and confusion had been left behind was discussed. Some well-known faces failed to show up during the check that night, and the final tally of casualties sustained by the battalion at [Minqar Qaim](#) and [Bir Abu Batta](#) showed 13 killed in action, 8 died of wounds, 8 wounded and 1 unwounded left behind and afterwards taken prisoner, and 9 missing. Forty-six were wounded during the engagement but were successfully evacuated. Among the men whose loss the battalion mourned were Lieutenants [Cross](#)<sup>5</sup> and [Dix](#),<sup>6</sup> the RSM [WO I Wilson](#),<sup>7</sup> and the stalwart signals corporal, V. E. R. [Horne](#).<sup>8</sup> True, the total losses were surprisingly light but the gaps were sorely felt. Though there was no lack of good men to fill the vacant appointments, old hands were always missed.

Back at [Bir Abu Batta](#) the dawn disclosed a grim spectacle. The whole area was thick with German dead and wrecked enemy transport. The plight of the New Zealand wounded left behind was a sorry one for the Germans were bitter in defeat. Some of our men received little mercy at their hands and were forced to spend the long, burning day without cover, food or water, and were harassed by frequent searches during which they were roughly handled by the enemy guards. Cigarettes, water bottles, and all personal possessions were taken from them, and the fate of at least some of the group seemed to be sealed when their captors, lining up those who could stand, talked of shooting. A high-ranking German officer arriving on the scene restored reason among the guards, whose prisoners were shortly afterwards turned over to the Italians.

During the night attack on [Bir Abu Batta](#) 4 Brigade took very few prisoners. The operation was not one which could afford encumbrance for the stakes were high. The attackers had but one objective: to blast a lane through the encircling enemy and allow the Division to escape. The New Zealanders were on their own. No help could be expected from [13 Corps](#) for [1 Armoured Division](#), badly battered in previous engagements, was unable to send tanks in support. A swift, decisive assault and an undisturbed withdrawal were the two tactical requirements. At [Bir Abu Batta](#) they



were both fulfilled.

The 19th brought back to the Alamein Line but two prisoners. They were found during the halt next morning clinging precariously to the back of a portée. In one of the prisoners, a very scared snowy headed German youth of perhaps 18 years, his unit, 617 Motor Anti-Aircraft Battery, lost a promising soldier, for if he was as eager to please his officers as he was his captors, his future must surely have been bright. He was an excellent cook, and the company which held him was sorry when the time came to pass him back to Brigade.

The presence of the New Zealand Division in the Western Desert surprised the enemy Intelligence and the official German reports of the encounter complained that the attack had been made by 'thousands of drunken New Zealanders'. Rommel's advance had been halted and one of his panzer divisions disorganised.

On 29 June the New Zealand Division reorganised and prepared for the next round. Along the Alamein Line, from the coast to the [Qattara Depression](#) 35 miles south, defensive positions were pushed ahead with vital urgency. Minefields, strongpoints, and anti-tank gun and machine-gun posts were being rapidly added to the already partly established defences. Thirteenth Corps took over the southern half of the line while [30 Corps](#) concentrated on the defence of the northern sector. The battle-weary Eighth Army was doggedly on the defensive, for on this new line hung the fate of the [Middle East](#). It was a crucial period.

In [Cairo](#) itself there were feverish preparations. Base camps and L of C<sup>9</sup> units were combed for fresh troops for the forward area. Headquarters and installations in [Cairo](#) and [Alexandria](#) were organised for anti-paratroop and anti-sabotage work. A considerable section of the Egyptian population now made no secret of their sympathies. A further German victory would almost certainly be the signal for an open breach, for Farouk had no love for the British. Plans were prepared to deal with both situations.

The spectacular advance of the [Afrika Korps](#) had not been without tactical disadvantages to Rommel. Former positions were reversed and the maintenance of long supply lines now became his headache and not Auchinleck's. But his tried [Panzer Army](#) was confident that it could crash through to the [Nile](#).

At first light on 30 June Colonel Hartnell was called to 4 Brigade Headquarters and received orders to take out a mobile column to the east to cover the withdrawal of forces of the brigade into the defensive area of the 'Kaponga Box', where 6 Brigade was already established. The column moved out early in the morning forward on to the high ground covering the enemy approach. The force consisted of a skeleton headquarters (CO, Intelligence Officer, two members of the 'I' section, two battalion signallers with No. 18 set, two signalmen from J Section Divisional Signals with No. 11 set), Wellington Company and Wellington West Coast Company, one platoon from 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion (Lieutenant Evans<sup>10</sup>), a 25-pounder battery from 4 Field Regiment (Major Bevan<sup>11</sup>), plus one section of Bren carriers.

An enemy OP with several six-wheeler cars and a light tank withdrew as the force moved into position on the high ground at Hager el Ghurab to link up with a Divisional Cavalry squadron operating to the north. From this feature enemy columns out in front were kept under observation all day. Except when disturbed by RAF bombing raids they did not appear to be moving, and at nightfall a reconnaissance revealed that all our troops were now clear of the road below. The mobile column therefore withdrew inside 6 Brigade's position and rejoined the battalion next morning.

While the mobile force was away the unit welcomed back to its ranks six men whose fate had been unknown since the 27th, when the first enemy attacks on Minqar Qaim began. During that morning the reserve section of Bren carriers had been sent out south of the battalion position on a reconnaissance and to act as FOPs for the artillery. Of the three carriers which went out only one returned, and as the other two were last seen being pursued by enemy tanks there seemed little reason to believe that they had made good their escape through the panzers which ringed the position. Fortune had favoured them, and Corporal Mac Opie,<sup>12</sup> one of their number who kept a diary, was able to give the following report:

The men involved were: No. 1 carrier, Sgt F. V. (Frank) England, Pte W. J. (Paddy) Doonan (driver), Pte J. (John) McFadgen (gunner). No. 2 carrier, Cpl C. M. (Mac) Opie, Pte C. C. (Colin) McPherson (driver), Pte R. L. C. (Len) Brown (gunner). No. 3 carrier, Cpl A. R. (Wyn) Gibson, Pte R. V. (Ray) Ryan (gunner), Pte I. E. (Ian) Archer (driver). We were reserve section and were sent out to do a reconnaissance

to the south for [Capt D. S. Thomson](#) of Wellington Company. We never got back to the Platoon from there for we were sent on again as a FOP for 46 Bty. It was a very hot day and we parked under the lee of a small escarpment, leaving one man on guard in a sanger to observe east with glasses while another man was posted round the corner to observe to the south. Len Brown was on guard in the sanger when he saw something coming out of the haze close to an abandoned staff car (7th Armd Div) which we had passed during the morning. He called out and as he did so we watched some 2-pounder portées—British pattern—pull up and turn with their guns pointing towards our position! Not so good. At the same time there emerged from the haze some Mark IV enemy tanks.

My reactions were that our artillery observers must have seen these happenings as they were located quite close to the scout car mentioned before and we ourselves could see the car quite plainly. It was obvious, however, that our next job was to get out of it as quickly as possible and head back to the Bn for the tanks were advancing up the Wadi between us and the NZ positions.

By this time we had roused the rest of the boys, started our carriers and, taking a zigzag course, we ran away flat out west. The tanks pursued firing all the while—both big and small stuff—but we were lucky and got up the big escarpment OK. Wyn Gibson's carrier, however, stopped about 200 yds short of the crest. We went back on foot and poked our heads over to see what had happened to him but he was crawling along towards the Div and the Huns seemed to be leaving him alone. They were still concentrating on us so we kept going and joined up with an Armd car which had just been chased off the top; he took us with him to his command truck. Here the English Col in charge told us that we had better tag along with him as he was pulling out to go south then east. The enemy were concentrating to the west. We took his advice but Frank [England's](#) carrier was towing mine which had cut out the generator and by the time we turned east the Armd cars proved too fast for us, but we did not worry as it seemed clear that we were now on the main convoy route back.

At dark, we joined up with the 'B' echelon column of the 7th Armd Div where we had a hot meal. They did not believe us when we told them we were Kiwis and as our carriers had no fernleaf on them, and we were wearing no shoulder titles, it was difficult to convince them. However, during the meal their RSM came along with the

announcement that the NZs were in the Desert and engaging Jerry now. The whole crowd of Tommies—about 40 or 50 men—set up a chorus of 'Good old Kiwis' and gave three cheers for the NZ Div. We felt very proud.

That night after a half hour's sleep we got hurried orders to move as we were supposed to be on the direct line of advance of a German tank-supported tank supply column coming up from the south. This time my carrier was towed by a big breakdown truck but at dawn the truck had to leave us for the going had been very rough, so we transferred to their column's only protection: a Stuart tank with a jammed turret, a two-pounder gun which would not fire and no machine guns. Their only armament was a Tommy Gun with a 100 round magazine! After travelling 52 miles that day we were fortunate enough to come across an abandoned carrier. We retrieved the generator, battery, tools, track pins, etc., set fire to it and then made the necessary repairs to my bus.

Late that afternoon as we headed east in the British convoy two ME 110s cleaned up five trucks. A Hurricane on his way home came down to investigate and one of the 110s shot him down in flames. However after that the [Luftwaffe](#) left the convoy alone and we travelled all night, passing through the wire gap in the [Fuka](#) minefield at 11.30 p.m.

At dawn we leaguered, cooked a meal, talked things over and decided to try to get back to the Div. Word came through that [Fuka](#) was in German hands so we headed for [Alamein](#) via [Daba](#), having first fueled up at a British dump and at the same time taken aboard good stocks of tinned food. We had nearly reached the escarpment when a South African Armd car dashed up and announced that they expected Jerry at any time and that we had better clear out east. We hit the main road again at 7.30 p.m. and were about 13 miles west of the Alamein Rd which we picked up before halting. Italian bombers were doing a shuttle service bombing and strafing up and down the road all night; so once more sleep was out of the question.

At dawn we started off along the road inland and had a good find in milk and sugar on an abandoned ration truck. We had just come across a new Bren Carrier which had also been abandoned when the Carrier Platoon from 26 Bn arrived on the scene. They were on the way to the rail. They invited us to go with them but as a 27th Bn officer told us that the 19th were away inland we refused the invitation and

after some searching, 3 hrs later met up with our own Unit. It was then June the 30th.

On 1 July 4 Brigade was established in Deir el Munassib. The new month opened with pitiless temperatures and in the wadi where the 19th took up its new position the heat was terrific. Shade was difficult to contrive for there was no material from which shelter could be constructed. The sun beat down into the shallow slit trenches, where in the pause before further action the men tried to catch up on their sleep. Out in front of the position, patrols riding in hot, oil-drenched Bren carriers watched a tank battle develop around Deir el Shein where, unknown to them at the time, 18 Indian Brigade Group was making a gallant stand against the Axis' first attack on the Alamein Line.

The night proved cooler and was mercifully quiet. The battalion, pleased with the news that it would remain in its present inconspicuous position for another twenty-four hours at least, settled down to sleep. During the darkness a British armoured brigade rattling its way forward through the area added a further sense of security to those badly needed hours of rest. The morning dawned without disturbance, and the first enemy action seen during 2 July was a flight of bombers which unloaded their cargoes before reaching the battalion area. During the afternoon rumours of an impending enemy armoured attack created a certain amount of tension, and some heavy detonations seemed to signal an approaching battle. On investigation these proved to be nothing more than a nearby unit practising with spigot mortars. The day passed without further incident and the night was again quiet.

At 7.30 a.m. next day sudden orders were received for the battalion to move out and destroy an enemy concentration then being engaged by a mobile column under the command of Brigadier [Weir](#),<sup>13</sup> [CRA 2 NZ Division](#). The action was taking place approximately six miles to the north. Barely an hour and a half later the 19th was on the spot. The approach was made in MT, Wellington Company leading, Wellington West Coast Company on the left flank, and Taranaki Company on the right flank. Once within striking distance the companies debussed, and the enemy was discovered to be in a slight depression with some supporting arms further away over a crest to the south. The battalion mortars went into action immediately and their

shooting was excellent: two enemy ammunition trucks and an 88-millimetre gun and portée were set on fire within the first two minutes. [Wellington](#) and Taranaki Companies went forward in battle order until, going over the slight rise towards the depression, they came under heavy machine-gun and mortar fire. In addition to his usual weapons the enemy was using captured Brens. Our infantry, going to ground immediately, engaged any targets visible until the supporting machine-gunners of No. 4 Platoon [27 Battalion](#) were brought up. One section of these MGs gave overhead fire; the other went forward with the companies, got into position and gave close support to the attackers. The combined fire from the battalion's four anti-tank guns, all its mortars, and these attached machine guns had a devastating effect on the opposition and their fire weakened. Three tanks and several trucks and guns attempting to escape north were engaged by the anti-tank platoon, and at the



### **Attack on enemy concentration, 3 July**

same time the forward companies came to grips with the enemy infantry posts. These quickly surrendered. The reserve company (Wellington West Coast) was now put in and the whole enemy concentration overrun.

The bag for this successful engagement was 352 badly shaken prisoners, mainly Bersaglieri and gunners of 132 Artillery Regiment, twelve 105-millimetre, eleven 88-millimetre, and sixteen 75-millimetre guns, five British 25-pounders (one of which had received a direct hit from one of our anti-tank guns), a number of 20-millimetre dual-purpose guns plus many mortars, machine guns, and ack-ack guns. Trucks, ammunition, and a quantity of valuable medical supplies completed the booty, while

an enemy tank knocked out by our anti-tank platoon was a heartening sign of the effectiveness of the two-pounder in its new role as a battalion weapon.

As soon as the engagement was over orders were received by the 19th to withdraw to the area occupied by Brigadier Weir's mobile column. The battalion, in the highest spirits, embussed once more. Its attack had been a decisive and well executed operation, impressive in its marked success and in the co-ordination between the infantry and its supporting weapons. Our casualties were two killed—Privates 'Lofty' Plant <sup>14</sup> and Laurie Ryder <sup>15</sup>—and thirteen wounded. The enemy had suffered severely, not only at the battalion's hands but in the earlier bombardment he had received from the guns of 4 Field Regiment. Later in the afternoon a patrol with sappers attached visited the scene of the engagement and completed the demolition of the heavier weapons. The four serviceable 25-pounders were recovered and put into commission by our own artillery. The battalion signals platoon, too, scored a truck to replace one lost at [Minqar Qaim](#), as well as a useful quantity of Italian line equipment.

This action and attacks made elsewhere on other parts of the front drew off enemy strength from the north and relieved the pressure on the right and centre of the new line at a crucial period during its consolidation. They also brought the wrath of the [Luftwaffe](#) against the forward troops.

On the morning of the 4th the 19th rejoined the brigade and a short move was made to the north-west. On settling down again the battalion had only just dug in when a patrol of Stukas appeared overhead. Their target turned out to be Corps' and [Divisional Headquarters](#)' areas, and on this occasion the unit luckily escaped unscathed. But the noise of the bombing had scarcely subsided when enemy artillery began to shell the brigade area. The 4th Field Regiment's guns were quick to reply and an artillery battle went on for about two hours. It died down about noon and the position remained quiet until 2.50 p.m., when Stukas and Junkers selected the 4 Brigade area as their target for the afternoon. All the surrounding ack-ack batteries went into action immediately and succeeded in keeping the raiders well up, but the battalion area received a heavy concentration of bombs and there were fifteen casualties—sixteen including 'Major', the regimental mascot. 'Major' was evacuated from the field through the normal medical channels, his field medical card being tied

to his collar on which he proudly wore his identity discs as No. 1 dog of the New Zealand Division and the three pips indicating his captain's rank.

During this raid two trucks, including one fully loaded with ammunition, were also hit, but Private 'Johnny' Trye—whose daring exploits in the recovery of MT under fire were now almost legendary—again distinguished himself by calmly walking out amid the falling bombs and exploding ammunition and driving away from the danger area another unit truck which but for his cool action would have been burnt out also. The ammunition truck was still burning when darkness fell. It provided illumination for reading an eagerly awaited mail from home which was distributed with the evening meal. There were no further alarms or visitations in the 4 Brigade position that night, but to the north-west of [El Mreir Depression](#) 5 Brigade went into action against the Pavia Division and inflicted further casualties on the luckless Italians.

The early morning of the 5th was still quiet and all ranks made the most of the rest period, but by 11.50 a.m. 4 Brigade was on the move once more. In desert formation it headed round the south of the [Kaponga Box](#) to take up a position on its west side. En route eight Me110s bombed the convoy, catching the right-flank vehicles and inflicting severe casualties. Among the many killed were the Brigade Commander, Brigadier [John Gray](#),<sup>16</sup> and the Brigade Major, [Brian Bassett](#).<sup>17</sup> The death of Brigadier Gray was a bad blow to 4 Brigade. As one of its senior battalion commanders he had, on arriving back with the Division after a course in Palestine, taken over the brigade from Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows, who had carried on from Minqar Qaim until reaching [Alamein](#). Gray was now succeeded by Brigadier Burrows. In this raid Lieutenant Jack Evans, who had commanded the [27 MG Battalion](#) platoon attached to the 19th and had given such stalwart support to the unit during its previous engagements, was also killed.

The Luftwaffe continued to shower 4 Brigade with its unwelcome attentions for the rest of the day, and when at 2 p.m. the battalion was in position near [Kaponga](#) it was discovered, with some dismay, that the area chosen was almost solid rock and quite undiggable. Fortunately the next two raids passed overhead, but in the evening two further flights of bombers straddled the battalion area but caused no damage or casualties. A 500-pound bomb dropped near Battalion Headquarters by the last of the Heinkels failed to explode. It was given a wide berth, and when a party of sappers arrived to attend to its disposal an interested audience, keeping at



a safe distance, were well under cover when the explosion came. The CO, however, had a very narrow escape. Unaware of what was happening, he arrived back from a reconnaissance to find his headquarters deserted, and climbing into a slit trench in an attempt to raise an answer on an unattended phone, he had just knelt down when the explosion occurred. The bang was louder than any bomb explosion previously encountered, and the effective range of one of these monsters was clearly demonstrated. During one of the bombing raids a nearby ack-ack battery suffered severely and the battalion's stretcher-bearers and RAP staff were kept busy assisting the casualties. The enemy was now dropping heavy stuff and his [Air Force](#) was more in evidence than ever before during the desert battles.

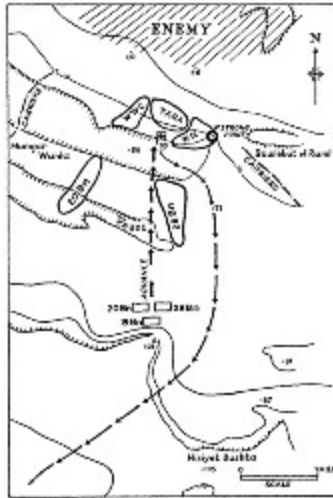
At this time 150 bomber and 500 fighter sorties a day were being flown by the [RAF](#). Along Rommel's line of advance good targets awaited our pilots, and if the forward units at [Alamein](#) were suffering under the spite of the [Luftwaffe](#), the panzers too were taking a battering. [Daba](#), [Fuka](#), [Sidi Haneish](#), and all enemy concentration points out in front were subjected to continuous harassing by our Air Force, whose chief role was to inflict as much damage as possible on the advancing columns and so give [Eighth Army](#) time to strengthen its line and to pass from defence to attack. Every hour gained was valuable and the sky offered a far more profitable field than the ground, where our forces, sorely short of armour, were reorganising and regrouping.

The Alamein Line was much extended and its defences still loosely knit. Battle groups weak in numbers and almost without armoured support were holding key positions. It was an anxious time, but nevertheless many successful attacks were pushed out against the enemy and he was forced to entrench. For the first time the desert war showed signs of becoming static.

The few dominating features in the battle area—features hardly worth the names of hills or valleys—became of prime tactical importance. In the centre of the line Ruweisat Ridge and [Alam Halfa](#) loomed much larger than their actual size. Both would shortly be the objectives in bloody battles. On the first, in a few days' time, 4 NZ Infantry Brigade would end its desert career; from the second, two months later, Rommel's forces recoiled and never recovered.

The battalion remained in position until the 7th, when at 30 minutes past

midnight it joined the other units of 4 Brigade in a night advance to [Point 59](#), some miles to the north. An attack on an enemy force feared to be menacing the flank of 5 Brigade was to be made at first light. The



Advance to Point 59 and engagement on 7 July. The strongpoint comprised a troop of anti-tank guns, 3-inch mortars, medium machine guns, a rifle platoon, and an artillery OP

Advance to [Point 59](#) and engagement on 7 July. The strongpoint comprised a troop of anti-tank guns, 3-inch mortars, medium machine guns, a rifle platoon, and an artillery OP

plan was for 20 and 28 Battalions to lead on to the southern edge of a shallow depression and take up a position there while the 19th, leapfrogging through them, was to go on to the objective, which was on the opposite (northern) side of the depression. The leading units started off at 1.30 a.m. and the battalion followed at 2.15, moving due north. Passing through 20 and 28 Battalions, it was learned that they had got on to their objective without making any contact with the enemy. The 19th kept on advancing according to plan and, still without meeting any enemy opposition, arrived on [Point 59](#) about an hour before dawn.

Companies were disposed as follows, all positions being along the edge of a low escarpment. Wellington West Coast was on the left; Taranaki Company, centre; [Wellington](#) Company, right. At first light the unit transport under Major Pleasants was to come forward and disperse in the depression under an escarpment some 400 yards south of the battalion position. Supporting weapons were now set up and sections got into fire positions. The light brightened, and to the intense astonishment of the whole unit it was seen that considerable enemy infantry forces

occupied the low ground to the north and had a 75-millimetre battery established on the high ground to the north-east. The enemy was completely oblivious to the presence of the battalion, and it was with a feeling of unreality that our troops watched his forward elements—barely 600 yards away—rubbing the sleep from their eyes, folding their blankets, and preparing breakfasts alongside the slit trenches from which they had just risen.

While our infantry watched the enemy at his early morning interior economy, a strongpoint which had been quickly established at a suitable spot on the right of the battalion line opened fire. Here the unit's 3-inch mortars and the attached machine-gun platoon from No. 2 Company [27 MG Battalion](#) (Major [C. C. Johansen](#) <sup>18</sup>) had set up, and with the range at approximately 1000 yards, their first bursts had such a telling effect on the enemy artillery that his guns never got into action. Simultaneously the infantry with LMG and rifle fire pinned the enemy infantry to the ground and inflicted heavy casualties on the startled Jerries. Our own artillery, whose battery positions had been established in the rear of the infantry, engaged enemy tanks and trucks which were clearly visible in the distance. Carrier screens operating to the east and west of the 19th line reported all hostile movements and gained much information; they were the means of preventing an enemy counter-attack from developing, and throughout the whole action the Hun was kept completely at our mercy.

During the morning [4 Field Regiment](#)'s guns were constantly active. They harassed the enemy at every point where he showed any signs of activity. The 19th Battalion strong-point and the artillery did some excellently co-ordinated shooting. Though at one stage during the morning the enemy managed to get some mortars into action and brought fire to bear against Wellington West Coast and Taranaki Companies, most of his weapons were soon silenced and our casualties for the engagement were surprisingly low. The only man killed was Private [Dick Hooper](#), <sup>19</sup> whose carrier was hit by an anti-tank shell. Seven other men were wounded.

At 2.40 p.m. the brigade was ordered to withdraw for a heavy force of enemy tanks was reported to be assembling to the west. The withdrawal was successfully carried out, the 19th bringing up the rear. A sharp air attack—which fortunately caused no damage or casualties—and the sight of a heavy concentration of enemy shells landing on the position which the unit had just vacated were the only incidents

of note during the return journey. Within an hour the 19th was back in its former area.

The co-ordination achieved during this action of 7 July was commended by the Brigade Commander. The battalion's 3-inch mortars, the attached MMGs (No. 5 Platoon [27 MG Battalion](#)), the [4 Field Regiment](#)'s anti-tank guns, a rifle platoon from Wellington Company, and an artillery OP constituted the garrison of the strongpoint. These elements, plus the Bren carriers, achieved a programme of observed fire which rendered all enemy attempts at counter-attack or retaliation ineffective.

Back in the battalion's position our artillery was again active and during the evening enemy bombers passed overhead several times. A large tank force was reported to be advancing around the flank of the Division's position, and orders were received from Corps Headquarters for a move towards the rear. Up to this time the Division had been on the flank of [13 Corps](#), whose extended front was but thinly manned and stretched as far north as Deir el Harra. There was a gap between the right of [13 Corps](#) and the left of [30 Corps](#) about Deir el Hima, and into this gap the Division was now being moved. The route lay back around the south of Qaret el Abd, and after a strenuous all-night move in which the exhausted drivers of the 4 Brigade vehicles had to strain every nerve to keep awake, the unit arrived and took up its position in the new area.

The troops were tired and units lay up for the day. The QM took the opportunity to issue fresh clothing, a much-needed hot meal was prepared, and with appetites whetted by several days' short commons the meal was tackled with gusto. The rest too was appreciated and, fortunately, during the day there was little enemy action to disturb it. At 8 p.m., however, the 19th was required to move on once more. Advancing two miles to the north and facing north, the battalion dug in in darkness in the Alam Nayil area.

The following day (9 July) was spent in improving the fighting slits, which had to be dug in almost solid rock, a disheartening and wearying task. Still, it was a reasonably quiet day with the [RAF](#) much in evidence above. Six huge Liberator bombers were watched with great interest as they flew by, and as this was the first appearance of these huge machines, there was much speculation about what they were. The weary infantry raised a cheer at this convincing evidence of our increasing

strength in the air. It was not until evening that the enemy opened his hate with a dive-bombing attack by eight of the detested Stukas. There were several casualties and Private [Phillips](#),<sup>20</sup> a popular member of the 'I' section, was killed. Later in the evening the sounds of a fierce tank battle somewhere out in front could be clearly heard, but to offset this disturbing din flights of [Wellington](#) bombers roaring overhead all night indicated that Rommel's newly captured supply port at Mersa Matruh was receiving attention from the [RAF](#).

On the 10th an alteration in the battalion position was ordered: Taranaki Company shifted from the right to the left flank and linked up with [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#), while Wellington West Coast Company on the right of the position made contact with [20 Battalion](#). Out in front of the 4 Brigade area unit Bren carriers kept constant patrol and maintained touch with 7 Motor Brigade, which was operating five 'Jock' columns south of the position. During the day our artillery was kept busy but there was little retaliation. The enemy occupied the [Kaponga Box](#), which had been abandoned by 4 Brigade the previous day, and was now pushing on to Qaret el [Himeimat](#). These advances seriously threatened the Alamein Line. The 5th Indian Division was therefore moved up to relieve 1 Armoured Brigade on the eastern end of [Ruweisat Ridge](#), which dominated the northern sector and was the most important tactical feature in the whole line.

On 11 July German forces had succeeded in establishing positions on the western ridges of the Ruweisat salient and had already set up several tank harbours in the rough ground to the south. Our armour was giving battle, and on the [Alam Nayil](#) ridge the troops of 4 Brigade were wakened in the early morning to the din of a tank clash taking place to the north. At 3 a.m. the New Zealand artillery joined in the battle and for almost two hours sent over salvo after salvo. During the morning the battalion area was twice bombed but otherwise the day was quiet until 5.30 p.m., when 4 and 5 Brigades moved to attack north along [Alam Nayil](#).

Proceeding on a bearing of 330 degrees from 20 Battalion's forward positions, the 19th advanced in transport for approximately a mile, then debussed and went forward another 600 yards on foot. All unnecessary vehicles were sent back and a temporary rear Battalion Headquarters established while the advance took place. During this move [23 Battalion](#) of 5 Brigade became the target for an extremely nasty

enemy artillery bombardment which later embraced 4 Brigade. The 19th, 20th and 28th Battalions, however, went steadily forward and, despite heavy artillery and mortar fire, reached their objective and dug in. This advance was a fine example of unflinching obedience to orders: a steady, controlled movement with a purposeful occupation of prearranged positions at its end. It was watched and favourably commented on by members of 1 Armoured Brigade whose tanks were harbouring close to the debussing point. The 19th and 20th had casualties.

At 3 a.m. a further move of 1000 yards was made and a fresh area occupied. Our armour, meanwhile, was concentrating in the rear, and the battalion Bren carriers, which were running a shuttle service between Rear HQ and the forward battalion positions, reported gleefully that some 180 tanks—Grants, Lees, Stuarts, Crusaders—were in a handy position to add weight to the final attack which was expected to take place the following day.

The 12th July dawned clear and the day was intensely hot. Both water and rations were scarce, and as the enemy artillery was active it was difficult to get supplies up to the infantry. However, just after midnight rations were sent up to the forward troops, and the first batch of reinforcements—some 92 other ranks—joined the battalion and went out to their companies that night.

During the day Lieutenant [Hugh Flower](#)<sup>21</sup> was ordered to report to Brigade Headquarters for briefing for a special mission. On his return to the battalion he selected fifteen men from Wellington West Coast Company to accompany him on a tricky reconnaissance patrol which would be carried out as soon as darkness fell. They were to go right through the enemy FDLs on to [Ruweisat Ridge](#) over five miles away, and observe and report on the position of minefields, wire, and enemy troops. Along the route which the patrol was to take, 4 Brigade would shortly move to attack and occupy Ruweisat. Careful compass bearings were given and, loaded into the 15 cwt truck of No. 11 Platoon, Wellington West Coast Company, Flower and his men set off on their mission.

Progress for the first three miles was slow. The truck crawled along without attracting attention then finally bogged down in deep sand. For a breathless few minutes all struggled to release it, for the patrol was now among enemy transport and German voices could be heard close by. Once out of the sand they proceeded on

their route unmolested until Flower, judging that any further advance would have to be done on foot, ordered a halt.

Leaving three men to watch the truck, with orders to return to the battalion on the same route as they had come if the patrol did not get back at a stated time, the rest set off through the enemy lines. Lightly equipped and wearing rubber shoes, they moved noiselessly along their bearing until the voices of German troops could again be clearly heard. The patrol commander and Private [Bill May](#)<sup>22</sup> now went on for a further 2000 yards, passed through further enemy posts, and moved about in the rear of the enemy's position observing.

Having done as much as time and darkness permitted, they retraced their steps, picked up the rest of the party on the way, and arrived back at the truck without difficulty. They headed back to Battalion Headquarters, arriving just before dawn, reported the way clear of wire or minefields and gave, as far as was possible, the location of the enemy FDLs. Two days later the battalion moved along the same route into the attack.

In oppressive heat and choking dust the troops worked hard during daylight on the 13th to improve cover and battle positions. At night strong patrols were sent out along the whole front. It had been an exhausting forty-eight hours: scorching hot days with continuous shelling and bombing; nights taken up with movement and digging; and rations and, worse still, water had been scarce during the whole period. An outbreak of 'Gypsy tummy' added to the discomforts of many of the weary troops. Nevertheless the battalion was in good heart and made the most of its opportunities to contact other members of the brigade who were in positions alongside. Some amusing stories over events of the past week were exchanged. The Maoris, in particular, had had several unusual experiences. During the midnight advance to occupy the [Alam Nayil](#) ridge one of their vehicles had become bogged. As several of them helped to push it out they were assisted by some Italians who, pushing and chatting in their own tongue, were quite oblivious to the fact that they were helping their enemies. The Maori Battalion, too, had captured a German prisoner who, as a continental woolbuyer, had several times visited New Zealand before the war. He talked freely to his captors saying, among other things, that 'between our officers and the New Zealand 25-pounders we haven't known whether we were on our heads or our feet lately.'

The battalion's Bren carrier platoon came in for wide praise. In heavy shelling the carriers had made many trips to the forward positions, carrying rations and ammunition and taking back wounded; as links between Battalion Headquarters out in front and B Echelon and Brigade Headquarters in the rear they had done outstanding service. Communications were difficult at all times and line communication in particular was almost impossible. The brigade wireless link was at this time set up in a slit trench with the aerial rod of the No. 11 set poking up some 12 feet above the ground. The mast seemed to attract fire, and Signalman [Bradnock](#)<sup>23</sup> from J Section, Divisional Signals, repairing for the second time the broken sections of his aerial, treated the nearby troops to an amusing diatribe as he worked. 'Brad' was good value and the 19th, to whom he had been attached on several occasions, regarded him with affection. His pungent comments during times of stress lessened the tension and brightened the mood of all who were within hearing.

The new reinforcements posted to platoons settled down in a soldierlike manner and, despite the uncomfortable situation, quickly demonstrated that their morale was high. They were a valuable addition to the thinning ranks of the battalion's rifle companies. The 19th was well under battle strength. The company from the [Essex Battalion](#) was no longer attached, Hawke's Bay Company was LOB, and the casualties sustained over a month's fighting had been considerable. It was well known that the impending attack would demand the utmost from the whole of the brigade. All ranks were on their toes. The attack failed to develop as expected on the 13th, but Bostons and Hurricanes flying almost continuously in the enemy's direction during daylight and after dark were judged by the troops to be a good omen for the following day.

On the 14th the unit endured another blazing day in the discomfort of oven-hot slit trenches. Enemy shelling had eased considerably but two Stuka raids, one with eighteen planes equipped with screamers, filled in the gaps and made rest difficult. During the afternoon orders for the attack on [Ruweisat Ridge](#) were issued. It was to be another night show. The 4th and 5th New Zealand Brigades and 5 Indian Infantry Brigade were to do the job. The 1st Armoured Division in support would advance in a westerly direction and, with its right flank on the ridge, would at dawn exploit the



infantry successes and mop up any resistance remaining in the south, so leaving the way clear for the New Zealand gunline and **Divisional Headquarters** to move up within operating distance of the forward troops holding Ruweisat.

Fourth Brigade's objective was the westward end of the ridge, including Trig 63, and its attack was to be made with **18 Battalion** forward, **19 Battalion** echeloned rearwards and left, and **20 Battalion** in reserve. The infantry were expected to encounter outlying enemy posts three miles

short of their objective, to go through them, capture the ridge, consolidate, and with the assistance of 2 Armoured Brigade hold the feature against counter-attacks. Each



Ruweisat Ridge, situation at dawn, 15 July 1942

### **Ruweisat Ridge, situation at dawn, 15 July 1942**

attacking battalion was to take with it three trucks only: a wireless van with the brigade link, an artillery forward observation truck, and a vehicle for wounded. Anti-tank guns were to move with the reserve battalion, while unit mortars, Bren carriers, etc., were expected to join their battalions at first light when the artillery, too, would come up on the position.

At 10 p.m. the 19th moved out to the start line, reached it after a half-hour march, and formed up as follows: Wellington West Coast Company (Captain W. E. Aitken) right forward, Taranaki Company (Captain B. R. Dill) left forward, Wellington Company (Captain D. S. Thomson) left rear, Battalion Headquarters right rear, with

the three vehicles following behind. At 11 p.m., on a bearing of 320 degrees, the battalion moved to the attack. Companies picked up their weapons, shook out into battle order and went forward. The men, grim and uncomplaining, gave no indication of the exhausting days they had just endured; the pace was regular; the formation good; the glint of fixed bayonets gave the only indication of what lay ahead. It was a long approach march, but sterling compass work and accurate pacing on the part of the direction men from the 'I' section under Lieutenant Bob Wood<sup>24</sup> ensured a square and uniform front, a factor which had an important bearing on the success of the first clash.

It soon became obvious that opposition could be expected much sooner than was first anticipated, for after the attackers had covered about two miles the enemy, by extensive use of flares, discovered the advance of the forward companies. They were then about 250 yards from his forward positions. A hail of fire met the leading troops, but there was no slowing of the advance and hand-to-hand fighting soon developed. These encounters were to be repeated right up to the objective for the enemy was now organised in depth throughout the whole area. The initial clash caused casualties in all companies, but soon after our men had closed with his infantry-supported machine-gun posts the enemy began to surrender. Most of the opposing troops were Italians, and in a short time the 19th was through their first defence line and among their artillery and transport. There was no time to round up prisoners, and the rudely awakened and badly scared Italians wandered aimlessly about while the battalion reformed.

In the confusion of the first encounter Brigade Headquarters lost touch with the battalions and the battalions, heavily engaged, had no inter-company contact. Wireless communication was never established for the cumbersome and temperamental No. 18 infantry pack set was not robust enough to stand the racket; though the 19th signallers carefully netted their stations before the attack, the sets did not stay adjusted and interference made renetting on the move impossible. The wireless van with the brigade link had been hit early in the engagement and none of the battalion transport got up with the unit after the attack started. Companies were rallied by a prearranged signal—'Single shot flame tracer from a Bren gun fired straight into the air'—and the advance went on again.

The other battalions, too, had had some stiff fighting, and at this stage the 19th

was joined by 60 men from the 18th who, under Major Brett,<sup>25</sup> formed themselves into a composite company on the battalion's right flank after having become detached from their own unit during the initial encounter. This company continued on to the objective with the 19th, which arrived on Ruweisat after further fighting about an hour and a half before dawn. Wellington West Coast Company exploited forward into a small depression, then all companies immediately set about putting their areas into a state of defence.

The successful completion of the first part of its formidable task had cost the 19th some sixty all ranks, and with the first glimmer of daylight reorganisation began. Companies were disposed as follows: Wellington West Coast Company on the north side of the ridge, facing north; Wellington Company on the south side of the ridge, facing south; Taranaki Company linking the two and facing west; while the troops attached from 18 Battalion were in position watching the east and acting as reserve. The whole area was just east of Trig 63. Fourth Brigade Headquarters was sited slightly east of 19 Battalion Headquarters and in the area occupied by the composite company under Major Brett. A sparse minefield with well-defined tracks inadequately covered its approaches, while a single concertina barbed-wire obstacle gave further slender protection. Unfortunately there were no mines and no wire with which to make these obstacles more effective, and 6 Field Company NZE (Major Reid<sup>26</sup>) occupied an infantry position as brigade defensive troops, a role which they carried out with distinction during the whole of the Ruweisat operation.

As the light increased heavy firing broke out to the south-west and on contact being made it was found that 20 Battalion was having difficulty in getting on to its objective. All available light machine guns in the 19th's area were immediately brought to bear on enemy machine-gun and mortar posts which could now be seen engaging 20 Battalion, and their fire quietened the enemy. A small force of vehicles broke off from the advancing troops and came up on to the ridge at high speed. These proved to be the medium machine guns under Major Johansen and some six-pounder anti-tank guns under Major Nicholson,<sup>27</sup> and these weapons got into action very smartly. The added weight to the battalion's fire enabled control to be established over the area, and the 20th were then able to continue up on to their position on the ridge. Brigade Headquarters and the rest of the anti-tank guns put in an appearance shortly afterwards, and all supporting weapons immediately engaged

the confusion of enemy troops and transport which could be seen trying to escape from Deir el Shein. In the first few minutes they knocked out three enemy light tanks which had shortly before put in an appearance and began to harass the area. An enemy 20-millimetre dual-purpose ack-ack and anti-tank gun in Wellington Company's area, manned by our men who had captured it after killing the original German crew, also did its share in the long-range work. The gun had cost the 19th several men killed, for the enemy crew had made a valiant stand and had continued firing until our forward troops were on top of them.

The battlefield, which had been previously strongly held by the enemy, was littered with vast quantities of guns and equipment which had been abandoned by the Italians. Burning vehicles included a tank, which had brewed up when one of our men tossed a grenade into its turret, and a large number of trucks set on fire by our advancing infantry; these and the three tanks knocked out by the anti-tank gunners created a pall of smoke over the area. There were scattered enemy parties still roaming about to the west of the position and it appeared that a counter-attack was being organised. This was discouraged by fire from the brigade position, but it soon became evident that there was still some well-sited artillery out in front, and it was not long before the troops on the ridge came under accurate fire from 88-millimetre guns whose airburst and delayed action high-explosive shells made the position most uncomfortable.

It was clear that large pockets of enemy to the west, and to a lesser degree to the east, had escaped the night attack. They were now effectively preventing our artillery, mortars, and Bren carriers from coming up. The situation was serious and enemy shelling was steadily increasing. Still, the armour was expected to put in an appearance at any time, and meanwhile the troops on Ruweisat were fighting back with all the weapons they could bring to bear. Digging was extremely difficult, the whole area having a shelf of rock about a foot below the surface. Tools, too, were short. 'Bouncing B's'—shells which bounced on impact and exploded in mid-air—were particularly troublesome. The few phone lines laid immediately companies had got into position were quickly cut, and repairs soon became impossible. Lack of adequate protection resulted in a steady toll of casualties. However, despite every disadvantage, the 4 Brigade units were in high fettle and sent out patrols, brought in prisoners, and did everything possible to enable the success of the attack to be fully

exploited once our armour came up.

Throughout the morning enemy pressure steadily increased. The senior officers—including four generals—among the many prisoners taken were sent back to Divisional Headquarters. Those from the 19th were sent back under a corporal's escort—a sufficient guard, but in rank somewhat below the exalted station which army etiquette demands shall accompany such high-ranking prisoners. Still, the Italians themselves were in no mood for niceties; the area was being fiercely shelled by their own compatriots and they were glad to get out of it. Two of these officer prisoners, with arms entwined, wept hysterically as they went. At the time German airburst fire was playing havoc with the crews of our anti-tank weapons, but these were gallantly kept in action and the enemy armour, which had now put in an appearance, kept its distance.

By midday the position of 4 Brigade was grim; the 19th area was being shelled from almost point-blank range, and more and more men were being killed and wounded. The dressing station was under fire and it was obvious that only early intervention by armour could restore the situation. So close was the enemy now that two Wellington West Coast Bren-gunners were able to fire on a German officer directing a mortar sited to the north of the position.

Still the armour failed to arrive, and with every hour's delay the hard-won success of the night attack became less and less possible to exploit and the defenders of Ruweisat Ridge were slowly but surely being exterminated. Messages to [Divisional Headquarters](#) from 4 Brigade, giving notice of an enemy armoured attack threatening from the west, brought the reply that our tanks could be expected in the sector almost immediately. They never showed up, and it was galling to watch what might have been an outstanding victory being slowly turned into a costly defeat. The immense damage which could have been inflicted on the disorganised enemy to the north of the position, had our armour been close on the heels of the infantry, was apparent to all, but as the day wore on the great mass of transport and equipment abandoned during the night by a terror-stricken foe was being recovered.

Without artillery or mortars and under heavy fire, the brigade could do nothing to intervene and the enemy had the field to themselves; with typical German thoroughness they were taking full advantage of the situation. Using two captured

tanks, the panzers were making a deliberate and careful reconnaissance of the perimeter of the whole of the 4 Brigade area. From [19 Battalion](#) headquarters these two tanks were seen steadily working round the position and halting hull down while observing. Their reconnaissance covered a period of several hours. They were in no hurry to attack and were clearly leaving nothing to chance. Meanwhile the lot of our troops—shared by the many prisoners they had taken—was highly uncomfortable. Constantly under fire and almost without cover, scorched by the sun, choked by dust and irritated by fumes and smoke from burning vehicles, short of food and water, the 4 Brigade defenders of the ridge were in desperate straits. They were trapped—still fighting—but against odds which could not be coped with by unsupported infantry.

At 3 p.m., however, it seemed that salvation was in sight for a liaison officer from [1 Armoured Division](#) arrived at Brigade Headquarters where a conference of harassed unit commanders was in progress. He brought good news—our armoured forces were proceeding in strength west along the southern slopes of [Ruweisat Ridge](#) and were now barely three miles away. An outline of the situation was quickly given him and he was sent hurriedly back to report to his tanks. Aid was now at hand.

Almost an hour passed, and just before 4 p.m. [20 Battalion](#) notified Brigade of an impending enemy attack on its position. The armour were immediately informed, messages being sent to their commander by their own LO and one of the brigade staff. The whole area at this time was under murderous fire. A thick pall of smoke was drifting across the front and to the west; with the setting sun, the dust of battle and the smoke of burning vehicles, carried on to the position by a light westerly wind, rendered visibility in that quarter almost nil. Still, our surviving anti-tank gunners were engaging anything out in front which moved. They held off the attack. The armour was expected to put in an appearance at any minute and at Brigade Headquarters dispositions for the night were being discussed. Confident that the tanks would soon arrive, 4 Brigade made ready to assist them to exploit.

Forty more precious minutes ticked by, then the panzers suddenly delivered their coup-de-grâce. Using the covered approach given by the poor visibility in the west, and adding to the already heavy smoke screen by setting further derelict vehicles on fire, the German tanks, some flying British recognition pennants, came up, got into position and, supported by heavy shelling from the north, attacked.

Despite desperate fighting the whole area was overrun in a few minutes. About a dozen eight-wheeled armoured cars and some captured Bren carriers were used to round up our infantry after their brief gallant fight, and practically the whole of the surviving members of 4 Brigade were captured. Armoured car crews covered our men, holding them with the threat of machine-gun fire. At the slightest sign of a break they opened fire or hurled grenades and so kept their prisoners powerless until lorried infantry, who came up in armoured troop-carriers, shepherded them away. Most of our wounded were left where they lay, and though several attempts were made to bring them away this was not permitted.

Unmolested, the Germans ranged the ridge at will, and our own tanks but half a mile away to the east did nothing to restore the situation. Enemy light armoured forces combed the area thoroughly, gathering in any who had eluded the first attack, and when men and guns were all captured the whole force rallied towards the headlighted guide truck which had marked the axis of its advance.

Of the last few minutes on [Ruweisat Ridge](#) Captain Dill (OC Taranaki Company) writes:

In odd lulls things stand out—Lt Colin McLernon, <sup>28</sup> Bde LO, and driver were quite unhurt when their jeep blew up on a mine not far behind us. Vague memories of a portée screaming back through us—whether going back for more ammunition or getting out at the double, we could not decide.

It must be remembered that the infantry had only Brens, Thompson subs, rifle and bayonet and the odd grenade. No anti-tank weapon at all.

Between 1500 and 1600 hours the shelling eased a bit and gradually gave way to high velocity and machine gun fire.

Forward sections reported tanks. These came on through the haze flying our pennants of the day. Then as they got more visible we recognised them as German eight wheel armoured cars.

The vickers were scuppered—the anti-tanks had gone or were silenced, the armour turned and snuffled in and about the small wadis ahead and to our left. We had very little vision of what was going on in front of WWC Coy until we noticed

small groups standing up.

Next the cars in front of us turned towards us and closed in with the commanders sitting up as large as life through the turrets. They did not stay there long—everything closed down with a clang as the air seemed to scream full of lead. We lay low—watched and waited. The two platoons on the right stood up, there were two cars right on top of them. I turned to see Bn HQ packing up. There was a little fire burning, probably in the IO's slit. Turned again and saw a white rag—or was it a red cross?—fluttering in Bde HQ area. I could have wept. A darned great ugly eight-wheeler rolled up towards our little Coy HQ group. I buried my glasses and old revolver—and stood up.

It was 7.30 p.m. before our armour opened fire. The German tanks, then moving back in bounds, avoided an engagement. So ended the battle of [Ruweisat Ridge](#) for [4 NZ Infantry Brigade](#). The operation which had begun so well had finished in disaster. Chagrin and bitterness was the lot of the men who had won and stubbornly held the ridge. Now prisoners of the [Afrika Korps](#), they were herded out of the area and whisked away westwards by German transport. Once out of the forward line they were debussed and formed up to march wearily to the first of the many wire cages which were to be their lot for the next three years. As a final touch of irony, the long line of prisoners moving slowly westwards was attacked by the [RAF](#).

The German was evidently still smarting over his earlier defeats at the hands of the New Zealanders, and once back in the rear areas the treatment meted out to our men was anything but pleasant. Officers in particular were singled out for special attention, and on the evening of the 16th at a panzer headquarters the German GOC and his staff officers turned on a display of Nazi tantrums which they no doubt imagined would terrify their prisoners. Spitting and shouting, they stamped up and down a line of New Zealand officers who stood awaiting interrogation. One of them in broken English screamed: 'In [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) the New Zealanders fought like gentlemen but now they fill themselves with cognac and fight like [Bolsheviks](#).' Captain David Thomson, who was captured late in the evening, had his shoulder straps and badges of rank ripped off his uniform—an extreme insult from the Germans' point of view—and was told that he was no longer an officer. His pack was torn from his back and he was allowed to take nothing from it, not even his wife's



photograph. Products of Hitler's hysterical new order, these German officers showed none of the traditional Teutonic impassiveness.

Not all of 19 Battalion went into the 'bag', for there were some notable escapes after capture and some of the unit managed to elude the attackers altogether. Approximately two platoons from Wellington Company got clear when Captain Thomson, realising that the armoured rush was about to start and that his unsupported infantry were right in the tracks of the oncoming tanks, withdrew them about 100 yards into a slight depression. Here they remained undetected by the enemy but Thomson himself, going out in an attempt to bring in more men, was captured. Four members of the signals platoon got away in an Italian 'bug' which they had salvaged earlier in the day. As they ran off the ridge they were shot up by an armoured car and also mortared, but though hit the vehicle kept going. Driven by Private Cliff Lunn<sup>29</sup> with Privates John Pike,<sup>30</sup> Harry Toho, and 'Spike' Moloney<sup>31</sup> as passengers, it brought them and their equipment to safety. 'Benito' the bug, with its bullet-torn body, became a centre of attraction at Amiriya when the remnants of the unit were collected once more.

Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell had a double escape. He was at a Brigade Headquarters' conference when the attack took place. The brigade staff and stragglers were organised and manned a hurriedly formed line, and when this position was finally overwhelmed Colonel Hartnell, with Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch<sup>32</sup> (18 Battalion) and his batman, lay doggo in a slit trench. A passing armoured car threw in four hand grenades and Lynch and his batman were severely wounded. The 19th's CO, however, was untouched. Later when trying to get clear, he with several others was rounded up by the German armour. Just at that juncture, however, some of the British tanks appeared, and taking advantage of the preoccupation of the enemy he went to ground and escaped. Several of the rest of the group who were too well covered by the enemy to try to break away had the additional humiliation of watching our tanks withdraw again, while a German officer speaking perfect English sneered, 'There goes your gallant British armour.'

During the early hours of darkness Colonel Hartnell retraced his steps, traversed the 19th position, and then went on to the spot where Brigade Headquarters had been located. Here he met Brigadier Burrows who had also eluded his captors. Together they collected a few other survivors who appeared from various hiding

places and, salvaging two trucks, put on board what wounded they could find and began to withdraw. Unfortunately the trucks attracted attention and were soon surrounded by four enemy armoured cars and two Bren carriers. Some of the party judged the Bren carriers to be ours and on running towards them were quickly taken prisoner. The Brigadier and Colonel Hartnell lay on the ground in the darkness and so escaped attention. Both later escaped separately to the east.

While the 4 Brigade infantry were in occupation of [Ruweisat Ridge](#), Brigade Rear Headquarters and B Echelon were moved up to a position slightly forward of [Alam Nayil](#), arriving there at approximately the same time as the forward troops got on to their objectives. During daylight on the 15th this group was regularly bombed and suffered several



casualties. The news of the progress of the attack was vague and disturbing. The artillery and unit Bren carriers, mortars, etc., had not got forward as planned, and it was soon clear from the few reports which came from the forward areas that the infantry were in a precarious position. Fearing that the ammunition carried into battle on the man would be expended, Major Pleasants organised a Bren carrier service to take out extra supplies of small-arms ammunition and some sorely needed water. Despite severe shelling and mortaring, several of the 19th carriers (Second-Lieutenant [Hislop](#)<sup>33</sup>) successfully made the trip. Their arrival on the ridge was greeted with cheers, but the news that those men who returned brought back was grim. Without artillery support and with the armour failing to carry out its role, the debacle out in front could have only one ending. Shortly after dark a trickle of survivors coming in confirmed the worst.

Pleasants immediately went out alone on foot in an attempt to find and bring in

any other men of the 19th who might have escaped. His was a forlorn mission, and on his return late that night orders were received to move south and east to a spot close to rear Divisional Headquarters. It was a sad convoy which set off into the darkness. The empty trucks and the few battle-scarred Bren carriers left the area and began the first leg of a miserable journey which was to end back at Base. On [Ruweisat Ridge](#) the 19th had lost approximately 248 other ranks and 12 officers; sick at heart, the survivors answered next morning's roll-call. During the day a few more men drifted in until finally the battalion strength stood at 12 officers and 325 other ranks, of whom the great majority were in Headquarters Company. Of the rifle companies, [Wellington](#) mustered 61, [Wellington West Coast](#) 21, while Taranaki's roll showed only 17 names.

In the early afternoon a further rearward move was made and to the accompaniment of two brief bombing raids the remnants of the battalion dug in and wearily but luxuriously—with boots off for the first time for many days—settled down to sleep. That evening 6 NZ Brigade moving up to the front from [Amiriya](#) took over all the unit's three-ton transport, its Bren carriers, and all weapons except rifles and pistols. The 19th were now definitely out of the fighting, and the following day (17 July) set off for No. 4 camp at [Amiriya](#). A swirling dust-storm caused the convoy to split in two en route but both sections arrived before the evening meal. Sixty dozen cans of beer were distributed with the food and the men bedded down early, sleeping in tents and, for the first time for over a month, taking their rest without the monotonous formality of digging in.

On Saturday the small area required to accommodate the battalion was put in order and the melancholy task of sorting out the gear of the missing members of the unit was begun. The survivors in bitter mood discussed Ruweisat. It was the all-absorbing topic, the sorry climax to a campaign in which the 19th had acquitted itself well. Of the many engagements of the past month, none held such possibilities as the part played by the 4 Brigade units in their capture of their objectives on the ridge. Not without reason did the men lay the blame for the near extinction of the brigade on the unwilling tracks of 1 Armoured Division; nor have the years dimmed their resentment. Whatever the factors dictating the lack of offensive action on the part of the tanks during the daylight hours of the 15th, the infantry who were there cannot forget that 4 NZ Brigade was rolled up by a light German armoured force

while our armour, superior in weight and numbers, stood by without attempting to intervene.

Some tanks halting in the [Amiriya](#) area that morning were treated with open contempt by the 4 Brigade men. Their crews admitted being near Ruweisat during the 15th and resentfully endured the insults which were heaped upon the proud name of their corps. One of their NCOs finally spoke up and in a broad Lancashire drawl said: 'Ee lads we know how you feel—but it's not our lads won't fight, it's muckin' HQ won't let them.' It was learned later that on the morning of the 15th [1 Armoured Division](#) had lost its commander, wounded; perhaps in the confusion of the occasion the original plan was temporarily forgotten. At all events the British armour had proved its worth and courage in many previous battles, and was not found wanting in the fierce fighting which took place in the subsequent phases of the Battle of [Alamein](#).

The LOB company (Hawke's Bay) had been on its way up to reinforce the battalion when the Ruweisat operation was in progress. It now joined up with the remnants of the unit at [Amiriya](#) and with these survivors formed the backbone of a new [19 Battalion](#)—a battalion which was destined in the future to play a much different role. When it next took the field it would be an armoured unit. It was fortunate indeed that Hawke's Bay Company remained intact, for at the time all available men were being rushed to reinforce units in the line. During July Eighth Army had over 13,000 battle casualties; since its return from [Syria](#) [19 Battalion](#) alone had lost 23 officers and 369 other ranks, with a further 38 men evacuated sick. [Eighth Army](#), in its all-out effort to establish and hold the Alamein Line and to wrest the initiative from Rommel, had become dangerously weak; the whole of the [Middle East](#) command was being combed for fit men to reinforce it. Now, however, the Axis no longer boasted loudly of invasion and conquest, for Rommel, within a few short miles of his goal, had been held at the Alamein Line.

After a short address by the CO, in which he outlined the background for the recent actions and expressed pride and gratification for the manner in which all ranks had acquitted themselves, leave began. Of the Ruweisat survivors, 30 per cent left immediately for [Alexandria](#) and the rest of the unit packed up in preparation for the return to [Maadi](#). Before moving out the 19th said goodbye to Major Clive Pleasants, MC. He had served continuously with the unit since 1939 in all capacities

from company officer to unit second-in-command and had earned a high reputation for solid soldiering. His doggedness and bravery during the campaigns in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) had become a byword in the battalion. He left to command [18 Battalion](#)—still at [Alamein](#)—and all ranks wished him well.

On 21 July the unit arrived back at [Maadi](#), occupied an area adjacent to the Pall Mall theatre, and made the most of the amenities which the now well-found camp provided. The transfer from dreary [Amiriya](#) had been surprisingly sudden—no doubt accelerated by the unorthodox but effective action of a 19th officer (Captain Jack Hutchinson <sup>34</sup>) who was acting Staff Captain for HQ [4 NZ Infantry Brigade](#). On the Brigade Commander's behalf he sent to Divisional Headquarters a signal bearing the prefix MOST IMMEDIATE, asking permission for the move. This message took priority over all other traffic and the desired result was achieved in short order. This prefix is used only on very urgent and important messages and is not often seen on signal traffic in the field. No doubt the battle-weary troops back in [Maadi](#), enjoying their first shower for over a month, would have been unanimous in their opinion that the circumstances fully warranted the use of any priority which might hasten their return to such luxury. Captain Hutchinson in due course found a somewhat less appreciative reception awaiting at Divisional Headquarters.

Personal comfort, refitting and refurbishing, mail and correspondence, bazaar shopping, relaxing at the New Zealand Club, reading, and in camp the nightly picture show—these were the chief activities during the first few days in [Maadi Camp](#). The old hands made the most of the calm of Base after the hectic month they had spent in continuous movement and fighting in the [Western Desert](#). Reinforcements came and went almost before their presence was noticed; they were sent up to the units still at [Alamein](#), and only those ex-members of the battalion who after wounds or sickness were discharged from hospital remained with the 19th. In the [Naafi](#) among the beer mugs and the peanuts, groups of men talked and argued over the engagements in which they had just taken part. The old question, 'What is happening?', was now framed in the past tense, and added also was the further burning question, 'Why?'. On the 27th in the Pall Mall theatre some of these answers were given.

The CO's talk on the campaign in the [Western Desert](#) was greatly appreciated.

With the aid of maps prepared by the 'I' section, he outlined the moves from the New Zealand Division's first encounter at [Minqar Qaim](#) until the attack on [Ruweisat Ridge](#). It was characteristic of the New Zealand soldier that he felt no fealty for a commander whose plan he did not, at least to some extent, share, and these talks on current events and tactics, both before and after battle, were avidly absorbed by all ranks and always critically discussed. The sequel to Ruweisat was now known. By an outstanding feat of arms the Division, with 5 Indian Infantry Brigade, had not only secured for Eighth Army invaluable OPs on the Ruweisat feature and gained important ground to the west, but it had also taken some 2000 prisoners. The enemy persisted in his efforts to gain the ridge by trying to dislodge the Indians on the 16th—the morning following the overrunning of 4 Brigade. This time, with the assistance of [2 Armoured Brigade](#) and a heavy concentration of artillery, he was beaten off on three successive days. Then, on the 21st, 5 and 6 NZ Infantry Brigades and 161 Indian Infantry Brigade attacked again; once more the attack was successful, but next day the New Zealand and Indian infantry were counter-attacked and overrun.

Nevertheless the total gains made by the two attacks on 14 and 21 July were considerable, and though costly were a vital contribution to the plan upon which the defence of the Alamein Line was based. The desert war was now static. Close to its own supply bases the hard-hit [Eighth Army](#) could now concentrate on reinforcing and re-equipping in preparation for the offensive that would drive the Axis armies from North Africa.

But for [19 Battalion](#) the desert war was over, and back in Base Camp its members followed the progress of events at the front with a certain wistfulness. Some could already foresee the day when a reproach, not lightly to be borne, might be levelled against 4 Brigade— for of the hard campaign which would culminate in the final defeat of Rommel, the rest of the Division, like Henry IV, could say, 'We fought at Arques and you were not there.'

The 19th Battalion sustained just under 50 per cent battle casualties in this campaign. Of the total of 781 all ranks on strength, the following were casualties:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed in action	2	25

Died of wounds	–	18
Missing	–	7
Wounded	9	115
Wounded and prisoners of war	2	22
Prisoners of war	10	182
	—	—
Total	23	369

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<sup>1</sup> Tpr D. J. Thompson; Petone; born Napier, 8 Jul 1916; labourer; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> Brig J. T. Burrows, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Greek); Korea; born Christchurch, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn Dec 1941-Jun 1942; 20 Bn and Armd Regt Aug 1942-Jul 1943; comd 4 Bde 27–29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul-15 Aug 1942; 5 Bde Mar 1944, Aug-Nov 1944; 6 Bde Jul-Aug 1944; Commandant, Southern Military District, Nov 1951-Oct 1953; Commander K Force Nov 1953-.

<sup>3</sup> Lt A. H. Carmichael; Palmerston North; born Riverton, 10 May 1917; farm employee; wounded 14 May 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Tpr C. H. Whittaker; born NZ, 29 Aug 1912; upholsterer.

<sup>5</sup> Lt K. A. V. Cross; born Australia, 16 Jun 1913; radio dealer; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Lt H. R. Dix; born Raetihi, 6 Sep 1916; clerk; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>7</sup> WO I R. A. H. Wilson; born NZ, 11 Nov 1913; Regular soldier; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>8</sup> L-Cpl V. E. R. Horne; born NZ, 26 Mar 1908; clerk; wounded May 1941; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>9</sup> Line of Communication.

<sup>10</sup> Lt J. C. Evans; born New Plymouth, 20 Nov 1913; auctioneer; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

<sup>11</sup> Maj T. H. Bevan, DSO, m.i.d.; Onehunga; born London, 27 May 1909; builder; battery commander 7 A-Tk Regt and 4 Fd Regt; wounded 17 Dec 1942.

<sup>12</sup> Lt C. M. Opie; Alton; born Christchurch, 31 Dec 1913; shepherd.

<sup>13</sup> Maj-Gen C. E. Weir, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; Wellington; born NZ, 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO 6 Fd Regt Sep 1939-Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941-Jun 1944; commanded 2 NZ Div 4 Sep-17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944-Sep 1946; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1948-49; QMG Army HQ Nov 1951-.

<sup>14</sup> Pte S. A. Plant; born Wellington, 20 Apr 1918; salesman; killed in action 3 Jul 1942.

<sup>15</sup> Pte L. E. Ryder; born Nelson, 1 Jul 1916; railways clerk; killed in action 3 Jul 1942.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> Maj B. I. Bassett, m.i.d.; born NZ 12 Sep 1911; barrister and solicitor; BM 10 Bde May 1941; BM 4 Bde Aug 1941-Jan 1942, Jun-Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

<sup>18</sup> Maj C. C. Johansen, m.i.d.; Plimmerton; born Norsewood, 2 Oct 1910; civil servant; company commander 27 MG Bn 1941-42; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>19</sup> Pte R. K. Hooper born London, 11 May 1908; bee farmer; died of wounds 7 Jul 1942.



<sup>20</sup> Pte B. G. Phillips; born Foxton, 1 Sep 1910; solicitor; killed in action 9 Jul 1942.

<sup>21</sup> Capt H. F. Flower, m.i.d.; Oroua Downs, Foxton; born Christchurch, 2 Oct 1915; stockman; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped Modena, 15 Sep 1943.

<sup>22</sup> Pte J. M. May; New Plymouth; born NZ, 6 Mar 1908; salesman; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Cpl W. J. H. Bradnock; Levin; born Wellington, 5 Oct 1912; exchange clerk.

<sup>24</sup> Maj R. M. Wood; Sydney, NSW; born NZ, 12 Aug 1914; clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped Modena, 15 Sep 1943; company commander 22 Bn 1945; 2 NZEF PW Reception Group ( UK) May-Nov 1945.

<sup>25</sup> Maj C. L. Brett, EM; Gordonton, Hamilton; born Cambridge, 4 Oct 1906; stock and station agent; company commander 18 Bn 1942; wounded Mar 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>26</sup> Lt-Col H. M. Reid, MC and bar, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Auckland, 21 Mar 1904; civil engineer; OC 6 Fd Coy Jun-Aug 1942; 8 Fd Coy Aug-Dec 1942; comd NZ Forestry Group ( UK) Jul-Oct 1943; attached Air Ministry Dec 1943-Feb 1944; twice wounded; wounded and p.w. 16 Dec 1942; released Tripoli, 23 Jan 1943.

<sup>27</sup> Lt-Col S. W. Nicholson, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 22 Feb 1914; customs agent; CO 5 Fd Regt Oct-Nov 1944; 7 A-Tk Regt Dec 1944-Mar 1945; 6 Fd Regt Mar-May 1945.

<sup>28</sup> Capt C. R. McLernon; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 3 Jun 1912; oil driller; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>29</sup> Pte C. W. Lunn; born Wellington, 12 Jan 1915; truck driver.

<sup>30</sup> Pte J. Pike; Auckland; born Gisborne, 9 May 1916; advertising salesman.

<sup>31</sup> Cpl L. Moloney; Bay View; born Wairoa, 28 Apr 1916; freezing-works hand.

<sup>32</sup> 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.

<sup>33</sup> Maj R. J. Hislop; Stoke; born NZ, 5 Jun 1914; mechanic.

<sup>34</sup> Maj J. H. Hutchinson; Lower Hutt; born South Africa, 6 Jul 1910; salesman.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 15 – INFANTRY INTO ARMOUR

## CHAPTER 15

### *Infantry Into Armour*

Wherin old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,  
The cruel markes of many a bloody field.

—Spenser

The **Maadi** bivouac area of early 1940 had grown by 1942 into a military metropolis of the size and population of many of the suburbs of **Cairo** city. During the final phases of the battle for **Egypt** **Maadi's** inhabitants, however, were of dire necessity few in number. The remnants of **4 NZ Infantry Brigade** comprised the largest formation in residence, and during the last months of the year many of its members began to fear that their occupancy had become permanent.

The rest of the Division, busy fighting and sometimes weary of the thin existence and the uncompromising hardness which the desert campaign imposed, were wont to gibe at 'Groppi's Light Horse', as the **Cairo-dwelling** 4 Brigade was contemptuously, if somewhat enviously, dubbed by the troops in the field. The units of the brigade, however, found no satisfaction in their enforced absence from the Division; they soon tired of the delights of **Cairo** and became unappreciative of the comparative luxury to be found in **Maadi** Camp. For **19 Battalion** life there was bearable because of the absence of the petty restrictions and wearying formalities usually associated with Base.

There had been many changes in the unit, but most of the principal posts were still held by old originals, and many former NCOs and men who had left New Zealand with the battalion in 1940 now held commissioned rank. At this time the chief appointments were:

CO: Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell	OCA Coy: Maj H. G. Wooller
2 i/c: Maj D. K. McLauchlan	OCB Coy: Capt F. P. Koorey
Adjt: Capt D. A. Caughley	OCC Coy: Maj C. A. Latimer
QM: Lt A. R. Lucas	OCD Coy: Maj A. M. Everist
RSM: WO I D. Rench	MO: Capt C. K. Swallow
RQMS: WO II D. Brown	Padre: Rev Fr E. A. Forsman

Insufficient numbers robbed training of its collective appeal, and competitive sport suffered for the same reason. Duties were few, food was plentiful, and for the first month the unit was free to fatten—for, as ever, there was 'Corn in [Egypt](#)', and the lean days spent in the Desert had left their mark on the men. Rumours and speculation over the future of the battalion naturally found ready listeners, for there was plenty of time to gossip. The probable, improbable, and even fantastic were expounded, and with or without any reasonable basis every rumour in its turn provided an intriguing topic of conversation among the troops.

After a short period at [Maadi](#), when accumulated pay was spent and prices were rocketing, the weekly pittance of piastres barely covered one quiet eight-hour leave to the city. Camp amusements, too, were somewhat curtailed: beer was rationed, and a crusade against gambling had increased the already heavy odds that the two-up and Crown and Anchor enthusiasts would cheerfully accept, by the addition of a stiff fine and the inevitable period of discomfort which lasted as long as the paybook remained in the red.

Remembering the desert days with their easy companionship, the strong hand of fierce loyalty which ruled each section and platoon, the sharing of carefully hoarded luxuries from the section tuckerbox and the spice of healthy hunger which flavoured the infrequent food, the [Benghazi](#) burner and the hissing brew consumed by twos and threes while crowded into an inadequate slit trench or sheltering beside the wheel of a briefly halted truck, the older hands were restive. They hankered to return to the Desert, even though the fearful face of danger would be there to welcome them with wounds or worse.

The recruits, too—some with two years of non-combatant service in New Zealand behind them—shared the restiveness of the veterans. They spoke a different language, the language of camps and not of campaigns. They would fall silent when in mess or canteen the talk turned to war. Seeing only the loose-knit, almost careless, appearance of soldiering in the battalion to which they had been posted, they were puzzled. Prepared to learn, they would willingly face battle to be able to break into the steel ring of unspoken friendships, inside which the older men of the unit lived and moved.

During August great changes were afoot in [Eighth Army](#). On the 13th Lieutenant-General B. L. Montgomery assumed command and [Lieutenant-General Freyberg](#), returning to duty on the 10th after convalescing from his wounds, resumed his appointment as GOC [2 NZ Division](#). The following day he temporarily succeeded Lieutenant-General W. H. E. ('Strafer') Gott (killed in action) as commander of [13 Corps](#). Mr Churchill visited the Alamein Line, and as the month ended Rommel launched a heavy attack along the whole front. Montgomery's famous taking-over order, 'NO WITHDRAWAL and NO SURRENDER', had by this time been bolstered by extensive material preparations, and by 5 September Rommel's offensive had been thoroughly beaten. During the fighting 5 and 6 Brigades added further laurels to the proud record already held by their Division.

But the successes of the New Zealand Division had been bitter fruit; the desert battles had cost it dearly. The heavy losses sustained in the stand at [Alamein](#), when both 4 and 6 Brigades had been overrun by enemy tanks, could have been avoided by adequate armoured action. The Division had made its name as a hard-hitting, highly mobile formation, and [General Freyberg](#) felt that it required its own armoured brigade if it was to undertake future battle commitments with full efficiency and confidence.

This view was represented to the New Zealand Government and to General Headquarters, Middle East Forces. The British Army was at the time reorganising formations; the mixed division combining infantry and armour was already planned on paper, and agreement was reached at all levels to allow the New Zealand Division to reorganise on this already approved basis, which provided for a division of two infantry brigades, each of three battalions, and an armoured brigade of three regiments and a motor battalion, together with corps troops.

The choice of [4 Infantry Brigade](#) as the formation to be converted to armour was dictated largely by circumstance. The 5th and 6th Brigades were still committed to the desert battle while the 4th, reinforcing and refitting in [Maadi](#) after its mauling at [Ruweisat Ridge](#), was available immediately for reforming. On 17 September [General Freyberg](#), in an address to officers and NCOs, gave the first official advice of what was afoot.

At the beginning of September 19 Battalion mustered a strength of 29 officers

and 571 other ranks, but in the middle of the month cherished hopes that the unit would soon be fit to fight again were dashed when 198 men were transferred to 22 and 25 Battalions in the field, and the persistent rumour that 4 Brigade was about to be converted into an armoured formation was confirmed by the CO. Now began a period of renewed activity, a period when novelty successfully competed with all other attractions and completely routed the lethargy brought on by the unaccustomed high living and lack of hard work. Though the first reaction of all ranks was one of wistfulness over the abandonment of their traditional role, the men now comprising [19 Battalion](#) tackled their new training with eagerness.

Fortunately all the oldest hands had been spared to remain with the unit, but now, after almost three years' overseas service, the number of original members had dwindled to but one-fifth of the total establishment. Some of the men transferred to units in the field had survived three campaigns with the battalion, and it was a sad occasion when they left the battalion lines. There was no time for brooding, however, and even before the official announcement which changed the title of the unit from [19 NZ Battalion](#) to [19 NZ Armoured Regiment](#), conversion courses had begun.

Over a hundred NCOs and men were enrolled at 9 Infantry Brigade School and at the New Zealand School of Instruction for elementary courses in signals, while all officers undertook a radio-telephony procedure course (held in unit lines), and a number of officers and other ranks left for the Middle East Royal Armoured Corps School at [Abbassia](#) to attend a course on Matilda tanks. The R/T courses naturally included long periods of 'procedure', a dry subject which was sometimes enlivened by disputes on obscure points and situations between the two principal instructors, Second-Lieutenant John [Arlidge](#),<sup>1</sup> signal officer, and his corporal, 'Kingi' Best.<sup>2</sup>

In the midst of all this unaccustomed brain work the 19th found time to put away its notebooks and enjoy the customary celebration which marked a further unit anniversary. This was a unique occasion, for within a few days of its third birthday the battalion was to lose its identity. Also it was the first time that the event had taken place other than in the [Western Desert](#). Many of the troops on courses contrived to get leave and to come back to [Maadi](#) for the evening. A count of heads revealed that of the 768 men who originally sailed from New Zealand, only 171 now remained. 'Fallen comrades' and 'absent friends' were poignant toasts honoured in



all messes.

On 5 October a new series of routine orders commenced, and the first paragraph in issue No. 1 read: 'It is notified that as from the 5th October 42 the name of this Unit is the [19 NZ Armd Regt](#) and this title will be employed in all correspondence, etc. No public comment however will be made regarding the reason for the change.'

Of that change there were no outward and visible signs. As yet the [19th](#) had no tanks, and three months would pass before the black beret, distinctive head-dress of the Armoured Corps, was issued. Meanwhile courses continued in tented classrooms, and almost every man in the unit possessed a collection of carefully kept notebooks. Many found themselves back at school, swotting willingly, if laboriously, and sweating under unaccustomed mental stress while striving to master the perplexities of wireless operating procedure, the intricacies of the internal combustion engine, or the technicalities of tank maintenance. There was keen competition among the men for the tank-crew posts, and in the main the various jobs went to the volunteer who felt that he had found his particular niche in driving, wireless operating or gunnery. Reports from [Abbassia](#) were consistently good and many men—former infantrymen—in the newly formed New Zealand armoured units gained marks which were well up to those earned by men whose whole service had been in armour.

Everyone was active, and [19 Armoured Regiment](#) as a unit was at the top of its form. True it had much to learn, but willingness and zest were characteristics carried over from old battalion days. The newly acquired rank of trooper seemed to fit the general air of jauntiness, and though the stiffer style of private was still often inadvertently used, the absent-minded NCO or officer was quickly reminded that that rank was now obsolete. The conversion to armour was almost religious in its fervour.

A [Royal Armoured Corps](#) sergeant was posted to each of the new regiments, and, together with those who had done well at the [Abbassia](#) school, pepped up the unit courses. Regiments were made responsible for their own initial tactical training, and the 19th, using 15-cwt trucks as tanks, made good use once more of 'Sunstroke Plain'. Batches of trainees went across the [Nile](#) and camped for a week at a time on the ground over which the unit had trudged during its first overseas tactical exercise as an infantry battalion. Though the truck-tanks were frequently bogged in the soft sand, those who had been there before were unanimous that all in all armoured

training was a good deal less irksome than that of the infantry.

In addition to conversion courses, senior officers in the unit attended high-level discussions on the new 'mixed division' and studied its complex organisation and tactical possibilities. Its establishment was a radical change from the traditional composition of the British infantry division. It combined armour and infantry, arms of the service which had hitherto been handled separately. The [2nd NZ Division](#) was in the process of transition and, once the armoured brigade was trained and equipped, would take its place as a mixed division and retain this organisation until the war ended.

The year was within two months of closing. It had been a fateful one for the Allies, but now the Axis tide of invasion had begun to ebb. In North Africa on 3 November Rommel began to withdraw from his positions in front of [El Alamein](#). In the [Eighth Army](#) offensive which drove him off, 2 NZ Division, consisting now of 5 and 6 Infantry Brigades and divisional troops, had played a leading part. It now began to prepare for the most satisfying role of its career: the pursuit of a retreating Axis army. Back in [Cairo](#) 4 Armoured Brigade followed the fortunes of [Eighth Army](#) as it returned over the ground the brigade knew so well, towards final victory. The daily news bulletins kept excitement at fever heat. On 5 November [Fuka](#) was encircled, but the enemy escaped. On 7 November delay at [Sidi Haneish](#) because of heavy rain enabled the quarry to avoid battle. On 9 November Mersa Matruh was passed and [2 NZ Division](#) approached [Sidi Barrani](#). On 10 November New Zealand troops passed [Buqbuq](#); on the 11th they crossed the Libyan frontier; on the 12th they halted near [Bardia](#).

With the news of each advance the excitement in [Maadi Camp](#) mounted steadily, but a feeling of frustration tempered the jubilation of the newly formed armoured brigade. As yet without tanks and still practically untrained, 18, 19 and 20 Armoured Regiments, unaccustomed to their long confinement to Base, developed bed sores. When 22 Battalion—sadly depleted in numbers—marched in fresh from the battlefield to join the new armoured brigade, the 'base wallah' stigma was keenly felt. The older hands resented the changeover, for they felt that it was robbing them of a share in the desert victory, which as members of the senior formation in the Division, and by reason of their long service, was rightfully theirs.

On 27 November [General Freyberg](#) flew from [Bardia](#) to [Maadi](#) and spoke to his armoured fledglings. In his description of the operations which had led up to the present [Eighth Army](#) offensive he did not forget 4 Brigade's share. The GOC still held his veteran units in high regard, and his promise for an active future instilled fresh confidence.

Despite an official preference for the peaked hat with a black pugaree, berets were at last issued to all ranks, and during December, as the rest of the Division swept triumphantly towards [Tripoli](#), the armoured tyros in [Maadi](#) seemed to catch something of the tempo of their comrades' advance and exorcised their consciences by working harder than ever. The change was now fully accepted and its advantages began to be recognised. At this time, too, the 19th got its first tanks—two Covenanters and a Crusader—and practical work in the unit lines became a reality. Many men found themselves possessed of unexpected skills in the trades required of trained tank-crew members. Some, with an eye to the future, took every available opportunity to improve both theory and practice in such subjects as motor mechanics and radio repairing. In civvy street, when the time came, these trade skills would mean satisfying jobs for those who were previously unsuited or untrained.

Reinforcements arriving in [Egypt](#) from New Zealand on 8 January 1943 brought all of 4 Brigade's units up to comfortable working strength once more. The 3rd Army Tank Battalion was absorbed by the armoured brigade, and the addition of these trained and keen troops was welcomed. B Squadron was posted to [19 Regiment](#), and the marchings-in during the month brought the unit strength up to 28 officers and 585 other ranks. Of this total, 21 officers and 400 other ranks had taken part in one or more campaigns, and 13 officers and 150 other ranks were First Echelon troops. Complete armoured organisation was now adopted, and as this provided for only three squadrons, the [19th](#) dropped its four traditional provincial designations and the squadron titles became A, B, and C respectively. The last vestiges of the old order had now gone; only the spirit remained, and as an armoured regiment the former 19 Infantry Battalion looked clear-eyed and expectantly from beneath black berets towards a future spiced with fresh experiences.

The few tanks on regimental strength were worked overtime, but courses still continued, and after the Christmas and New Year break intakes to schools of

instruction claimed a good proportion of the unit strength. By February the regiment was able to publish the following impressive figures:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Posted strength	28	525
Completed courses at <a href="#">Middle East</a> schools	45	181
Completed courses at local schools	61	824

Having passed well out of the recruit stage and with the unit again strong numerically, all ranks looked forward to operational employment on armoured work and waited impatiently for the full quota of tanks and administration vehicles to be issued to the regiment. Lack of full equipment imposed irksome restrictions, particularly in tactical training, and commanders and crews fretted for full possession of a tank they could call their own. The day when the regiment could turn out in complete battle array was still seven months away, however, and many startling changes would take place in the 19th before then.

Meanwhile the [Maadi](#) dwellers were making the most of their life in Base Camp. Fresh ventures were tried and proved successful. A regimental library was established and immediately became popular. A brigade choir attracted a select few with the necessary talent; its performances added dignity to church services and colour to less solemn occasions. Sporting contests and competitions, debates, concerts, and even dances were regular functions. With the posting of the new reinforcements, the unit's early enthusiasm for sightseeing was revived. [Cairo](#) attractions long treated with a blasé indifference took on a brighter complexion as the old hand introduced the open-mouthed new arrival to the sights, sounds, and smells of that intriguing city. At work and at play 'Groppi's Light Horse' struck the peak of form during those early months of 1943.

In [19 Regiment](#) several changes in the senior appointments took place. Major McLauchlan left to command Headquarters Squadron of Headquarters 4 Armoured Brigade, and Major [Wooller](#)<sup>3</sup> replaced him as second-in-command. Padre John Somerville<sup>4</sup> took over from Padre Forsman. The unit's second overseas marriage was solemnised when Captain F. M. Stewart, OC Headquarters Squadron, was wedded to Miss Paddy Levin, a member of the NZ WAAC who were doing such a fine job in the New Zealand general hospitals. Decorations earned in the desert campaigns were presented by the GOC to the following members of the unit: the

DSO to Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell, and the MM to Lance-Corporal Clark<sup>5</sup> and Troopers Rieper and Trye.

Among the drab hutments of 19 Regiment's camp, flowers began to bloom. Messes were made comfortable and attractive by purchasing furniture, and if the amateur and solely male attempts at decoration gave the messrooms a somewhat rakish touch they were at least distinctive. During the off-duty hours a proportion—a good proportion—of the unit was at home to all callers, and until the beer supplies in the Middle East almost ran out, organised and spontaneous parties were nightly functions in canteens and messes. A rare storm on 22 February wrecked many of the outside improvements in the unit lines, but enthusiastic voluntary labour repaired the damage and added more and more fancy touches until 19 Regiment's area, neatly marked out in paths, gardens, and decorative work in white limestone, took on an almost Gezira-like appearance.

Armoured training progressed steadily. One demonstration of the proficiency attained caused the CO a good deal of awkward paper work. One of the unit's few precious tanks 'brewed up' and became a complete write-off. The cause: a Bren-gun bullet fired from a regimental invention on another tank. This invention consisted of a Bren mounted on the 75-millimetre gun of the Sherman, set at single shot and electrically fired. Its use had enabled the unit to test the efficiency of its gunners by a convincing and satisfying practical demonstration, the official method of going through the motions of firing being considered a barren pastime. Tangible evidence of marksmanship was required, and this specially mounted Bren provided the answer. On the undulating desert at the back of the camp 19 Regiment's two tanks rattled and bumped—pursuer and pursued. Each time the commander of the leading tank heard the smack of a bullet against his armour plate he signalled a hit to the attacker. Gunnery in the unit improved—until this unlucky hit penetrated the tool-box louvres and ignited the hot petrol fumes in the Crusader. The crew abandoned ship smartly. From then on all gunnery practice took place on the armoured fighting vehicle range.

On 22 March the New Zealand Minister of Defence (Hon F. Jones) inspected 4 Armoured Brigade. A few days before this inspection the Division, as part of New Zealand Corps commanded by General Freyberg, had begun its highly successful 'left

hook' attack which was to force the enemy to withdraw from the [Mareth Line](#). After three weeks of heavy fighting the Division in early April was now getting its second wind for the advance north. In Tunisia the pincers were closing on the Axis, and the end of the campaign was in sight.

In April the regiment had a change in command. Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell had been required to spend an ever-increasing number of hours at Headquarters 4 Brigade as administrative problems mounted. It was with little surprise, therefore, but with genuine regret, that the unit learned that he would soon leave it. His promotion to second-in-command of 4 Armoured Brigade meant, however, that he would still be closely associated with his old regiment, where his tall figure and cheery grin had become well known and popular.

For the first time in its history command of the 19th passed to an officer whose service had been entirely outside the unit. On 19 April Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell introduced his successor, Lieutenant-Colonel [McGaffin](#),<sup>6</sup> at the Pall Mall Theatre and said goodbye to the men he had commanded with distinction in the two [Western Desert](#) campaigns.

Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin, who flew from [Tunisia](#) to take over, was not a complete stranger, however; he had had long service with the Division. He was a First Echelon officer, and his original unit was 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, whose companies the 19th had good reason to remember with affection for their excellent support in many actions. After taking part in the campaigns in [Greece](#), [Crete](#) and [Libya](#), Colonel McGaffin had attended the Armoured School at [Abbassia](#) and was selected as one of the officers to return to New Zealand for training in armour. In November he came back to the [Middle East](#) in command of 3 Army Tank Battalion, a big proportion of whose members were absorbed into [19 Armoured Regiment](#); he then rejoined [27 Battalion](#) as commanding officer. The new members of the 19th all knew him personally, the older hands knew him by repute, and he received a ready welcome and had the co-operation of all ranks from the start.

The other principal posts in [19 Regiment](#) remained as before, except that RSM Dave Rench handed over again to Bert [Steele](#),<sup>7</sup> who had returned from New Zealand. NCO appointments increased as from time to time vacancies in the new establishment were filled by those men whose skill and experience made them

eligible. During the early training considerable thought was given to the NCO position, and few appointments had been made. It was significant that the former infantry soldiers did well and by keenness and aptitude justified appointments as NCOs for which long service had fitted them.

Throughout April the regiment, by rostering its few tanks to squadrons for two days at a time, concentrated on practical handling and on tactical exercises. The promise that regiments would soon be able to muster a full establishment of Shermans quelled the discontent caused by having to make do with so few tanks, and when the first tanks arrived from [Abbassia](#) there was great jubilation and increased interest. The first intake included tanks of both British and American



manufacture; the contrast in finish was most marked and, though there was no difference in performance, the latter type found immediate favour. With the interior finished in white enamel, the American Sherman was cleaner and seemed much more spacious than its British counterpart. Keen competition was expected among the troop commanders when the time came to allocate vehicles.

With the approach of summer battle dress was replaced by shorts and the cool and comfortable bush shirt. Long leave also began during the month and with it came the welcome news that a sustenance allowance of three shillings a day would be paid to all ranks spending their leave at other than transit camps or official leave centres. A visit from the 2 NZEF Broadcasting Unit gave fifty men of all ranks from the regiment the opportunity to record a message to their folk at home, and most of those who broadcast were First Echelon men with three or more years' service overseas. Other matters of note during April were the depressing shortage of beer and the institution of regular programmes of summer sport among the squadrons,

who soon developed a keen rivalry. Some good games of cricket were played. On the lighter side, entertainment continued to be well catered for, and at least two official items contributed to the amusement of the troops. The first was the visit to the area of a Chinese military mission and the second a fatuity originating at Headquarters British Troops in [Egypt](#) and published in the routine orders of all units. Over the signature of a female soldier the following notice appeared:

Secret

Hq

Bte

### Abbreviations.

The unofficial abbreviation AMEN for anti-personnel mines will not be used in the ME Comd, as it is considered unsuitable.

[Sgd] Margaret D....

T/Cdr

for Brigadier GS.

May 1943 was a momentous month for the whole of the [2 NZEF](#) in the [Middle East](#). It marked the final overthrow of the Axis forces in [Africa](#), the return of [2 NZ Division](#) to [Maadi Camp](#), and the announcement of a furlough scheme for long-service personnel. In the regiment there were 190 officers and men whose service entitled them to return to New Zealand in the first furlough draft. In a new organisation which depended so much on men whose long experience fitted them for important commands and key posts, this gap would be serious. Similar situations existed in all the armoured units.

The code-name for the first draft was RUAPEHU, a singularly apt choice, for the repercussions of the furlough scheme were almost volcanic. The ties of home were a powerful attraction, yet the majority of the men whose overseas service entitled them to consideration for return to New Zealand stoutly resisted all persuasion to go; they preferred to remain with their units as long as their services were necessary



—until hostilities ceased if need be. The unselfish creed of the volunteer, the esprit de corps which bound each unit, and the general belief that the war would soon be won were in conflict with the principles on which the furlough scheme was based. In [19 Regiment](#) thirty men were warned to stand by to move when the word came; and finally as more and more men became eligible to return to New Zealand, lots were drawn to fill unit quotas, and when even this method failed to produce the required numbers those eligible were sent home without the option.

On 6 June the GOC himself left [Egypt](#) by air for New Zealand, where his brief visit would provide an opportunity for discussions with the [War Cabinet](#) on the future of 2 NZ Division. At Maadi Camp [Brigadier Inglis](#) assumed command, and as the homeward-bound troops left reinforcements arrived to replace them. The 1st Tank Battalion, fresh from New Zealand, joined 4 Armoured Brigade, as its sister battalion had done earlier in the year. With the posting of these men and of the 9th Reinforcements, regiments reached battle strength, and for the first time regimental rolls showed full establishments.

Now that the men had reached the peak of training signs of staleness began to appear, and with July came the least esteemed anniversary on 4 Brigade's calendar: the formation had been a full year in [Maadi](#) Camp. True, it was now once more in company with the rest of the Division, but it had been a sad and sore reunion, with the brigade to a man more than eager to erase the bar sinister of 'base wallah' from the newly acquired escutcheons of the armoured regiments.

At this time, too, a series of incidents took place in [Cairo](#) between New Zealand and American troops. The result was a general tightening up of discipline. The check rein of the Army Act inevitably caused further fretting, and news of a fresh campaign, opened by the Allied landings in [Sicily](#), made the troops even more than usually restive. At the end of July [General Freyberg](#) returned from New Zealand and resumed command of the Division amid a feeling of relief brought about by portents of a probable move from [Maadi](#).

This move, however, did not eventuate for another two months, and meanwhile in [19 Armoured Regiment](#) there were many marchings-out of men going on furlough and marchings-in of reinforcements. Tanks, too, were on the move, and the worn-out Crusaders on which A Squadron had spent so many enthusiastic hours were

replaced by Shermans. These new tanks arrived on the same day as three officers and fifty-five other ranks left the regiment as part of the Wakatipu draft, bound for New Zealand, and eighty-three men of the 10th Reinforcements were posted. There were now only twenty in the regiment who could claim the distinction of being original echelon men, all of them senior officers, WOs or NCOs. Some of them figured in the list of mentioned in despatches published during August. Those of [19 Regiment](#) so honoured were Major Wooller, Captain Stewart, Sergeant [Agent](#),<sup>8</sup> Sergeant Grennell,<sup>9</sup> Sergeant [Collett](#)<sup>10</sup> and Private [Gibbons](#),<sup>11</sup> each of whom had earned the distinction by devotion to duty during the earlier part of the Battle for [Egypt](#).

An operational role for [2 NZ Division](#) now seemed certain, and [General Freyberg](#), flying to [Sicily](#) at the request of General Sir Harold Alexander, learnt that the New Zealanders were required for projected operations in southern [Europe](#), and agreed to have the Division in readiness by October. The consent of the [War Cabinet](#) in New Zealand was readily obtained, and in preparation for a mobile role with [Eighth Army](#), equipment began to arrive. The 19th received twenty-two Sherman tanks and seven scout cars. This completed the table of fighting vehicles, and the regiment was now fully equipped with Shermans. There was great satisfaction all round when on 10 September a regimental advance party moved to Burg el Arab. The excitement of other- days returned. In the bustle of the following week, when the whole unit moved out by squadrons to join the rest of the Division in the Desert, all staleness evaporated. The tank crews, looking down along the long lines of sweating infantrymen who covered the whole hot route from [Maadi](#) to Burg el Arab on foot, had their first practical demonstration of the advantages of their new role.

Brigade and divisional exercises began at Burg el Arab on 17 September and continued until units began to embark for their unknown destination in southern [Europe](#). The main exercise had as its object 'to practise co-operation with an Armd Bde Gp in attack'. Aptly code-named TECHNIQUE, this manoeuvre took place in the [Wadi Natrun](#) area and occupied the week from 24 September to 3 October. It involved an attack on a brigade front to penetrate enemy infantry and anti-tank defences, clear gaps in minefields, and exploit success with armour. During its progress the GOC met units and told them of the imminent change of operational theatre, stressing the great importance of security during the initial stages of the

move. Shortly afterwards the New Zealand insignia were removed from vehicles, badges and titles withdrawn from issue, and all leave cancelled.

For 4 Armoured Brigade the stay at Burg el Arab was intensely busy. Working at last as a complete formation, the brigade faced for the first time the complex problems of the tactical handling, mechanical maintenance, and routine administration of a large mobile force. Not the least important feature was the smoothing out of communication difficulties, and many hours of practice, plus several full-scale signal exercises, were held to this end. Important recommendations for the allocation of wireless sets, made as a result of experiment and practice within the regiment, were later embodied as standard throughout armoured formations. The 19th took its 'R/Toc' seriously.

On 3 October the regiment's advance party, comprising the second-in-command, Major Wooller, and RQMS MacRae,<sup>12</sup> left for Amiriya, and for the following week the unit prepared for departure. On the 9th the advanced vehicle party (ten trucks with one officer and eleven other ranks) pulled out. Two days later Captain Reid<sup>13</sup> left the unit lines with the scout cars and jeeps. On the 12th the second-flight vehicle party, including tanks, each with a crew of two men, and transport (73 vehicles in all) went, and then the regiment's quota for the Division's personnel flight (424 all ranks) marched to the embarkation camp, where the regiment was further split up. It would be several weeks before it was able to function again as a corporate body.

At A, B, and C camps at Ikingi Maryut the troops of 19 Regiment made the most of the five days yet remaining of their long sojourn in Egypt. The usual transit camp distractions were well in evidence. Sandstorms and swimming, fatigues and route marches, beer issues—three in four days—and unexpectedly, rain. Then at last, after an early breakfast, the move to the embarkation point became a reality.

It was a memorable morning, fresh and dustless after the rain; the grim old desert turned on its best behaviour as a friendly farewell to the troops it had known now for almost four years. As the convoy of ten-tonners rolled over the salt marshes and desert flats between Ikingi Maryut and Alexandria, many men beneath the khaki canopies, though joining in the general joyful chorus of 'Goodbye Egypt', felt the parting to be almost personal. They had had tremendous experiences in these arid wastes. They had known elation and fear, joy and sorrow, well-being and pain. In

the anxious hours they had spent sweating in hot slit trenches or shivering in chill winds, chords of memory had been spun, chords too strong ever to sever cleanly. This was —this had been—home.

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<sup>1</sup> Lt J. B. Arlidge; Johnsonville; born Palmerston North, 5 Aug 1916; student.

<sup>2</sup> Cpl H. J. K. Best; born NZ, 7 Dec 1915; labourer.

<sup>3</sup> Maj H. G. Wooller, m.i.d., MC (Greek); Auckland; born Waihi, 18 Sep 1908; Regular soldier; 2 i/c 19 Bn and Armd Regt 1942–44; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. J. S. Somerville, MC; Wellington; born Dunedin, 7 Jul 1910; Presbyterian minister; chaplain 19 Armd Regt 1942–45.

<sup>5</sup> L-Sgt W. J. Clark, MM; Lower Hutt; born Woodville, 18 Apr 1919; storeman; wounded 3 Jul 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Col R. L. McGaffin, DSO, ED; Wellington; born Hastings, 30 Aug 1902; company manager; 27 MG Bn 1939–41; comd 3 Army Tank Bn (in NZ) Mar-Oct 1942; CO 27 MG Bn Feb-Apr 1943; CO 19 Armd Regt Apr 1943-Aug 1944; CO Advanced Base, Italy, Aug-Oct 1944.

<sup>7</sup> WO I A. W. Steele; Christchurch; born Dunedin, 29 Aug 1913; labourer.

<sup>8</sup> Sgt K. Agent, m.i.d.; Te Popo; born Stratford, 14 Jul 1916; labourer; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Lt J. E. Grennell, m.i.d.; Picton; born Chatham Islands, 19 Feb 1918; carpenter; three times wounded.

<sup>10</sup> L-Sgt D. B. Collett, m.i.d.; Point Howard, Wellington; born NZ, 27 Mar 1910; painter.

<sup>11</sup> Pte A. W. Gibbons, m.i.d.; Plimmerton; born Taumarunui, 13 Jun 1916;

battery burner; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>12</sup> WO II J. S. L. MacRae; Hawera; born NZ, 12 Jul 1913; grocer.

<sup>13</sup> Capt A. N. Reid; London; born Dunedin, 17 Nov 1909; publicity liaison officer.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 16 – EGYPT TO ITALY

## CHAPTER 16

### *Egypt to Italy*

All is now downhill— *Italy* lies before you!

—Hannibal

Even though their hearts may have been light, the troops' backs when leaving *Egypt* for *Italy* were burdened almost to the point of breaking under the proverbial last straw. In fact, if it had not been for mutual support and much good-hearted pushing and shoving, many would have collapsed beneath their burdens while embarking in the lighters which took them to the waiting transports and when negotiating the steep, swaying gangways leading up the ships' sides. The load carried by each man was of impressive proportions. It included a bedroll of four blankets, a kitbag with a full issue of both winter and summer clothing, a haversack with personal gear for toilet and messing and miscellaneous articles, weapon and ammunition, full web gear and respirator, anti-malaria outfit, emergency ration, field dressing, a two-gallon water can, and one bivouac tent between each two men. Additional items for regimental and squadron orderly rooms, unit records of one sort or another, medical supplies and a prudent proportion of tools—all had to be manhandled.

Once aboard—the regiment was split up among three ships, Regimental Headquarters and B Squadron on the *Nieuw Holland*, A Squadron on the *Llangibby Castle*, and C Squadron on the *Letitia*, with part of Headquarters Squadron on each—the problem was to fit men and gear into the limited space, for all ships were crowded. When this was accomplished, however, the sea trip became a very pleasant break. The weather was ideal and the convoy, at one time comprising more than fifty vessels, made an impressive sight as it steamed across the calm *Mediterranean*.

On the first day out the destination— *Italy*—was disclosed in the GOC's special order of the day, which was read to all troops:

TO ALL RANKS 2 NZ DIV.

During the final training at BURG EL ARAB I told you we were going overseas.



Now that we have left NORTH AFRICA, I can tell you we are on the way to [Italy](#). This may not be a surprise to you; neither is it our first venture across the [Mediterranean](#). In 1941, many of you went to the help of [Greece](#) and took part in that short and ill-fated campaign. All those early campaigns in the [Middle East](#) were difficult ones. We were usually outnumbered and short of the essential equipment. Although in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) we suffered a heavy reverse we never lost our steadiness or doubted our ability to overcome the Germans when equipment did arrive.

Two and a half years have passed and times have changed. The victories in North Africa are behind us. We go back now across the [Mediterranean](#) as a veteran Division. Further, for the first time our own Armoured Brigade is with us and we will take the field as the most powerfully equipped Division in the world. I cannot say what our role will be, but it is certain to be a mobile one in which we may operate as an independent force as we have done many times before. Battle conditions in [Europe](#) will be very different from those in the [Western Desert](#); much of the country is mountainous and wooded, while the valleys and plains will be cultivated. Speaking generally, the country will favour defence and infantry will play a bigger part. The conditions under which we will be fighting call for the highest degree of physical fitness.

As you can see from the map of [Europe](#), the tide has turned strongly in favour of the Allies. This has been a brutal war especially on the Continent. The Germans realise what defeat will mean and what is coming to them. They can be depended upon therefore to fight hard up to the moment when the crack comes. After four years of war, we know our German and we know quite well we can beat him. Lastly I need not add that I am confident the Division, trained and equipped as it is, will maintain its reputation in the difficult times that lie before us.

B. C. Freyberg,  
Lieutenant-General,  
Comd 2 NZ Division

The announcement that [Italy](#) was to be the new theatre surprised very few, for all had followed the fortunes of Fifth and Eighth Armies, whose invasion of the Italian mainland took place while preparations for the Division's move from [Egypt](#) were in full swing. There were some who had hoped for a return to [Greece](#) and for an

opportunity to reverse the parts played there four years previously. Mr Churchill's references to the 'soft underbelly' of [Europe](#), and the inclusion of an armoured brigade with the Division seemed, in the opinion of some of the old hands, to favour a return to the [Balkans](#), especially as recent news from [Italy](#) had been so good. Mussolini had resigned; [Naples](#) had fallen; the situation seemed to be well in hand there. Perhaps now a new thrust would be made elsewhere?

The news, however, was generally well received, for there were few who were not moved by the prospect of seeing something of a country which history, art and literature had provided with so rich a background. The dead domains and the long-buried culture of the ancient Pharaohs could not compete in interest with the birthplace of boyhood heroes. Italian opera, too, even in far-away New Zealand, had many followers. This, the land of the Cæsars, of Michaelangelo, of Rossini, of Leonardo da Vinci, was approached with keen expectation by the troops now headed towards its shores.

At dawn on 21 October [Sicily](#) came into view, and the following morning the convoy neared the Italian mainland. By noon the ships were entering the inner harbour of [Taranto](#), the great naval base of the [Italian Fleet](#). A cruiser and a couple of destroyers were the only survivors there of the warships which Mussolini only two years before had boasted were the masters of the [Mediterranean](#).

The backdrop of buildings flanking the harbour looked impressive, but as the disembarking troops clambered from ship to lighter, and then from lighter to quayside, the city of [Taranto](#) began to lose its enchantment. A few shoddy-looking, all too familiar green uniforms represented the troops of our former enemy. The wearers lounged apathetically and looked with bored detachment at the stream of khaki spilling over the quayside into their country. The none too polite sallies from soldiers with a smattering of Italian picked up from prisoners of war during desert days failed to straighten their backs or raise their choler. Despised but apparently unmoved, here in their natural setting they looked no better than they had done in North [Africa](#). They had no heart for the war. A week earlier [Italy](#) had been granted the courtesy title 'co-belligerent'. Now, after their disastrous defeats on land and sea by the Allies, the Italians were feeling the severity of the Axis claw.

Whatever the reaction of the disembarking troops, however, —and reactions

vary with the individual—the [Taranto](#) disembarkation was one of varying degrees of disappointment. This insanitary-looking port in over-populated southern [Italy](#) did not conform at all to the popular conception of the country which had been approached with such keen anticipation. But the seven and a half mile march to a camp set among olive groves at Tedesco revived the natural ebullience of the troops. En route, despite the burden of full packs, [19 Regiment](#) sang lustily. The clear air of the countryside was fresh and exhilarating. On the panorama of green fields and trees, glimpses of distant spires and whitewashed stone buildings combined in compositions vastly more satisfying than the drab, unending desert horizons of yesterday.

That evening, after a meal and the erection of bivouac tents in the rock-strewn olive grove, the men of the squadrons gathered round camp fires to spend their first night in [Italy](#). A wine factory, which earlier reconnaissance had discovered adjacent to the regimental area, provided the means for a successful house-warming party. The smell of wood smoke and earth and the lurid, unsteady illumination of the fires flickering among the olive trees created a picnic atmosphere. So violent was the contrast to the conditions in [Egypt](#) that many felt they might have been back in New Zealand. All revelled in their new surroundings.

Even the prosaic unit war diary struck a lyrical note, referring at length to 'lavender horizons, amethyst sunrises, evening skies of carmine, blood red and gold', and much more in similar vein. One entry describing the countryside posed the rhetorical question, 'Can anything be more starkly naked than a bare fig tree?' This did not escape the cold official eye, for pencilled against the margin is a laconic 'Yes'.

During the stay at Tedesco the unit exploited to the full all the fascinating possibilities of the countryside. Though lack of transport rendered the 19th immobile, this did not deter its members from following wide and varied trails of exploration. Route marches were officially a popular method of passing the time. The scene did not soon lose its charm, nor did the novelty of living and working close to civilians quickly wear off. The troops fraternised with the local peasantry and, despite language difficulties, soon struck up friendships. Italian families who could count a Kiwi soldier among their callers were fortunate, for gifts of bully beef and other rations not highly esteemed by the soldier were most welcome to the civilians of this war-ravaged country.

Fortunate, too, was the Kiwi who, when the weather broke on 28 October, could find shelter under an Italian roof. The deluge lasted for two days and turned the sylvan scene into a miserable morass. Now the troops got a glimpse of the conditions that would so often beset them during the first five months of the campaign in [Italy](#). The foul, clinging mud would prove an uncompromising foe to both man and vehicle; a foe which would restrict the role of the regiment and at times completely immobilise many of its tanks.

On 28 October Major Wooller arrived from [Bari](#) with his small party and a selection of unit transport comprising jeeps, scout cars, 15-cwt trucks and a water cart. These were fully employed immediately and the regimental commissariat was quick to seize the chance of supplementing hard rations by foraging for supplies of fresh food and drink. Eggs and vegetables, and wine of various colours and intriguing titles but of a fairly uniform potency were readily obtainable in exchange for bully beef and biscuits.

Training, designed to harden the troops for the physical rigours of forthcoming actions, was the daily routine at Tedesco. After the 28th, however, rain interfered with the programme but provided the opening for a suitable substitute for the set-piece physical jerks, cross-country runs and marches. Pick-and-shovel parties replaced physical training, and much time was spent improving the muddy tracks and making roads. Local flooding soon drove some men from the localities they had chosen on arrival, and many bivvy tents were shifted from the spots where the mud was deepest to places where it was only a little less boggy. Drying clothing and gear was a problem, and a fresh hazard in the area were the clothes-lines strung between the olives and the vine pergolas. During the day these wires were festooned with damp clothing, but at night, bare and invisible, they became traps for the unwary.

On 1 November summer clothing was withdrawn and battle dress became the official attire. News of the impending move nearer the front line was well received, but as the regiment was still without its tanks, preparatory tactical training took the form of a TEWT (tactical exercise without troops).

On the 2nd the CO and Adjutant left to reconnoitre the new area, thirty RMT trucks reported in, and camp was struck during the evening. The unit moved out at

eight o'clock the following morning. Extraordinary precautions had been taken to prevent the presence of the New Zealand Division in [Italy](#) becoming known, and strict wireless silence was enforced on all moves. Titles, badges, and the New Zealand insignia were removed from the vehicles before they started on the northward trek.

The ride up through southern [Italy](#) from Tedesco to the Monachella area took two days. The route led through Martina Franca to Alberobella, where the countryside, dotted with the curiously shaped 'trulli' houses, was full of interest. The farmers in the regiment, in particular, found much to talk about during the trip. By noon on the first day a halt was made at a staging camp in the vicinity of Altamura, and the journey was not resumed until 8 a.m. on the 4th. Travelling via [Corato](#), [Andria](#), [Canosa](#), [Foggia](#), [Lucera](#)—on account of road demolition—and [San Severo](#), the convoy crossed the plains of Puglia and reached its destination at 4.30 p.m.

Before the main body of the troops arrived, Regimental Headquarters had been set up in a farmhouse at Paziienza, and Captain Reid with the jeep and scout-car drivers had marked out the unit area at Monachella, south-west of San [Severo](#). The place was picturesque and pretty, with hills and forest separating the numerous villages. The autumn weather was cool, and squadrons spent the time sorting out and preparing their areas to accommodate the tanks, which were expected from [Bari](#) at any time.

There were few signs of war in this part of the country; even on the road up from [Taranto](#) the only visible evidence had been blown bridges, an occasional road demolition, and a little bomb damage to some of the buildings on the main road. The population, however, was obviously in straitened circumstances and was eager to exchange items of local manufacture for food, cigarettes, and cast-off clothing.

Unofficial expeditions to the many nearby villages were made by men anxious to send home some souvenir of [Italy](#) before all stocks were snapped up. Lace and hats were the main items available for purchase or barter, and those with wives or sweethearts soon had parcels ready for despatch. Others without such attachments found that the local vino merchants offered at seven lire a litre wares much more to their taste. There were evidently some connoisseurs in the unit, for on one occasion the Padre had good reason to suspect that the sacramental wine had been secretly

replaced by a less palatable local vintage.

Some men managed to visit [Foggia](#) and returned with accounts of the havoc done there during the hotly contested battles for the airfield by which the city was almost surrounded. Bomb damage had been particularly severe in the crowded residential outskirts, and the failure of electricity, water and sewerage had left the large population in a sorry state.

Fourth Armoured Brigade's assembly area was some 30 miles behind the front line, where [Eighth Army](#), after a successful and speedy advance, was held up in the [Sangro](#) valley, which formed the eastern flank of a German defence line designed to hold the Allied armies during the winter months. Officers of [19 Regiment](#) took the opportunity to go up to the forward areas and acquaint themselves with the problems of armoured movement across country and along the many intersecting minor routes. The clogging mud so much in evidence at Tedesco was even worse in areas where there was movement of heavy traffic. Bomb damage, demolitions, and solid wear and tear of roads and tracks had already made the movement of tanks hazardous. Winter had only just begun; the full three months of bad weather to follow would make much of the battle area impassable.

On 6 November the regiment's main flight vehicles, which had left [Tewfik](#) on 21 October and arrived at [Bari](#) on 3 November, began to arrive. The tank crews were wet through and had had a trying trip up. Squadrons immediately went to work 'fining up' their tanks for winter, and one of the first jobs tackled was a tough one—the removal of 'mud guards'. These had been useful to keep down dust in the desert, but in boggy ground they simply clogged up with mud. The weather was bleak and temperatures raw, but general conditions at Monachella were still good, and in the period of calm while the Division was assembling, the troops made the most of their opportunity to enjoy themselves. The waves of British and American bombers which passed over the lines daily were heartening, as was the assurance from men who had been forward that our air superiority was so marked that few enemy planes ever ventured into the battle area.

Relations with the Italian peasants were agreeable, and as an unusual diversion a soccer team from [19 Regiment](#) was matched against a team from the hilltop village of Torre Maggiore. The game, which was won by the unit, was watched by

approximately 1000 enthusiastic spectators. Several impromptu Rugby tussles also took place, but these were between teams from within the regiment; the natives did not understand the game, though they derived much amusement from watching our men play and appeared to think that Rugby was some form of organised mayhem.

Social calls, too, were exchanged with the local inhabitants, who were hospitable and most anxious to show friendship to our men. The CO and Adjutant accepted the invitation of the Padrone and were entertained at the [Castello](#). The meal was novel but palatable, the dessert being a confection which looked like chocolate—it was, in fact, dried pig's blood sweetened and served with cream. Fortunately the ingredients were not revealed until after the dish had been eaten, but for the rest of the evening the guests of honour were seen to swallow hard and frequently.

On 11 November the forward move began and the CO left on a reconnaissance to Palmoli (south of [Furci](#)), where [8 Indian Division](#) was in action, and at 7.30 a.m. on the 14th the regiment was on its way to [Furci](#) where Divisional Tactical Headquarters was set up. The route up for most of the troops was along the main roads through [San Severo](#), San Paolo, [Termoli](#), San Salvo, Abate (near [Vasto](#)) and [Cupello](#), but the tanks covered a lot of the distance across country and staged for the night at [Termoli](#). For them the latter stages of the journey were most difficult. Demolished bridges, traffic jams, and bad weather all contrived to delay their progress along the tracks and secondary roads chosen as the most suitable route. It was 16 November before all squadrons were back with the regiment, and even then five vehicles had been left by the roadside. Otherwise the trip was uneventful. Now the unit was far enough forward to hear the shellfire. Grimly reminding them of the vulnerability of even the heaviest armour, the tank crews on their way up had seen burnt-out Shermans and German Mark IVs lying derelict on each side of the road in the San Salvo area.

At Furci the tanks had an anxious few minutes when a carrier from 22 (Motor) Battalion caught fire and illuminated the whole of the refuelling point. The burning carrier also set fire to a haystack, and it was some time before the blaze was subdued. In the desert a beacon like this would have invited disaster, but here the excitement was purely local. No aircraft appeared.

At 7 a.m. on the 17th the regiment moved still further forward. Regimental Headquarters' tanks, followed by Headquarters Reconnaissance, C Squadron and A Squadron, passed through [Gissi](#) and Castelanguido, north-west of [Furci](#). At 11.15 a.m. they halted on a hillside above a demolished bridge over the Osento River, just below the town of [Atessa](#), which was at that time being shelled by the enemy. The engineers were working on a river crossing, but it was not ready for traffic before nightfall, so at 5.45 p.m. a descent was made into the riverbed, where RHQ and the two squadrons harboured for the night. B Squadron joined them later. A and C Squadrons each lost a tank over banks during the day.

This move to [Atessa](#) was taken on orders which placed the regiment under the command of 19 Indian Infantry Brigade. During the previous night the CO had gone forward to meet the Brigadier commanding that formation. At first light on the 18th the advance was resumed, and the tanks and A Echelon vehicles crossed the Osento River without incident, though the bad weather and difficult detours to bypass demolitions made progress slow and taxed the skill of the drivers. All tanks reached the destination safely, and on arrival at [Atessa](#) the regiment received orders for an immediate attack on [Perano](#), between [Atessa](#) and the [Sangro River](#).

The 19th, now committed operationally for the first time since [Ruweisat Ridge](#), made preparations to go into action. To the regiment went the honour of being the first New Zealand unit to engage the enemy and take an objective in the Italian campaign.



# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

# CHAPTER 17 – ARMOUR INTO ACTION

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## [SECTION]

Chill blustering wind and driving rain  
prevent my willing feet.

—Collins

With the onset of winter the campaign in [Italy](#), which had at first gone so fast and favourably for the advancing Allied armies, began to show signs of slowing up. On the [Eighth Army's](#) front German resistance increased, and it was obvious that the enemy had established a strong line behind the natural barriers of rivers and mountains which, north and west of the Gargano peninsula, formed such splendid terrain for defence.

October and November saw the character of the campaign change from tip-and-run tactics, in which Allied air, armour, and artillery had dominated the pattern, to stiffly contested infantry engagements, in which the enemy, favourably placed behind well-contrived demolitions and minefields, had held off thrusts from both [5 Corps](#) on the right and [13 Corps](#) on the left as the Allies faced up to his new line, probed for possible weaknesses, and reconnoitred for fresh advances.

Already the mechanised army of the attackers had met obstacles which made caution a keyword for all vehicular movement. The enemy laid mines lavishly along all main routes and on the steep, slippery tracks which led up to his strongly held key points, while the commanding heights which he occupied gave him a clear field of view over the area where the attackers were forced to operate. In addition, the worsening weather entirely favoured the defence.

The assembly of [2 NZ Division](#) in preparation for the new campaign had not been an easy task and its initial operational employment was bristling with difficulties. But General Montgomery, in a special order of the day issued to [Eighth Army](#) on the anniversary of [Alamein](#), 23 October, had struck a note of confidence which echoed the prevailing sentiment of all ranks. 'The end is in sight' was the theme, and to this theme every man subscribed. The New Zealand Division, fresh

and fit, went into battle confidently. Its presence in [Italy](#) had been kept secret.

The Army Commander's plan was to breach the enemy line by forcing a narrow bridgehead near the coast and, fanning out from there, compel the Germans to continue their backward move once more. The [2nd NZ Division](#), by relieving [8 Indian Division](#), would allow General Montgomery to concentrate [5 Corps](#) more closely on the coast and then thrust along the road north from [Atessa](#) to the Sangro.

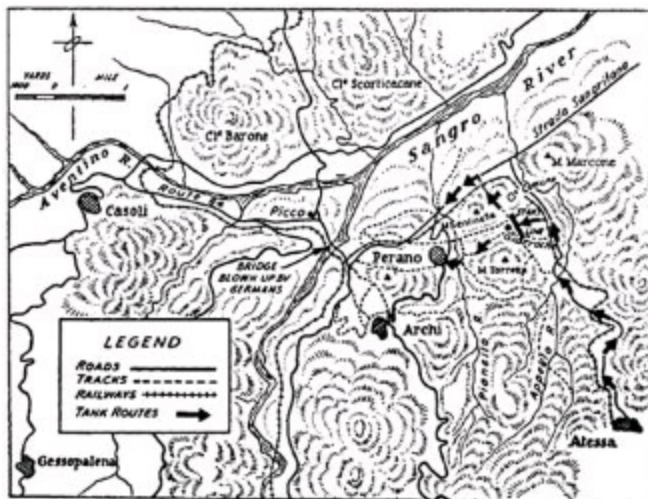
By mid-November the New Zealand Division was moving into position for the first attack. On the 18th [19 Regiment](#) successfully, though with difficulty, crossed the Osento River and worked uphill towards [Atessa](#). Regimental Headquarters had just reached its destination when orders were received from the GOC for an attack on [Perano](#) to take place the same afternoon. It was 12.30 p.m. when an orders group comprising [General Freyberg](#), the commander of 19 Indian Infantry Brigade, and Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin received the briefing for the assault which was timed to take place two and a half hours later. <sup>1</sup>

The tanks were still on the move. They had been moving for four days. A Squadron was coming forward to a forming-up area near [Perano](#). B Squadron was moving up from the riverbed, and C Squadron was concealed in a cemetery near [Atessa](#). Wireless silence was still in force because it was decided that this comparatively small action could not be permitted to give away the Division's presence by the sound of unmistakable New Zealand voices over the air. The area was under enemy observation and there was some shelling. Little or no time remained for reconnaissance, and the restriction on communications was therefore serious.

It was on faulty information of enemy strength that the plan of attack was devised and put into operation. The plan was that [19 Armoured Regiment](#) and  $\frac{3}{8}$  Punjab Regiment, with the co-operation of NZ Divisional Artillery, would capture [Perano](#) 'and so cause such a threat to the bridge over the [Sangro River](#) on the [Perano-Picco Rd](#) that the enemy would be forced to destroy it.'

Initially it had been the intention to undertake this operation at 8 a.m. next day, and the commander of 19 Indian Infantry Brigade and the CO [19 Armoured Regiment](#) had already had a quick look over the ground from Monte Torretta. The GOC,

however, was anxious to test the strength of the enemy on the left flank with a view to making a frontal thrust across the river if it could be made without danger to that flank. The bridge was the key to the problem. If it was destroyed this would clearly indicate that the German troops were already north of the river. Perano was said to be held by outposts armed with light



The Regiment's first action, Perano, 18 November 1943

### The Regiment's first action, **Perano**, 18 November 1943

weapons only and it was believed there were no hostile anti-tank guns in the vicinity.

Accordingly, it was decided that the assault would be made with four armoured troops only. Preparations were of necessity very hurried. Still, on the information given about the enemy, plus the fact that support was promised by the Divisional Artillery, the indications were that the attack would be an easy one. As events turned out, the action proved quite costly in both tanks and infantry.

A Squadron (Major Tony Everist), with No. 9 Troop from C Squadron (Lieutenant Don Kerr<sup>2</sup>), was briefed for the assault. The rest of C Squadron was to give the fourteen attacking tanks supporting fire from a position behind a spur near Monte Sentinella. A start line on the saddle south-east of this feature was taped, and the tanks moved uphill from the river area along the winding slippery track, got into position, and awaited zero hour.

The crews, eager and tense, spent a feverish few minutes testing all controls

and mechanism, each man going automatically through the drill which had by now become habit yet for the first time took on an awful significance which no amount of peace-conditioned practice could hope to impart. Ahead was the enemy.

The squadron commander conferred with the battalion commander of the Indians, whose two companies of infantry were to go forward with the tanks, and troop commanders moved from Sherman to Sherman making doubly sure that nothing had been left undone by driver, gunner, or loader.

The starting time, at the request of the CRA, was delayed for half an hour while the artillery programme—twenty minutes of smoke on the slopes of [Perano](#) followed by thirty minutes of shellfire on the same area and then thirty minutes' shellfire on the town itself—was arranged. At 3.30 p.m., as the concentration came down, the fourteen tanks crawled across the start line on their journey to their objective, [Perano](#), approximately one unpredictable mile away. For the first time in history a New Zealand armoured force was in action.

The assault was made from two angles, two troops making straight for the town while the remaining two, going round Monte Sentinella, made for the [Strada Sangritana](#) and on towards the vital [Perano-Picco](#) bridge across the Sangro. The first forward movement drew enemy shellfire, most of which came from the [Casoli](#) area behind [Perano](#). Then, as the right-hand troops gained the [Strada](#), concealed self-propelled guns and anti-tank guns opened up at very short range from camouflaged positions in the ploughed fields north of the road where it runs east and west near [Perano](#).

Now the communications weakness became fully manifest, and though commanders kept their cupolas open and valiantly tried to direct following or flanking tanks on to targets or away from trouble, casualties could not be avoided. Four tanks were soon knocked out, three of them burning. The infantry, too, was in trouble, and machine-gun and mortar fire was playing havoc in their ranks. Co-operation was virtually impossible, for communications, apart from a prearranged code based on bursts of Browning machine-gun fire, were non-existent.

The German shooting was well directed from an observation post found later in a house which flanked the start line. Ten minutes before zero a flare fired from that

locality aroused suspicion at Regimental Headquarters, but wireless silence prevented the observation being checked back to the attacking force. The CO, too, was out of touch with the tanks immediately movement began, but with his adjutant and the CO of the Punjabis he watched the progress of the assault from a forward battalion tactical headquarters. This headquarters was soon picked up by the German gunners and was accurately shelled. The CO of the Punjabis was severely wounded.

When a further two tanks were knocked out the right-hand assault petered out, but it had not been without cost to the enemy, who had several of his anti-tank guns silenced by the gunners in the attacking tanks.

In their direct assault on the town, the two left-hand troops, despite very difficult going, had better luck. All successfully crossed the riverbed at the foot of the steep slope in front of [Perano](#). At 4.20 p.m. four tanks, two from the north and two from the south, entered the town itself, met on the south side of it and, taking effective action against machine-gun and mortar opposition, held it till the infantry took over at 5.10 p.m. Meanwhile the rest of this force had come to grief on the hillside, which was too slippery and steep to negotiate; four tanks bogged down in the attempt or suffered track trouble in the treacherous going.

Good shooting by C Squadron from behind the Sentinella spur gave the enemy something to think about, and though the squadron's position was at times heavily 'stonked' by the German artillery, the tank gunners picked up the flashes of the enemy anti-tank weapons and engaged them hotly. Lieutenant Wethey's <sup>3</sup> tank, though disabled early in the attack and in an exposed position, also gave supporting fire and continued to shoot until it had exhausted its ammunition. The action continued in the failing light until silence from the opposite side indicated that the enemy had withdrawn.

The forward tanks, moving through the town, now got into position to command the bridge. It was blown at 6 p.m. and other demolitions followed, indicating that the enemy moving further back was making sure that his tracks were well covered. The mission was accomplished. The <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>th Punjab Regiment, now under its adjutant, for its senior officers had all been killed or wounded, consolidated and the tanks turned to face [Archi](#), which was still in enemy hands.

With the stabilising of the position Major Everist and Captain [Kelly](#)<sup>4</sup> set about at once to reconnoitre the area, arrange for the recovery of bogged and knocked-out tanks, and care for the casualties. It was soon found that all the tanks immobilised on the right flank were covered by fire, and attempts made to bury those of their crews who had been killed were frustrated. The enemy, however, had obtained valuable information from these knocked-out vehicles or from the possessions of the dead, and now knew of the presence of the New Zealand Division in [Italy](#).

A British soldier, who had been a prisoner and was left behind by his captors, reported in and told how the Germans, before blowing the bridge, had retreated over the river with two self-propelled guns, five anti-tank guns, two tanks, and a body of infantry. Our tank gunners during the attack had accounted for five anti-tank guns, and a self-propelled gun with muzzle-break fell into our hands after Major Everist and Captain Kelly, who were reconnoitring on foot, unexpectedly encountered this and another gun. During the confusion Kelly was wounded and one German unit which was mobile made off; the other, in a fixed position, was abandoned.

The CO, going forward to A Squadron, went round the area to assess the situation. At 11 p.m. he sent the following report to 19 Indian Infantry Brigade:

1. Tanks gained objective and handed over to your acting Bn Cmdr. Have surveyed the situation and advise 9 tanks from "A" Sqn are staging in arranged area NE of [Perano](#) in support of your troops in [Perano](#).
2. Owing to presence of enemy A/T guns and one (more suspected) tanks, strongly recommend reinforcing NW corner San Marconi Hill with A/T guns (Ref 330905).
3. Reports reveal bridge blown over [Sangro River](#) on [Perano-Picco Rd](#).
4. Our casualties 7 other ranks. Wounded 2 officers 3 other ranks Tanks out of action 9 (4 destroyed) (2 disabled) (3 bogged) Runners 29
5. The CO will call at Bde HQs tomorrow morning.

By 2 a.m. on the 19th Colonel McGaffin and Sergeant 'Wyn' Gibson of the Reconnaissance Troop had walked round all areas in which the tanks of the regiment were located. It was a pitch-black night, the CO's glasses had been smashed during the shelling of the infantry tactical headquarters from which he had been watching the attack, and the going was rough. Gibson, acting as the eyes of the party, did a good guiding job. When they returned to headquarters a signal was sent to [2 NZ Division](#) stating that, despite losses, the action had been a success, and that the



new position was secure. The GOC replied that his congratulations were to be made known to all ranks of the regiment.

The distinction of taking the first tank into [Perano](#) went to Captain [Leeks](#),<sup>5</sup> second-in-command of A Squadron, who supplied the following account of the action as he saw it:

After crossing the start line Sqn Hqs tagged along at the rear but as we were moving close to the barrage visual contact was soon lost with the three troops going out on the flanks. With wireless silence it was boring waiting for something to happen so I decided to cross the creek then try the tank up the steep incline in the centre which looked as though it had been consolidated by live-stock.

We took the slope all right and came out on to the road leading into [Perano](#). This road wound round the hillside and was in full view of the enemy over and on the river flats, but as far as I am aware only two shells were fired at us. At this stage we were advancing quicker than the barrage and moved right into it.

The Punjabi Inf moved in sections in close support of the tanks and I admired their copybook style. They were having casualties but we were luckier and passed several Huns but as they were only in small groups they were left for the following inf to mop up.

Visibility was now poor and as we arrived on the outskirts of [Perano](#) we were met by two bursts of fire which fortunately had no effect. We went quickly along the main street, right through to the end of the village and here sighted Lieut. Morrin's<sup>6</sup> tank coming up the incline and prior to the brief period of recognition I pulled off the road to get my gun into action. After recognition we moved back along the main street until we were halted by a gesticulating group of Italians calling out 'Tedeschi' and pointing to a building. [Jock McPhail](#),<sup>7</sup> my gunner, and I off loaded smartly and kicked open the door. A large black cat leaped out and in the excitement received a full burst from the Tommy Gun!

After contacting the Inf and receiving sundry bottles of Vino from the Italians we returned to the RV to see how the rest of the Sqn had fared.

The day following the attack, carriers from 22 NZ (Motor) Battalion came up and

took up positions in the Colle Comune area, while other units of 19 Indian Infantry Brigade were attacking [Archi](#). A Squadron gave supporting fire for this attack, but it was a bleak wet day with a heavy mist obscuring the target and effective direct fire was difficult. That evening it was reported that the Indians' assault had been successful, and at 7 p.m. the regiment came under command of [6 NZ Infantry Brigade](#) and withdrew to a regimental harbour in the riverbed beyond the hill features east of [Perano](#).

This first armoured engagement came under much critical discussion among the troops. The older members of the regiment, remembering grim battles and long casualty lists of infantry days, contrasted this action with others in which the 19th had played a part. The newer members, in action for the first time, though shaken by our own casualties were none the less convinced that, by comparison with those of the Indian infantry with whom the 19th was co-operating, our losses had been small. All were aware of the textbook shortcomings of the method in which the operation had been carried out, but it was nevertheless clearly established that the capture of [Perano](#) was in no small measure due to direct action by armour operating over the most difficult terrain and in the least favourable circumstances. It was, all in all, a good show, and Major Everist, who had led the assault, was later awarded the DSO.

Some brave and skilful work was done by all troops participating, and in the ill-fated No. 9 Troop Trooper Colin [Farquharson](#)<sup>8</sup> did a particularly fine job. His troop commander reported on the incident as follows:

Sgt Moody's<sup>9</sup> tank was knocked out by a direct hit from an 88 mm A/T Gun. The shot penetrated the left side of the turret exactly where the Wireless Operator Geof. [White](#)<sup>10</sup> was sitting and he was killed outright. The projectile then hit Sgt Moody on the opposite side of the turret and then penetrated the right-hand side of the turret. (In one side and out the other.)

The Gunner Bert [Tod](#)<sup>11</sup> was not wounded by this first shot and endeavoured to climb out of the turret through the top hatch. He was ... [hit] by a shot which bored across the top of the turret, taking the complete periscope (cupola) ring and Tod with it.

Colin Farquherson and Ted [Morgan](#)<sup>12</sup> evacuated through the emergency hatch in the bottom of the tank and were unhurt.

My own tank and Cpl Fair's<sup>13</sup> had fired a few rounds at the tree and buildings in the vicinity of the bridge but pulled right back into the olive grove when we saw that smoke was coming from the turret of Sgt Moody's tank.

Cpl Fair and I then ran across to Moody's knocked out tank, looked in the turret and saw that nothing could be done unless the tank could be got back into cover of the olive grove.

Farquherson and Morgan were both under the tank, so I told Morgan to get back to my tank in the trees. Farquherson told me that the engines were still in working order and volunteered to get back into the tank and drive it out. I told him he stood the chance of getting himself shot up but he said he'd do it. He climbed back in and when the engines were going I yelled "go". He started the tank in reverse and put his foot hard down.

As soon as the tank moved the Anti/Tank Guns opened up and in the 50 yards the tank had to go it was hit three more times [by anti-tank guns, and it was also under a hail of small-arms fire] but Colin didn't stop and we finally made the cover of the olive grove.

Here we were able to take the bodies of Sgt Moody and Geof. White out of the turret and left them on the ground by the tank and they were buried on the 19th November.

Trooper Farquharson added further to his brave achievement by volunteering to take part in a dangerous recon-naissance that same night. For his work at [Perano](#) he was later awarded a well-earned MM.

On the afternoon of the 20th enemy activity had lessened, and the Padre, with a party of men from the assaulting squadrons, held a memorial service and buried the dead. The first names on the regiment's roll of honour for the campaign in [Italy](#) were:

Sergeant R. E. (Dick) Moody

Corporal H. B. Lepper

Lance-Corporal M. Wilson

Trooper G. A. Glossop

Trooper P. Hyndman

Trooper H. S. (Bert) Tod

Trooper G. E. (Geoff) White

The ten days between the engagement at [Perano](#) and the launching of [2 NZ Division](#) against the enemy defences on the northern banks of the [Sangro River](#) were hectic ones in [19 Armoured Regiment](#). Prodigious efforts were made to recover bogged and disabled tanks, replenish supplies, and in general maintenance. All this work demanded unremitting toil. The tracks into the regiment's area were treacherous and wet, and the main routes to the supply points were congested. The lying-up area was overlooked by the enemy, and all movement had to be made after dark. Heavy and long hauls of fuel and ammunition were required to replenish stocks after the action, and the grand work of B Echelon during this difficult time was remarked on by all ranks. Squadron Sergeant-Major [Tait](#),<sup>14</sup> in particular, did yeomanly service in keeping our transport rolling.

On Monday the 22nd eight days' hard rations were issued down to troop level, and warning orders of impending events resulted in conferences and reconnaissances by all commanders. At this stage B2 personnel added to the already high regard in which the men in the squadrons held them by not only bringing up essential supplies but also distributing [Naafi](#) and [YMCA](#) comforts—including one bottle of beer to each man. In this allocation was their own quota, which they had generously handed over to the forward troops.

With action impending, the riverbed where the regiment's tank harbour was situated became hourly more and more crowded. In addition to [19 Regiment's](#) tanks and vehicles, sappers' trucks and artillery transport arrived at an alarming rate. Dispersal—the do or die axiom of desert days—was disregarded here, but an instinctive uneasiness was manifest among the troops who had had so many bitter

experiences in the past. The regiment was now all set to go again, and the general comment was: 'The sooner the better.'

The 19th at this time was under the command of 6 Brigade, which was to do the assault when the New Zealand Divisional attack was launched. In preparation, squadron and troop commanders went forward on three successive nights to the forward infantry positions. Daylight reconnaissance was impossible, but every effort was made to discover every scrap of useful information about the river, its approaches and defences. The armour, determined to get the full story, did everything humanly possible to achieve this end. Captain [Wilson](#)<sup>15</sup> forded the river to the enemy side in an attempt to select suitable crossings and routes out of the riverbed for our tanks.

Lower down the [Sangro](#) 78 Division had made some progress and had actually crossed in one place on the 21st. On the 22nd, however, its forward companies were driven back, and in the light of these reverses the New Zealand Division's attack was postponed. Detailed air photographs of the country occupied by the enemy were issued and closely studied by all squadron commanders.

It was the 27th before [19 Regiment](#), with the rest of the Division, got into position for the frontal attack across the Sangro. At 3 a.m. on Sunday the 28th Regimental Headquarters, followed by A Squadron (Major Everist), C Squadron (Captain [Parata](#)<sup>16</sup>) and B Squadron (Captain [McInnes](#)<sup>17</sup>), left the laager area. An hour later they had crossed the [Strada Sangritana](#) and were feeling their way down the slippery tracks to the riverbed, finding unexpectedly grave difficulties in making progress over the soft, muddy ground in the pitch darkness.

For this operation the squadrons of [19 Regiment](#) were to be divided: A Squadron was under the command of 5 Brigade on the right flank and B Squadron under the command of 6 Brigade on the left flank, while one troop, No. 7 (Lieutenant [Wiseley](#)<sup>18</sup>) from B was detached to Divisional Headquarters for protective duties on the left flank. The regiment was the only one with tanks forward of [Bari](#) and therefore had to be split up in this way.

After the night approach the plan was for A Squadron to lead the 19th across the ford and to go on in close support of 21 and 23 Battalions. Once across, the rest

of the regiment was to advance south-west in close support of 6 Brigade. It was thought that all objectives would be attained in four hours. The full extent of the problem was not appreciated until the river was reached. At 5.30 a.m. the enemy added to the already tricky task of getting the slow-moving vehicles over the three crossings by shelling the area.

The orders issued to the squadrons for the operation were:

A Squadron under the command of 5 Brigade in a support role.

[19 Regiment](#) less one squadron with 6 Brigade.

B Squadron to support the infantry on Marabella and left flank from the western side of the Gogna River.

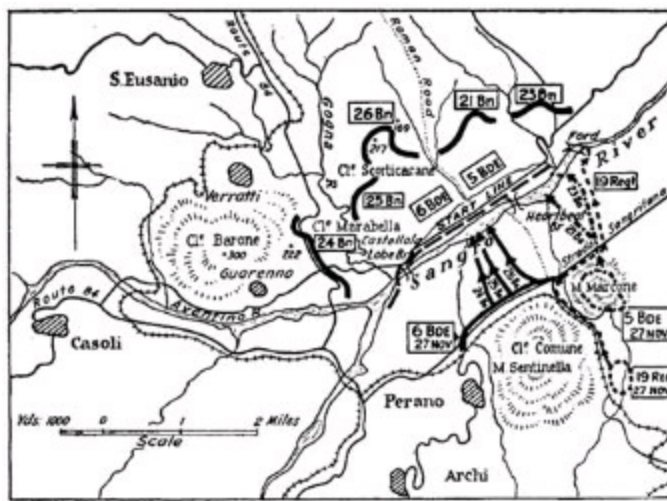
C Squadron to support the infantry on the eastern side of the Gogna River.

After attaining the first objectives B Squadron, less one troop, with two companies of infantry, was to get onto the Barone feature, protect the infantry while consolidating and then exploit and shoot up two bridges across the Aventino River near [Casoli](#).

The attack was to be preceded by Allied air bombing of key points and one squadron of Kittyhawks was to be on call if required for the Barone assault.

The Sangro, already swollen by late-autumn rains, was divided by an island at the point of crossing, while a tributary flowed into the main stream just above the area over the ford. The river banks were already badly cut up, and muddy, cultivated ground fringed the tracks and roadways leading down. Misty rain completed the dismal picture on that fateful morning, and before zero hour the 19th had lost three Regimental Headquarters' tanks ditched.

A Squadron, however, led into the water at 5.10 a.m., but only three of its tanks reached the road which ran



The crossing of the Sangro River, 28 November 1943

### The crossing of the **Sangro River**, 28 November 1943

laterally across the line of advance for 21 and 23 Battalions. It took them hours to get there. The remainder of the squadron had bad luck. One tank was stuck in the first stream. With the aid of a bulldozer from 5 Field Park Company—the first vehicle to cross the river—the rest managed to reach the other side, only to bog down in a soft patch of ground between the bank and the road. The depth of water at the ford, officially given as four feet, proved to be considerably underestimated. Several tanks struck deep holes into which they plunged to turret height, and there were some narrow escapes from drowning.

C and B Squadrons, profiting by A's misfortunes and benefiting by the increasing light, went further upstream before attempting to negotiate the area between the road and the river bank, and after a reconnaissance on foot found better going and got safely onto the highway.

By 7.30 a.m. Regimental Headquarters and C Squadron, with six tanks, were on the road and, turning west, made for **Castellata** and on towards **25 Battalion's** forward positions. The CO here joined the infantry commanders, and Regimental Headquarters' radio was able to give 6 Brigade Headquarters the general picture of the forward situation. At 9.30 a.m. these tanks took up a gun role against enemy-occupied country north of the battalion position, and they were able to support **26 Battalion's** attack on its third objective. One prize which fell to our tanks was a German 88-millimetre gun and its ammunition wagon, which were destroyed in seven rounds' gunfire. This gun was sited at a bend of the road on Route 84 and

could have done much damage.

A Squadron's three remaining runners, in attempting to get forward to support [23 Battalion](#), helped to clear an extensive minefield and filled in a blown demolition crater, only to run into another demolition which blew up the leading tank and completely blocked the road along which they were advancing. Though the squadron commander went forward and made contact with the infantry CO, none of the tanks got up to the forward troops that day.

A member of the crew of A Squadron's command tank has supplied the following account from a diary he kept at the time.

The infantry had to wade the river and the river was running fast. Being deeper than anticipated the rushing water washed off ration containers and water cans strapped on the front of our tank. Then the fun started with the bog! Until noon the only tank safely on the road was ours and at 9 a.m. while stationary waiting for the rest of the squadron we were strafed by six enemy fighter bombers and one bomb dropped 30 yards off the tank.

At last light 3 "A" Squadron tanks moved along the road to support [23 Battalion](#). A section of the road had been mined heavily and although the engineers had cleared some 100 odd mines there was a wrecked German staff car which had been booby trapped. Our tank tripped a wire and there was a terrific explosion. We now had only 2 runners in the Squadron.

During the morning B Squadron, by superhuman efforts, extricated three of its bogged tanks. These joined the three which had successfully crossed earlier, and at 2 p.m. assembled in support of [24 Battalion](#) near [Colle Marabella](#). These six tanks, with the two runners from 7 Troop (detached earlier to the Division's left flank), now assisted the infantry to consolidate on their objectives. One troop, making a difficult climb over the hills from the road to Scorticacane, went on to [26 Battalion](#) to give protection to the forward posts at Point 217 against possible counter-attacks.

No. 7 Troop had had a busy time on the left flank. Before reaching the [Sangro](#) it ran into a minefield and lost one tank. At daylight the crews lifted the mines and, despite a report of eight feet of fast-flowing water, crossed the first fork of the river successfully. From the island below [Castellata](#) the troop commander did a forward



reconnaissance, and then the tanks crossed the remaining fork. Another minefield was encountered and, with the aid of an engineer corporal and some infantry pioneers, this was also lifted. The troop then moved on to [24 Battalion](#), two tanks reaching the infantry area and going on with the battalion to the second objective, where they were joined later by the rest of the squadron.

Meanwhile, down by the river, the crews of the eleven bogged tanks worked feverishly, eager to get free and get forward. Lieutenant Strang's <sup>19</sup> tank, which was acting as rear link, having taken over this role after the Adjutant's Honey was ditched on the way to the river, had suffered a direct hit from high explosive. The turret ring was completely blown away and the tank commander severely wounded. Though disabled and useless as a fighting vehicle, this tank did good work in towing and in assisting 5 Field Park Company's bulldozer to pull the other vehicles out of the mud. The bulldozer itself eventually succumbed in the sloppy, ploughed field, and thereafter recovery efforts were confined to hard spade work by the tank crews, who desisted in their efforts only when enemy aircraft intent on bombing Heartbeat Bridge appeared over the area. As far as could be seen, the barrage put up by the bogged tanks did not score any direct hits, but the gunners had the satisfaction of seeing an RAF Spitfire bring down one Messerschmitt which fell in flames in the regiment's area.

By mid-afternoon the regiment had sixteen tanks still mobile: the CO's, three from A Squadron, and six each from B and C Squadrons.

The difficulties encountered during the whole of the 28th were a great disappointment to the tank crews, who had looked forward to doing a really good show in close support of their own infantry. As it was, all the battalions were on their objectives by 7 a.m. (except [26 Battalion](#), which was held up at Point 169), and the forward line was well defined and firm before the first of the armour arrived in the infantry area at 8 a.m. Once in position, however, the tanks in 6 Brigade's area, which was on high ground dominating the [Gogna](#) valley and Route 84, found good gun targets and fired several times during the afternoon and evening at the request of the infantry. Those with 5 Brigade found no good targets on their front.

Altogether the regiment's summary for 28 November had few bright spots. The 19th was over the river, however, and though the proportion of runners was

lamentably low, these would more than justify their existence the following day in an attack on the Barone feature, from which the enemy had full observation of the Division's routes and from which he was directing fire on the bridges across the Sangro. These vital bridges were assembled, erected, and maintained by the engineers, whose efforts in the whole of the concentration area had been of the highest possible order. Despite heavy casualties, they had completed their second bridge by the night of the 28th–29th and so established the main road communications to the forward areas.

The one reassuring feature about [19 Regiment's](#) work on the 28th was the way in which the signal system functioned. Lieutenant 'Mush' Arlidge, the signals officer, was able to report that full communication had been maintained throughout the whole regiment under the test of battle and stress of adverse conditions. Though the squadrons and their troops were operating over a very scattered area, the CO and squadron commanders were able to keep constant contact. The picture presented by the radio reports was nevertheless a doleful one. The mud accounted for more tanks than did the enemy's minefields or his active opposition. The forward progress of the hourly diminishing number of runners was painfully slow, but this was no fault of the commanders or crews, who made desperate efforts to keep mobile and when bogged set speedily about the task of recovery.

Unsuitable terrain for armoured movement was the chief cause of the failure of the tanks to keep up with the infantry in their successful crossing of the [Sangro](#) and capture of the first objectives on its north side. The country fixed as the next objective appeared equally impossible, and this resulted in a postponement of part of the plan set down for 28 November. This plan had provided for [24 Battalion](#), with armoured and artillery support, to attack [Colle Barone](#), and indications at the time were that the enemy was holding this feature in some strength.

Late in the afternoon of the 28th, when our armour was available, it was decided that the attack could not take place until suitable approaches had been chosen. Little daylight remained for reconnaissance or for organising effective armoured and anti-tank support. The infantry, too, was tired. The GOC ordered that the attack should now be mounted as early as possible the following day (the 29th).

Lieutenant-Colonels [Conolly](#)<sup>20</sup> and McGaffin accordingly reconnoitred the

position and drew up orders for an attack timed to start at 12.30 p.m. on the 29th. Early that morning a patrol from [24 Battalion](#) went out and on its return reported that the enemy appeared to be thinning out from Barone and Guarenna. Further information received from local Italians during the morning indicated that Colle Barone was only lightly held. The plan of attack included support from the Divisional Artillery to screen the assaulting force as it crossed the start line and climbed the eastern slope of Barone and Point 300. In view of the reports received it was decided that the artillery programme would not be necessary. Nevertheless the commander of 6 Brigade decided to go on with the programme, and the barrage was therefore fired as arranged.

B Squadron ( [Captain McInnes](#)) led the attack with one troop directed to Point 300, one on the main Barone feature, and the third to Verratti. One platoon of B Company 24 Battalion accompanied each troop, while C Company followed up to replace the platoon attacking Point 300 and Verratti and so allow them to go further forward onto Barone itself. D Company meanwhile occupied the knoll south-east of Verratti, and Colonel McGaffin, with C Squadron [19 Regiment](#), followed up the attack.

At noon the barrage came down, the tanks crossed the start line on Route 84 west of [Colle Marabella](#), and the infantry followed up closely. By 1.45 p.m. all objectives had been taken, the only enemy opposition encountered being shell and mortar fire. There was no hostile anti-tank fire, and the only Germans met were a few stragglers. Having reached their objectives, our tanks during the afternoon engaged enemy transport and guns visible to the west.

Though the tanks had had the usual difficulty on the steep, slippery hillsides, all but three reached their objectives. Those bogged were recovered by their own crews the same night. It had been a most successful operation, and the presence of our tanks in the area no doubt influenced the enemy to abandon the position. Late the same afternoon C Squadron, which had not been needed and remained in



Sangro River-Orsogna-Lanciano area, November 1943-  
January 1944

### **Sangro River- Orsogna- Lanciano area, November 1943– January 1944**

reserve, assisted [26 Battalion](#) in a further exploitation. Some of its tanks had a narrow escape when an Allied air sortie against the retreating Germans landed its bombs almost on top of the new position.

On 30 November the tanks remained in the areas selected the previous day until after a conference at 9 a.m., when Brigadier [Parkinson](#) <sup>21</sup> outlined the plan for 6 Brigade's advance towards [Castelfrentano](#). The 19th, less A Squadron, was briefed to support the forward infantry closely. Situation reports gave reassuring news of the enemy's retirement, and the advance went on steadily with Allied air support much in evidence. By nightfall, in spite of the rough country traversed, C Squadron was well up with the companies of [26 Battalion](#). The tanks had an unenviable task once darkness fell, for the lanes leading to Route 84 were in very bad shape. Lieutenants Don Kerr and Jan [Suter](#) <sup>22</sup> both did good work that night in reconnoitring new routes and getting their troops up with the infantry.

During this advance B Squadron, with [25 Battalion](#), cleaned out the German posts around [San Eusanio](#) and by darkness was established close to the railway station ready for the assault on [Castelfrentano](#). The regiment now had seventeen runners, including the three with A Squadron, still with 5 Brigade. These tanks took up a position with B Company [21 Battalion](#) on 1 December. That day was spent consolidating, but it was by no means quiet. During the early morning the regiment reported the position of several German guns and at 8 a.m. C Squadron was shelled from the Colle Sambruno area. Artillery support was called for and by 9.28 a.m. the

opposition had been silenced. Shelling broke out again from the same quarter about noon. This time our artillery support had a less happy result, for shells falling short among our own troops caused casualties. Lieutenant Kerr was wounded. Our tanks, answering calls from the infantry as required, fired at suitable targets during the day.

During the night of 1–2 December all battalions had tanks well up with them. At first light a troop from C Squadron moved into [Castelfrentano](#) just behind [24 Battalion](#), whose assaulting troops were in the town at 7 a.m. By 8.20 a.m. it had been completely cleared.

The German defences on the [Castelfrentano](#) ridge had broken down, and the Division was therefore ordered to push on as fast as possible towards [Orsogna](#). The regiment accordingly assembled in the town at 11 a.m. and orders were issued which gave C Squadron the right flank. Its route was northwards along a minor road to a point east of [Spaccarelli](#) and from there westwards onto the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road. An order from the GOC received at 1 p.m., after the tanks had begun their advance, gave authority to push on as far as [Orsogna](#) itself. Infantry protection was provided by B Company [25 Battalion](#). The plan was to establish at [Orsogna](#) and from there send out light patrols to [Guardiagrele](#) and [San Martino](#) during the night.

At 12.45 p.m. the regiment, coming in from the south with a company of [26 Battalion](#), moved through [Castelfrentano](#) and exploited down the road to the west. The reconnaissance troop under Captain Reid ran into light machine-gun fire, and Lieutenant Stewart's <sup>23</sup> troop went down to clean up this opposition. The CO followed, but his tank was delayed on the way by a tempting target. Captain [Caughley](#), <sup>24</sup> who was acting as his gunner, got in some good shooting at a group of fleeing Germans in a valley on the left. Fifteen rounds of high explosive at a range of 2500 yards accounted for a number of the enemy, and the rest were effectively dispersed. Lieutenant Suter, also on the way down, captured some prisoners, and C Squadron ( [Major Parata](#) ), which came in on Route 84, reported a further bag of enemy, who could not be dealt with effectively until our infantry caught up. As a result, not all the Germans in the area could be rounded up and taken.

Our tanks went along the road with small arms blazing at every likely hiding place. The enemy posts were soon completely overrun and captured. To deal with the prisoners ten Bren carriers were hurriedly organised and sent forward, and these,

with a number of men from Regimental Headquarters, soon disposed of this problem.

At 2.30 p.m. OC C Squadron reported that it had reached the [Moro](#) and found the bridge blown south of [Spaccarelli](#). As the stream flowed in a deep gully and the gap at the bridge was thirty feet wide, there was no immediate hope of effecting repairs. A hasty reconnaissance failed to reveal any useable route which would allow the tanks to bypass the [Moro](#), and no more headway could be made until the bridge was rebuilt. It was ironic that its destruction had been caused by our own bombs and that the enemy, who already had material on the spot to repair it, had been cleared out before completing the work.

At 3.5 p.m. a report from Brigade advised that six German tanks were approaching along the [Lanciano](#)-Castelfrentano road, and Lieutenant Stewart's troop was sent back through the town to take up a position to counter this move and to guard the right flank. The enemy did not show up, but Stewart's troop remained with [28 Battalion](#) that night. The rest of the regiment laagered in the [Spaccarelli](#) area, and the infantry, taking up a position astride the road running north-east along the San Amato ridge, formed a protective screen round the laager area.

During 2 December A Squadron's three tanks worked with 23 and 28 Battalions, and the Division prepared to resume its assault on [Orsogna](#) next day. The town was to prove a hard nut to crack. The prisoners taken that day included men from 67 Panzer Grenadier Regiment of 26 Panzer Division, one of the best German formations in [Italy](#).

Daylight on the 3rd brought definite evidence of the enemy's determination to hold out on the [Orsogna](#) line. Heavy shelling and mortar fire greeted the first forward movements by our troops, and a German counter-attack was broken up at its forming-up point by fire from C Squadron, which received an urgent call for support on [25 Battalion's](#) front at 7 a.m. The forward guns were out of range and, before the 5.5s could be brought to bear, the CO's tank took up a position one mile down the road and got away twenty-seven rounds of high explosive on the reported enemy forming-up area. Lieutenant Suter's troop came up and took over the task, and under [Major Parata](#) did map shoots at a range of 6500 yards on the roads north and east of [Orsogna](#), where enemy movement had been observed. The 25th Battalion reported

the tank fire as most effective and made only one correction ('200 yards left') during the programme. These shoots were a most convincing demonstration of the effectiveness of tanks in a supporting role. Those taking part moved one and a half miles into position and engaged the target in just on seventeen minutes after receiving the report.

The 25th Battalion got one company into [Orsogna](#), but it was forced to withdraw when strong enemy forces, including tanks, were brought up. Later [24 Battalion](#) assaulted the town unsuccessfully and was forced back by heavy and accurate shelling.

Allied air support kept the enemy armour under cover, 180 sorties being flown on the Division's front that day. The enemy's artillery and mortars were extremely accurate, however, and our infantry was forced to disperse and dig in. The 19th Regiment gave support as required, fired on all suitable targets, and reported others for artillery action. News of enemy tank movements was received several times during the day, but on no occasion did the German armour venture out beyond the town. That night infantry patrols probed the enemy's forward positions and found them strongly held. The Division's plan to occupy [Orsogna](#) immediately was conditional upon the enemy's having thinned out. All evidence was to the contrary, and formations now began to regroup in preparation for a further full-scale attack to gain the town.

The 19th was increasing its strength day by day, for as soon as disabled tanks became mobile again they made their best speed forward to join up with the unit, coming from as far back as the Sangro. B and C Squadrons were now relieved by tanks from A Squadron [18 Armoured Regiment](#). A Squadron was withdrawn from 5 Brigade, and tanks of [19 Regiment](#) began to move back on 3 December to a rest area in the [Sangro](#) riverbed. By midnight the twenty-two remaining tanks were in the rest area, and next day (4 December) squadron positions were reconnoitred. For a week the 19th remained uncommitted but by no means inactive.

Recovering and refitting of vehicles kept all hands hard at work, while interior economy included dental overhauls and several greatly relished visits to [Atessa](#), where the mobile bath unit was operating. A substantial mail, with distribution spread over several days, was another welcome event.

Several enemy aircraft passed over the rest area and were engaged by ack-ack fire. One Focke-Wulf was shot down in flames in full view of the regiment. As keen observers of all air activity, the New Zealanders derived considerable comfort from the fact that the balance of air power remained obviously very heavily in the Allies' favour.

Meanwhile the pressure on [Orsogna](#) was being kept up and the [Divisional Engineers](#) were hard at work repairing and preparing routes along which the supporting arms could be moved into action with our infantry. The Germans, too, were obviously all out to improve their hold on the town. On 7 December they repulsed a further attack by 5 and 6 Brigades, which were hampered by adverse weather and by road demolitions and could not combat the armour employed against them. Nevertheless the New Zealanders gave a good account of themselves before withdrawing.

On 10 December the regiment moved to relieve 20 Armoured Regiment and on 12 December took over its task. C Squadron took up a position on the road midway between [Guardiagrele](#) and [Castelfrentano](#) and was available on direct call to [5 Parachute Battalion](#). This area was under enemy shellfire, and all moves had to be made at night. The rest of the regiment remained under the command of 4 Armoured Brigade, on two hours' notice by day and four hours' notice at night to move if required to [Guardiagrele](#). There was no change for several days, but during the attack on 14–15 December [19 Regiment](#) remained on call on an hour's notice to push forward to [Guardiagrele](#) and San Martino when the way was clear. C Squadron's tanks were moved off the road and the crews billeted. The weather was cold and wet, and the whole of the divisional area was a sea of mud. On 20 December C Squadron was relieved by A Squadron.

By the 23rd a corps' attack was in progress, and [19 Regiment](#), in readiness for an exploiting role, moved by night in bad weather to a point on the road about a mile and a half east of [Orsogna](#). A Squadron reverted to regimental command. No. 2 Motor Company came under the command of the 19th, and two officers each from 4 NZ Field Regiment and 75 Medium Battery, [Royal Artillery](#), were attached as forward observation officers. The regiment was under orders, once the town fell, to exploit through and go on across country to several doubtful routes which ran along the high



ground north-west of [Orsogna](#). It was likely to be an extremely sticky job, for the weather was bad. The maps of the area were studied with some apprehension by squadron commanders. The terrain looked even more than usually tough, and as the regiment had already experienced the extreme difficulties imposed by movement on narrow muddy lanes criss-crossing steep slopes, the task was not relished. Once again it seemed that the armour was expected to manoeuvre over country which would have puzzled mules and mountain goats.

This attack on 23–24 December did not break the [Orsogna](#) defences, and the 19th was therefore not required. In the struggle against the mud all mechanised movement came to a standstill, and on the 24th orders were received for the regiment to move on to [Sfasciata Ridge](#) in support. The tanks were to lie up and avoid any offensive action.

With Christmas only a day away, and with the arrival of a large supply of special fare for the occasion, this order to move was not greeted with the usual heartiness. The present surroundings were certainly not salubrious, but the route back to Sfasciata was bad going, and there was a general feeling that as the regiment was not wanted in the fight for the moment it might as well have stayed where it was.

However, in rainy weather, the move was made, and all vehicles duly arrived in the new area. The tanks with difficulty travelled under their own power, but the trucks had to be hauled up the ridge by D8 tractors. The crews worked with a will to construct shelters and dugouts against the weather. Attached troops now returned to their own units, and with each crew making itself as comfortable as possible, Christmas was celebrated in the traditional fashion.

Special services were held at Regimental Headquarters and in squadron areas, and parties braved the rain and chill winds to make calls and exchange greetings. An amazing array of food and drink had been accumulated, and a rum issue was added. All houses in the area were soon crowded with celebrating troops who shared their victuals with their bewildered but grateful civilian hosts and contrived a Christmas atmosphere which, despite occasional shelling and mortaring, soon blotted out all thoughts of war and weather.

From Christmas Day onwards it became apparent that the winter weather would

make the employment of armour in an offensive role impossible. The regiment now settled into its new quarters. All roads were so badly cut up that only jeeps were allowed forward of the crest of the ridge, and strict traffic control was maintained on 'Willis Street', the main road into the area.

One member of A Squadron wrote in his diary on Christmas Day:

Felt glad to be a tankie today when we saw the poor old infantry, who had just been relieved, passing our tank. They had been living in the rain without adequate cover and looked really done in and miserable. We, at least, have food, water and the utensils to cook with besides being able to change into dry clothing when necessary.

A duty roster was arranged providing for half a squadron on call and sited for indirect fire and one squadron continually on one hour's notice to move; the remainder took turns in a full twenty-four-hour off-duty break. The only operational employment was an occasional shoot into [Orsogna](#) or at houses on the outskirts. The tanks, deep in mud and cold, damp, and desolate, were dispersed among the olive trees and moved as little as possible. A few off-duty crews found shelter in the Italian farmhouses which dotted the area, the rest in well constructed dugouts. The position was quiet until the 30th, when the forward squadrons were heavily shelled and mortared from a position the enemy had evidently just occupied.

A howling blizzard ushered in the New Year, and dawn revealed the whole countryside thickly covered with fresh snow. Once more a rum issue supplemented other supplies as all ranks celebrated New Year's Day. Forty-two reinforcements contrived to find space in the already crowded quarters, and the regiment began 1944 only two men short of full establishment.

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<sup>1</sup> For German data on this attack see [appendix](#) on pp. 356– 7.

<sup>2</sup> [Capt D. Kerr](#), MC; [Nelson](#); born [Nelson](#), 19 Aug 1919; jeweller; wounded 1 Dec 1943.

<sup>3</sup> [Maj A. R. Wethey](#); [Taihape](#); born Dunedin, 5 Sep 1920; bank clerk.

<sup>4</sup> Capt V. O. Kelly, m.i.d.; born Totara North, 28 Apr 1905; wounded 18 Nov 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Maj L. Leeks; Tamworth, NSW; born Wanganui, 22 Nov 1914; insurance clerk; twice wounded.

<sup>6</sup> Capt T. G. S. Morrin, MC; Dannevirke; born Wanganui, 26 Aug 1917; stock agent; twice wounded.

<sup>7</sup> Capt J. A. McPhail; Dunedin; born Gisborne, 9 May 1918; clerk; wounded 15 Oct 1944.

<sup>8</sup> L-Cpl W. C. Farquharson, MM; Rissington, Napier; born Dunedin, 26 Jan 1920; shepherd.

<sup>9</sup> Sgt R. E. Moody; born Napier, 28 Oct 1914; wood turner; killed in action 18 Nov 1943.

<sup>10</sup> Tpr G. E. White; born Waipawa, 27 Jan 1920; farmhand; killed in action 18 Nov 1943.

<sup>11</sup> Tpr H. S. Tod; born NZ, 27 Feb 1914; cook; killed in action 18 Nov 1943.

<sup>12</sup> Tpr E. W. Morgan; Mangaroa; born NZ, 12 Aug 1915; carpenter.

<sup>13</sup> Cpl H. M. Fair, m.i.d.; Havelock North; born Waipawa, 6 Jun 1919; orchard hand.

<sup>14</sup> WO II A. C. Tait, m.i.d.; Wairoa; born Castle Douglas, Scotland, 15 Jul 1906; labourer.

<sup>15</sup> Maj S. J. Wilson, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 4 May 1917; public accountant.

<sup>16</sup> Lt-Col H. H. Parata, DSO, ED; Dunedin; born Riverton, 9 Jun 1915; public accountant; 27 MG Bn 1939–40; squadron commander 2 Army Tank Bn (in NZ) Jan 1942–Jun 1943; 19 Armd Regt Jul 1943–Jun 1944; CO 19 Armd Regt Nov 1944–Mar 1945; CO 18 Armd Regt Mar–May 1945.

<sup>17</sup> Capt D. McInnes; born Dunedin, 6 Oct 1918; audit clerk; died of wounds 31 Jul 1944.

<sup>18</sup> Maj J. M. Wiseley, m.i.d.; born Auckland, 14 Aug 1912; school-teacher.

<sup>19</sup> Lt B. A. Strang; born Waimatuku, 3 Sep 1917; bank clerk; died of wounds 3 Dec 1943.

<sup>20</sup> Lt-Col J. Conolly, DSO, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Waihi, 15 Aug 1908; school-teacher; CO 24 Bn 16 Dec 1942–5 Feb 1944, 20 Mar–22 Apr 1944; wounded 21 Jul 1942.

<sup>21</sup> Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Christchurch; born Wellington, 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1917–19; CO 4 Fd Regt Jan 1940–Aug 1941; comd 1 NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941–42; 6 Bde Apr 1943–Jun 1944; 2 NZ Div (Cassino) 3–27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div Jun–Aug 1944; comd 6 Bde Aug 1944–Jun 1945; Quartermaster-General, Army HQ, Jan–Sep 1946; NZ Military Liaison Officer, London, 1946–49; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1949–51.

<sup>22</sup> Capt A. N. Suter, m.i.d.; Eketahuna; born England, 19 Mar 1909; farmer.

<sup>23</sup> Capt G. W. Stewart, Bronze Star (US); Napier; born Napier, 11 May 1907; clerk.

<sup>24</sup> Lt-Col D. A. Caughley, MBE, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Christchurch, 7 Aug 1912; bank officer; Adjnt 19 Bn Jul 1942–Mar 1944; BM 4 Armd Bde Mar–Oct 1945; now Regular soldier.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## APPENDIX

### APPENDIX

The following are extracts from German war diaries and reports on the action at [Perano](#) on 18 November 1943:

#### ***10 Army War Diary, November-December, 1943***

From a conversation Kesselring-Lemelsen, 0850 hours 18 November.

'I think things will get going at [Perano](#). This [Archi](#) is a very commanding point, from which the enemy can see into the [Sangro](#) and [Aventino](#) Valleys. [Archi](#) must be held as long as possible ....'

#### ***16 Panzer Division War Diary***

18 November 1943:

1602 hours: From 16 Pz Arty Regt: Enemy attack from the east on [Perano](#) and the area north of it, with one company and 15 tanks.

1620 hours: From 16 Pz Engr Bn: Enemy attacking along the road from the NE to the area north of [Perano](#). Heavy smoke in battle area. A lot of tanks are firing.

1640 hours: From 64 Pz Gren Regt: Enemy tanks have broken into [Perano](#).

1645 hours: From 64 Pz Gren Regt: The enemy has rolled up [3 Coy](#) from the south. The enemy is in [Perano](#). 3/64 defending itself on Pt 121. Enemy tanks firing on it. Enemy pressure continuing.

1700 hours: From 16 Pz Arty Regt: Enemy tanks pushing forward on both sides of [Perano](#).

1715 hours: To 79 Pz Gren Regt: 1/79 will disengage from the enemy tonight, carrying out demolitions as it withdraws, and will move back into divisional reserve.

19 November:

1240 hours: Papers taken from the tanks knocked out yesterday revealed that they belonged to a New Zealand armoured unit.

Daily Report 18 November:

Enemy movement was seen and engaged by our artillery. At 1600 hours the enemy attacked the village of [Perano](#) from the east and SE and along the road south of the [Sangro](#) with strong tank support. About 10 troops of guns, a heavy smoke screen, and a large number of mortars fired a short, heavy concentration, after which 15 tanks and a company of infantry advanced and rolled up the protective posts at [Perano](#) from the south. The company took up a new position on Pt 121 and beat off further attacks, by about 40 tanks from [Perano](#) and Pt 141, supported by shellfire. One tank was brewed up.

At the same time at least a company of the enemy and about 20 tanks attacked from Piazzano station, but this attack was driven off with heavy losses. 3 tanks were brewed up and 2 more immobilised.

About 1900 hours the outposts of 3 km NE of R24 withdrew 1½km SW according to plan.

A patrol got some documents from a knocked-out tank.

# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## [SECTION]

The following are extracts from German war diaries and reports on the action at Perano on 18 November 1943:

# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## 10 ARMY WAR DIARY, NOVEMBER-DECEMBER, 1943

### *10 Army War Diary, November-December, 1943*

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## 16 PANZER DIVISION WAR DIARY

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Perano from the south. The company took up a new position on Pt 121 and beat off further attacks, by about 40 tanks from Perano and Pt 141, supported by shellfire. One tank was brewed up.

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A patrol got some documents from a knocked-out tank.

# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 18 – A NEW YEAR AND A FRESH FRONT

## CHAPTER 18

### *A New Year and a Fresh Front*

When January winds were blawin' cauld

—Burns

On 1 January 1944 the dispositions of 4 Armoured Brigade were: 18 Regiment resting at [Castelfrentano](#) (except C Squadron, supporting the [Salarola](#) sub-section); 19 Regiment laagering at [Sfasciata Ridge](#); 20 Regiment in reserve, with B Squadron at [Fontegrande](#) under the command of 6 [Infantry Brigade](#).

The [2nd NZ Division](#) was still facing [Orsogna](#), and the enemy, though under constant hammering from our artillery and from the Allied Air Force, continued not only to hold out but to reply vigorously. Firmly established in his winter line, he was secure in the comfortable knowledge that his opponents, now weather-bound, could do little more than hold their exposed forward positions while waiting till better conditions made further full-scale attacks possible.

Despite the apparent stalemate, our troops did not relax their pressure, and infantry patrolling was vigorous and aggressive. Even the more or less immobilised armour was by no means idle, for a [13 Corps'](#) operation order dated 30 December read: '2 NZ Div will continue to hold its present front and by the siting of the arm'd and reserve brigades ensure that the key position of [Castelfrentano-Brickworks-road junction 2698](#) [north of [Colle Sambruno](#)] is held secure in all circumstances.'

New Year's Day was spent digging out snow-smothered tanks. Nine inches of snow had fallen and in places the drifts were as many feet deep. When the thaw began, the hard, frozen ground became a morass, and the shovel continued to be the hardest worked piece of equipment in the campaign. The mud was worse than the snow. All manœuvrability was lost; every movement was made hazardous, the tanks and trucks bogging, sliding, and slipping in the slushy going.

It had been decided that the 19th would winter in its quarters behind [Sfasciata Ridge](#), with one squadron relieving 20 Regiment near [Pascuccio](#) and changing over with it every eight days. Many tank crews here constructed excellent dugouts

reminiscent of the First World War. At this time Regimental Headquarters was billeted comfortably in a tall house which already accommodated three generations of an Italian farming family. From the smallest child to the wrinkled old grandmother, they all welcomed the troops with open-hearted hospitality. 'Poppa' kept an adequate cellar and was not averse to dispensing—for a consideration—bulk supplies of the wine stored in the huge barrels in the basement. This liquor traffic naturally caused some embarrassment to Regimental Headquarters, for footloose Kiwis were always hanging about the area, which was well within enemy artillery range, and prudence demanded that activity be kept to a minimum. Further, the Italians expected the 19th to champion their cause in any dispute—and there were plenty—which arose while the wine was being sold. The RSM had quite a job.

The regiment's position, deep in the most tenacious mud, required constant work to ensure that tanks could be moved when necessary, and that the vital tracks along which daily supplies were distributed were kept open. The ubiquitous jeep became the mainstay of the transport system, and together with Bren carriers took over all supply arrangements. The routes along which they ran, however, required daily draining and patching. The cold, wet, muddy and miserable conditions on the [Orsogna](#) front were like those which [1 NZEF](#) had experienced on the [Somme](#) in the winter of 1916.

Meanwhile, the daily exchange of shells between the town and its besiegers indicated that both sides, despite the wretchedness of the weather, were determined to keep up the pressure.

The 19th Regiment's tanks, in a support role, did their share of the 'long-range sniping'. The tank crews welcomed these shoots. The efficacy of the 75-millimetre gun in knocking down stone houses and the efficiency of the tank crews were testified to by our infantry, who frequently called for fire against strongpoints located in buildings on the outskirts of the town. Spared by these shoots from the unrelieved monotony of merely standing by, and with only these few opportunities to show its mettle, the armour naturally took its gunnery most seriously, and competition between squadrons was keen.

All tanks were picketed at night. It was an unpopular duty. In his dark clothing the sentry stood out against the snow, and consequently was instructed not to move

about unnecessarily. The soft tank boots—so much admired before the winter weather began—were now useless and simply sopped up the moisture, so that wet feet added to the discomfort of the shivering but otherwise immobile man on duty. At first light all hands were roused to 'stand to', each man fully dressed, the tank driver in his seat, and the engine turning over ready to go at a moment's notice.

A rotation system of short leave to [Bari](#) was instituted and was immediately popular. This southern Italian seafront town had little to commend it from a sightseeing or shopping point of view, but its services organisations (notably, of course, the [New Zealand Club](#)), theatres, bars and cafés provided variety and a pleasant break from the mud and the cold.

Offsetting this local leave arrangement came simultaneously the bleak announcement that there would be no further furlough for long-service troops for at least six months. The furlough scheme was now a fully accepted feature of service in [2 NZEF](#), and those whose service was approaching the period required to qualify for furlough kept count in days of the time remaining for the various reinforcements. With a very few exceptions the echelon men had all gone back, and the 4th Reinforcements were ready to follow as soon as the situation was suitable. The six months' postponement was a blow to many hopes, but the war went relentlessly on.

Regular flare-ups still occurred along the [Orsogna](#) front, for the policy of vigorous patrolling kept the line seething. On 9 January C Squadron was ordered out to support 1 Paratroop Battalion on the right of the regiment's position at [Poggiofiorito](#). The squadron arrived at nightfall, when the evening hate was in full flush. Just before dawn on the 10th the squadron's new position was soundly 'stonked', and shortly afterwards it was discovered that the place was extensively mined. With the aid of the sappers, the mines were lifted. Enemy planes now put in an appearance and scored one hit on a C Squadron tank. No doubt this armoured movement had led the enemy to believe that an offensive was brewing.

Meanwhile B Squadron, in support of the Maori Battalion, which with unremitting energy always goaded the enemy, was having a lively time. On the 10th the squadron scored sixteen direct hits on houses in [Orsogna](#) from which machine guns had been harassing our infantry. Shooting with delayed fuse effectively silenced the enemy guns, and the forward position of these tanks made their support role most

useful. The infantry could rely on immediate and hard-hitting action from them. On the 12th the squadron repeated the performance, firing 100 rounds of armour-piercing high explosive and scoring many direct hits.

B Squadron enjoyed this tour of duty with [28 Battalion](#). Not only were the Maoris doing a grand job of patrolling, but they were making the most of the fruits of warfare by putting to good use everything they could salvage or scrounge in the area. Menus frequently featured pork or poultry, while the casas (houses) which the companies occupied yielded furniture and other comforts. The Maoris' dress had but one overall requirement—warmth—and all sorts of civilian apparel was pressed into service to achieve this. A more ludicrous collection of characters could not be imagined. Bowlers, top hats, coloured scarves, and even items of feminine attire were worn with battle dress.

At a conference of squadron commanders on the 11th the CO indicated that word had been received of the early relief of [2 NZ Division](#). The same day A Squadron occupied a position on the [Guardiagrele](#) road in support of 22 (Motor) Battalion, taking over this role from B Squadron 18 Regiment. Some good shooting at mountain troops on Monte Maiella was enjoyed by the extreme left-flank troop (Lieutenant [Beswick](#) <sup>1</sup>). This was made possible only by the ingenuity of the crews, who built platforms from railway sleepers on which to jack up the front of the tanks and so gain the extra elevation necessary to achieve the range.

From 12 to 19 January Regimental Headquarters was fully occupied in preparations for the move out. Squadrons maintained their support roles while Regimental Headquarters and B Echelon reconnoitred and prepared the new area. The move was still on the 'most secret' list, and arrangements had to be made with great caution.

While these preparations were in progress the 19th came under the command of the Canadian Division. Squadrons remained in position and still took their full share in shooting up targets. These varied from houses to ski troops and from suspected troop concentrations to a mediæval tower reported as being used as an observation post. During the regiment's last night on the [Orsogna](#) front, one tank from B Squadron moved forward and destroyed a spandau nest which had been harassing the [Gurkhas](#).



By the afternoon of the 19th ¼ Battalion of the Essex Regiment had taken over and at last light 19 Regiment's tanks began to move out. By dawn on the 20th the regiment was in the vicinity of the [Perano- Archi](#) crossroads and at the scene of its first action. On the hill overlooking the laager area were two of its own tanks—burnt out and derelict—while the graves of those killed during the engagement were a few yards along the road. This halt brought back vivid memories, and it was hard to realise that only eight weeks had passed since the regiment had experienced its first chill excitement of going into battle; battle against an old enemy, but in a new role. Casualties in the campaign to date were seven killed in action, two died of wounds, and eleven wounded.

From this first laager area the regiment split up, the tanks going to [Vasto](#) to travel by rail while the wheeled convoy (approximately 200 vehicles) began the journey by road. It was only when the trek was well into its second day that the men were told their destination was [Fifth Army's](#) front. [Divisional Headquarters](#) was already at [Piedimonte d'Alife](#), on the other side of the [Apennines](#). The regiment was bound for the same place. After an interesting two-day journey, the road convoy arrived on the morning of 23 January, and the tanks rumbled in from [Caserta](#) railway siding two days later. The regiment's area, firm under foot and in pleasant surroundings, found immediate favour. A party under Second-Lieutenant [Holder](#)<sup>2</sup> had guiding and billeting arrangements well in hand, and the 19th moved in as a unit, complete and self-contained for the first time since leaving [Maadi](#).

Two enjoyable weeks followed. The climate was much milder than that experienced on the east coast, and there was no lack of diversion for off-duty periods. Sightseeing visits to [Pompeii](#) were arranged. A football field, hot showers, and several cinemas were among the amenities most appreciated. The men shook the mud of [Orsogna](#) from their boots, smartened up, and settled down in ideal conditions to make the most of two weeks' respite from operational duties.

There were several internal changes at this time in regimental organisation, among the more notable being the marching out of Major Tony Everist to a tactical course in [England](#), and the return of Major Jock Thodey, who took over A Squadron; Captain Colin [Swallow](#),<sup>3</sup> who had been RMO since desert days, was replaced by Captain [Kennedy](#),<sup>4</sup> and shortly afterwards Captain [Roy](#)<sup>5</sup> was posted to the 19th.

Captain Dennis Caughley's promotion to second captain, A Squadron, necessitated a change in adjutants, and he handed over to Lieutenant John Wiseley. Several new second-lieutenants—ex-officers now recommissioned in the field—filled the vacant junior appointments.

Highlights of the programme at [Piedimonte](#) were a dismounted ceremonial parade and several tactical exercises. Perhaps the most valuable subject on the syllabus at this time was training in the use of smoke. Each tank crew was required to perfect a procedure by which it could provide its own cover and be able also to co-operate with its neighbours to screen vehicles in trouble or moving across hazardous going. Smoke was to prove a real life-saver to the armour, especially when, as frequently happened, members of a crew had to leave their tank. By the use of smoke in battle the regiment was shortly able to undertake tasks which otherwise would have been sheer suicide.

On the attachment of 392 Battery, [Royal Artillery](#), to the 19th no time was lost in working out an inter-communication procedure between the tanks and the battery's Priest 105-millimetre self-propelled guns. The regiment and the battery got along famously from the start. Always welcome visitors, the gunners shared the nightly brew of chai with the tank crews bivouacking close to their area. In the quiet evening at [Piedimonte](#) after the day's work was done, the lee side of each black and immobile Sherman would reflect a ruddy glow from a petrol-burning [Benghazi](#). Bursts of flame puncturing the darkness marked the lighting of pipes and cigarettes as the men relaxed. The buzz of conversation and occasional round of song often lasted late into the night, for the company was good, and the companionship growing up between all ranks in the two units was to put artillery support on an almost personal basis once the battle started.

A 'Q' conference at Headquarters 4 Armoured Brigade studied supply and replacement problems in the light of armoured experience on [Eighth Army's](#) front. All in all, full advantage was taken of the two weeks out of the line to bring men, equipment, and methods fully up to the mark before the next operation.

The Division had finished its first period of action under its new organisation. The incorporation of an armoured brigade had set many problems, but after three months' campaigning together the armoured regiments' work, always under critical

appraisal, had earned the confidence of the infantry. In the published lessons of the [Sangro- Orsogna](#) actions it was gratifying to read the comments of Divisional and 5 and 6 Brigade Headquarters: 'Support of Inf by tanks has been intimate and successful....' 'Against counter attacks tanks have proved indispensable....' 'The use of APHE shot from tanks has proved very valuable in reducing enemy strongpoints in houses, and against enemy taking refuge in dugouts etc.'

It was significant that the subject under closest examination by all headquarters was co-operation between infantry and armour. It would not be long before both arms were put to the test once more, for [General Freyberg](#), in an address at 4 Brigade's ceremonial parade, promised a very active time ahead. Having already had the experience of operating over the most difficult country that tanks could be called upon to work in, the brigade had good reason to face the future with confidence.

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<sup>1</sup> [Lt C. C. Beswick](#), MC; [Oamaru](#); born [Oamaru](#), 9 May 1912; insurance agent; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

<sup>2</sup> [Lt E. C. C. Holder](#); [Hastings](#); born [Napier](#), 1 Apr 1912; wool clerk.

<sup>3</sup> [Capt C. K. Swallow](#); [Palmerston North](#); born [Palmerston North](#), 3 Nov 1914; medical practitioner; [7 Fd Amb \( Fiji\)](#) Oct 1940-Sep 1941; RMO 19 Bn and Armd Regt 1942-44.

<sup>4</sup> [Lt-Col D. P. Kennedy](#), m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 19 May 1915; medical practitioner; [Adjnt 7 Fd Amb \( Fiji\)](#) Oct 1940-May 1941; [OC 4 Fd Hyg Sec](#) Oct 1942-Aug 1943; [DADMS 2 NZ Div](#) Apr-Nov 1944; [DADMS 2 NZEF](#) Nov 1944-Feb 1945; [OC 4 Fd Hyg Coy](#) and [DADH 2 NZ Div](#) Feb-May 1945; [OC 5 Fd Amb](#) Jun-Oct 1945; Medical Officer of Health, [Christchurch](#).

<sup>5</sup> [Maj L. J. Roy](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Winton](#), 10 Apr 1913; medical practitioner; RMO 19 Bn 1944.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 19 – CASSINO FORTRESS

## CHAPTER 19

### *Cassino Fortress*

He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks.

—Isaiah 33: 16

At Piedimonte d'Alife the weather broke suddenly on 4 February. Early in the morning heavy rain began to fall. This wet weather, the first bad omen for the forthcoming battle, was destined to dog the Division during the whole of its operations against the [Gustav Line](#). The same morning a forward reconnaissance party from Headquarters 4 Armoured Brigade, consisting of the brigade second-in-command, Colonel Hartnell, Major Thodey and Second-Lieutenant Holder from [19 Regiment](#), set out for the [Cassino](#) area. They had hardly left when a change of plan was announced and a second party, Captain Wilson and Second-Lieutenant [Monson](#),<sup>1</sup> were despatched to [Mignano](#). It was the eve of the first action on [Fifth Army's](#) front, and for the regiment the end of an idyllic two weeks.

The move to [Mignano](#) began at 3.30 a.m. on 6 February. In teeming rain and biting wind, on a route which was partly by road and partly across country, the regiment, in column led by the CO, safely accomplished the 50-mile journey. There were 150 vehicles in this convoy and not one fell out, a performance which spoke well for the skill of the regiment's drivers and for the high standard of mechanical maintenance in the unit.

The new area was in a bleak, windswept mountain valley dominated by rocky, snow-clad peaks and the grim 'Million Dollar Hill', where many American and German dead still lay unburied. It was about half a mile from what had been the town of [Mignano](#); after being mined by the retreating Germans, and after months of air and ground bombardment by the Allies, the place was now no more than a heap of rubble. Regular sorties by medium bombers and the almost continuous roar and rumble from the 240-millimetre guns sited north of [Mignano](#) brought the war back to reality. It was cold and wet, and here the regiment learned a new trick which it was to use successfully on many later occasions: the tank tracks were run over the muddy camp site to form drains to take off the water lying in the area.

On Fifth Army's front conditions were now somewhat similar to those the Division had so recently left behind on [Eighth Army's](#) sector. Stalemate had been reached. There had been some early, hard-won gains, but the whole Fifth Army was now halted. The winter weather had set in and the Allied advance was blocked by the powerful Gustav Line, standing squarely across the approach to Rome. By early February 1944 the fierce offensive by the American forces had battered itself out against the almost impregnable enemy defences in the [Liri](#) valley. A diversionary landing made at [Anzio](#) on 22 January had had only limited success and did not, as had been hoped, force the enemy to weaken his garrison manning the [Gustav Line](#). The road to Rome was still denied to us.

The [Orsogna](#) front became of secondary importance now, for in winter the [Apennines](#) are impassable. As deep snow closed the passes, denying the enemy reinforcements from the rear and making the exploitation of any Allied gains impossible, formations were drawn from the immobilised [Eighth Army](#) to bolster up [Fifth Army's](#) operations in the west. The New Zealand Division and 4 Indian Division were among those switched to [Fifth Army's](#) front, and together they became the nucleus of the [New Zealand Corps](#) which, under the leadership of [Lieutenant-General Freyberg](#), was briefed to assume responsibility for the [Cassino](#) sector as from 12 February. In addition to [2 NZ Division](#) (commanded by [Major-General Kippenberger](#)), [4 Indian Division](#) (Brigadier H. W. Dimoline) and [78 British Division](#) (Major-General C. F. Keightley), [New Zealand Corps](#) included strong British, Indian and American artillery formations and an American armoured force.

Beneath the dominating heights of Monte [Cairo](#) lay the [Liri](#) valley, through which ran Route 6, the main highway to Rome. Both the valley and the road were commanded by the steep, rock-faced hills above the town of [Cassino](#), where the road and railway were hemmed in close to the hills by the Rapido and Gari rivers and their tributaries. [Cassino](#) was the key point of the line, for there the enemy held a defence feature without parallel, a position which had long been regarded as the classic example of a natural fortress. But the thorough German was not content with geographical advantage only. Into the [Cassino](#) sector he put his best troops, laid extensive minefields, and built cunningly sited and well camouflaged strongpoints.

Immediately before [New Zealand Corps](#) took over the sector, [2 United States](#)

Corps, with 34 and 36 Infantry Divisions, had been making valiant efforts to dislodge the enemy and drive into the town of [Cassino](#) itself. Their main attacks launched in the last week of January secured bridgeheads across the Rapido, a foothold on Monte [Cairo](#), and a slender hold on the eastern slopes of Colle Maiola. The enemy then immediately reinforced, and drove back 36 Division, which was established over the Rapido, causing the Americans heavy casualties. By 6 February the force in the hills had taken a considerable part of [Monte Castellone](#) and fought its way under withering fire to within 300 yards of [Monastery Hill](#). The troops in the valley, however, after the bitterest fighting, succeeded only in securing a few houses on the outskirts of the town.

This ten weeks of uninterrupted hammering had taken a heavy toll of lives, but on 11 February the survivors, though almost worn out by their hard battling and the foul weather, put in a final attack. It failed, and with fierce fighting still in progress the relief of [2 US Corps](#) began.

Two American combat teams remained under the command of [New Zealand Corps](#). In the initial plan the role of one of these teams was to sweep across the Rapido and establish a bridgehead south and west of [Cassino](#). A force from [New Zealand Corps](#), 'Stewart Force', which included [20 Armoured Regiment](#), was to break through the Americans and push on to Sant' Angelo. The American task force would then make for [Pignataro](#), while another force (armour and motorised infantry) would advance to Piedimonte San Germano. A week of bad weather forced the abandonment of this plan, for during this period the low-lying flat land south and west of [Cassino](#) became waterlogged and impassable.

The next plan was to push the armour along the railway embankment and to break out from the station area. The bridgehead over the Rapido was to be made at the railway crossing by [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#), and [7 Indian Brigade](#) was to attack the Monastery from the north-west along the ridge; but before this attack was launched this historic building was to be destroyed by air bombing and gunfire.

The decision to destroy the Monastery on Monte [Cassino](#) was one which was taken reluctantly, for throughout the campaign the Allies had shown magnanimity in caring for historic buildings and in carefully avoiding targets which might jeopardise sacred or historic sites.



Though the [Fifth Army](#) commander, General Mark Clark, has since recorded his opinion that the destruction of the Monastery was unnecessary and that it was not occupied by the enemy, the other Allied commanders on the spot at the time did not share his faith in the Germans' moral integrity. So obviously important a military objective in enemy hands, even if only used at the time as an observation post, could be the cause of crippling casualties to our troops attacking the [Gustav Line](#). Its commanding height and formidable construction made it a most important tactical feature. It was capable of housing a brigade of troops, and in winter shelter was second only in importance to protection. Up to 15 February the Monastery was considered to have provided both shelter and protection for German troops in the area. Full warning of what was to take place was given to the occupants of [Monte Cassino](#).

On the 15th the attack began. Relays of heavy aircraft bombed [Monte Cassino](#), while both sides watched sadly. The magnificent structure at first stubbornly resisted the continuous concentrations of high explosive, but at last the bombs slowly began to take effect, though the shell still stood after 350 tons of bombs had been used against it.

That night (the 15th) 1 Royal Sussex Regiment attacked Point 593, but failed. Despite the bombing, there seemed to be no lessening of opposition from the [Monte Cassino](#) feature. More raids were made on the Monastery on the 16th and again the following day, but still the thick outside walls remained upright, and it was soon evident that as an enemy strongpoint the ruined monastery, if less comfortable, was just as effective as it had been before.

In preparation for the main attack on 17 February, 19 Armoured Regiment moved from [Mignano](#) to a position south-east of [Monte Trocchio](#), and that evening 28 (Maori) Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel [Young](#) <sup>2</sup>) crossed the Rapido. After fierce fighting during the night the Maoris captured the railway station and established themselves there just before dawn.

But the plan, which had provided for [19 Regiment](#) to cross the Rapido on a newly erected bridge, move along the railway embankment, pass through the Maoris, then break out onto Highway 6 and enter the southern outskirts of [Cassino](#), could not be proceeded with. It had proved impossible in the time available for the

engineers to fill the last two gaps in the embankment, and consequently the tanks could not get forward to support [28 Battalion](#). With daylight the enemy poured down devastating fire from the Hummocks, which overlooked the railway station position. The Maoris held on grimly until German tanks, attacking with infantry support, drove them back, and the hard-won bridgehead upon which so much depended was lost.

Shortly after dawn orders were received cancelling the regiment's role, and the tanks which had been standing by, at times under heavy shellfire, returned to [Mignano](#), where they arrived just after dark on the 19th. There had been twelve casualties.

Fresh plans were now prepared for the crossing of the Rapido and Gari rivers and for the capture of [Cassino](#) and the Monastery. This new operation, with the code-name Dickens, was to prove one of the most strenuous and perhaps the most disappointing ever undertaken by the Division.

In general the plan had the same objectives as before, but this time [Cassino](#) was to be assaulted from the north. Sixth Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Parkinson), with [19 Regiment](#) (Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin) under command, was briefed to attack the town and force a bridgehead. This formation was to relieve 133 US Infantry Regiment in the northern sector of [Cassino](#) before the attack. Fourth Indian Division, on the right, was to hold its position on the hills and secure the Monastery and the ridges leading to the high feature. Exploitation into the [Liri](#) valley was to be the task of the American Task Force B and the remainder of 4 NZ Armoured Brigade (Brigadier [Stewart](#) <sup>3</sup>).

In preparation for the relief of the American forces, Headquarters 4 Brigade and [19 Regiment's](#) orders group went up to Monte [Cairo](#) with Brigadier Parkinson and made contact with the Americans. A reconnaissance was made of all forward positions, and final arrangements were completed for the changeover. The following night the regiment moved out from [Mignano](#).

Under cover of darkness the tanks went forward in groups and squadrons took up the dispositions which had been previously reconnoitred. Simultaneously 756 US Tank Battalion moved out. By 3.20 a.m. the relief was complete and Regimental Headquarters was established in a wadi north-east of Pasquale, beside the Portella

Road. A and C Squadrons were dispersed in the riverbed and among the olive trees in the fields to the north of Regimental Headquarters. B Squadron took up a forward position with its headquarters in a casa and one troop in a quarry within 1000 yards of the enemy. This troop had the responsibility of watching the entrance to the town.

For the next three weeks the regiment remained forward under direct view of the Monastery and Monte [Cairo](#), uncomfortable, alert, and daily expecting the attack. Every alarm and hurried preparation during this uneasy period was brought to nought by the receipt each morning of a signal which read 'DICKENS postponed'. Bad weather held up the offensive. It was a trying time; security suffered and even the local Italians were soon asking, 'DICKENS tomorrow?' The sour jokes about the weather, which was invariably either as 'cold as the Dickens' or as 'wet as the Dickens', did nothing to confuse them—every bambino knew that an assault on [Cassino](#) was brewing and that DICKENS was the code-name for it.

B Squadron (Major Leeks) in particular had a very sticky three weeks, for its area was given the closest attention by the German aircraft, guns and mortars, and casualties, mounting daily, were a steady drain on manpower. Some of the men, too, were under fire for the first time; with no opportunity to reply or even to move about to any extent, theirs was an unenviable experience. Dismal cold and constant rain made conditions wretched for everybody, and nothing could be done to alleviate them. Squadron Headquarters had a narrow escape from obliteration when a heavy calibre shell penetrated its casa and ricocheted round the inside stone walls, injuring several men but fortunately failing to explode. Thereafter the anxiety remained that the German gunners might get on to the same target again, and that next time the shell would not be a dud.

The large proportion of heavy shells which failed to explode was remarkable. In A Squadron's area, of approximately 140 shells recorded, 100 were duds. This was popularly attributed to sabotage by the forced labour working in the German armament factories.

The use of wireless at this time was forbidden, so that communications were confined to line. As it was vital that the links to B Squadron and its forward troop should be always in working order, much maintenance was necessary. The forward watch on the town was of the highest importance, and Sergeant Ian [Hercus](#),<sup>4</sup> who

was killed in action later in the operation, did a sterling job under difficult conditions. He was out night and day testing and repairing the cables which were constantly being cut by shellfire.

The 19th Regiment's tanks, cowering immobile under wet camouflage nets, took no offensive action during these three weeks, but from the quarry just below Point 225 crews from the advanced troop patrolled along the approaches to [Cassino](#) and reported on the state of the routes into the town. When the operation developed, a clear passage in would be essential if the tanks were to give effective close support to the attacking infantry when it would be most needed.

It was the middle of March before the weather cleared sufficiently to dry out the airfields and so allow the preliminary air assault to be mounted against the town. Meanwhile battle casualties and sickness were robbing the Division of manpower, and unit strengths dwindled daily. On 2 March the GOC ( [Major-General Kippenberger](#)) was severely wounded by a mine and the command of the Division passed to Brigadier Parkinson, whom Brigadier [Bonifant](#) <sup>5</sup> succeeded as commander of 6 Brigade.

On the 14th word came through at last that DICKENS would begin at noon next day. In preparation for the bombing forward troops were withdrawn behind the safety bomb line, while units further back moved up into position. After so many postponements signs of the impending attack were greeted almost with relief. At a CO's conference the plan for [19 Regiment](#) was gone over once again, and squadrons made their final preparations. All was made ready for the midday move into [Cassino](#).

The 15th March dawned fine and clear and at 8.30 a.m. the leading waves of bombers appeared. From that hour onwards, with relentless regularity, Liberators and Fortresses roared over the target. Under the pall of smoke and dust churned up by the 1100 tons of high explosive they released, [Cassino](#) rocked and shuddered until it seemed impossible that any living thing could have survived. It was an awesome exhibition of Allied air might, but the watching troops, elated at first, were soon uncomfortably aware that the term 'safety bomb line' meant little to many of the bombardiers up above. Some of their missiles found marks as much as five miles within our own area, and there were many unexpected casualties. Much bitterness naturally resulted. It was with justifiable relief that the troops waiting to go into the

attack watched the last group of planes disappear shortly before midday.

At the stroke of twelve, when the air bombardment had ceased, our artillery opened up and, behind a barrage from over 600 guns of all calibres, the attack began to move forward. Over the radio telephone, breaking the long-imposed silence, came the voice of OC B Squadron, 'Moving now everything OK.' The month of waiting was ended: DICKENS was on.

The 25th Battalion with B Squadron 19 Regiment in support, led 6 Brigade's assault on the town. The first objective was Point 193 ( Castle Hill) and the high ground around it, then along the line of the main road running east through Cassino to the intersection of the north-south route. In code, this line was known as QUISLING.

The advance was made along two roads running south from the barracks area into Cassino. Two troops of tanks moved on each route, but in the first few minutes it was found that all the preliminary route reconnoitring by the engineers, infantry and armour during the long wait outside the town was now of no use. The two troops on PARALLEL (the eastern) route were forced to retrace their tracks, while radio reports from the leading tanks on CARUSO route indicated that, while they had reached the northern outskirts of Cassino, further progress was impossible. The heavy bombing had completely wrecked all roads to the objective. Huge craters and debris from demolished buildings made the going impossible, and the tanks were halted halfway between the jail and Route 6.



**ATTACK on CASSINO**

To add to the already serious situation, several sorties of dive-bombing Kittyhawks attacked the area in which the leading tanks were working. Some of them could now move neither forwards nor backwards.

The bridgelaying tank with B Squadron was called up, but the craters left by the heavy bombs on the rain-sodden routes were so large that they could not be spanned with this equipment. It was evident that bulldozer assistance from the engineers would be required before any reasonable progress through the town could be expected. All hope of a swift armoured breakthrough had now gone.

Nevertheless the crews of B Squadron's tanks left their vehicles and, working with pick and shovel under cover of smoke, cleared their way forward. By this means individual tanks were manoeuvred into positions where they could best assist the infantry by gunfire. Energetic work on foot, first by Major Leeks, then by his second-in-command, [Captain McInnes](#), and later by Lieutenant Carey,<sup>6</sup> resulted in ten tanks being got into good supporting positions. All these officers commanded B Squadron in succession, and all were wounded during this hazardous work.

The task of [25 Battalion](#), too, had been made very difficult by the bomb damage. [Cassino](#) was in ruins and the whole layout of the town seemed to have been changed. The attacking platoons had hard work keeping direction and surmounting obstacles. Though at first the infantry struck little opposition as they approached the objective, the enemy holding a strong line along the base of the hill began to fight back fiercely. The tanks now gave valuable assistance, and despite the fact that at this stage there was no effective communication between armour and infantry, B Squadron tanks, working individually and through regimental control, were able to bring effective fire to bear on many buildings from which the enemy was harassing our troops.

Snipers and pockets of enemy, who evidently had still been underground when the attack passed over them, began to emerge from the crumbling debris and engage our men from unexpected quarters, and areas that had been cleared but which could not be garrisoned by the attackers were later reoccupied by the Germans. Companies were out of touch with each other, and in the afternoon progress was impossible to follow. Fierce local fights held up movement in some places, while other groups managed to get forward. A company of [24 Battalion](#) was

put in to help clear the areas on the objective, and by 4.30 p.m. B Squadron [19 Regiment](#) had its ten tanks along the general line in close support of the infantry.

That the enemy could come up so full of fight after the fierce air bombardment and intense artillery barrage spoke well for the calibre of his infantry. It was evident that he was using his best and most seasoned troops in the defence of [Cassino](#). By nightfall [Castle Hill](#) and Point 165 were successfully occupied, but a number of enemy strongpoints were still holding out and giving much trouble. Then at dusk heavy rain began to fall, and the full moon, which had been counted upon to assist the attacking forces, was obscured by low black clouds.

Despite the unwelcome change in the weather, the night of 15–16 March was a period of feverish activity. The infantry, stumbling in the pitch darkness over the heaped-up ruins, attempted to link up their areas and consolidate their hard-won gains. The tanks, including A Squadron (Major Thodey) and one troop of C Squadron (Lieutenant [Brown](#) <sup>7</sup>), moved up during the afternoon and contacted part of 26 Battalion which they were supporting. No contact was made, however, with the forward company headquarters, of which there was no news. During darkness some damaged vehicles were recovered, wounded were evacuated, and the tanks took some supplies forward. The engineers, whose tasks were tremendous, did their utmost to clear routes for the next phase of the attack, which was planned to capture the railway station area and then, by exploiting along Highway 6 on to the high ground, secure the gateway to the [Liri](#) valley.

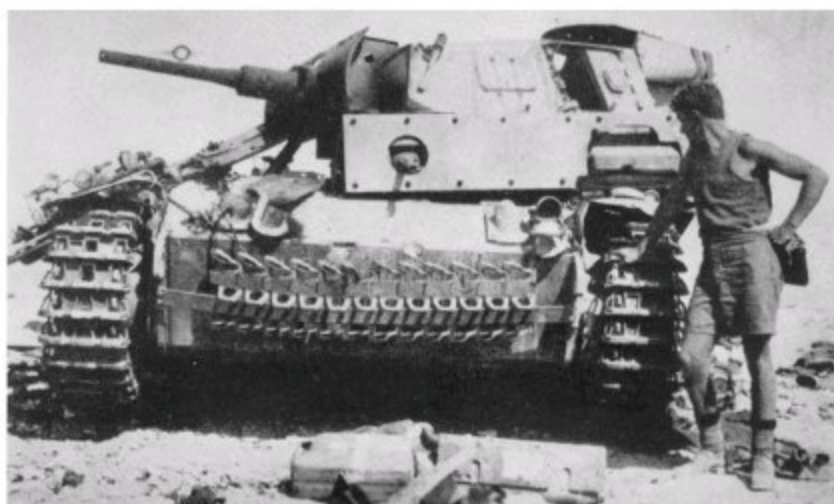
During the night, too, 5 Indian Brigade relieved 25 Battalion on [Castle Hill](#) and occupied Hangman's Hill. But the changeover was difficult and only scattered elements were able to establish themselves on the barren rock faces of the Castle feature. Throughout the night the enemy kept up an intense fire on all approaches.

With weeks of local knowledge behind them the German infantry had a great advantage over our men, and in the night they were able to infiltrate back into cleared areas, reinforce their strongpoints in the town and establish several new ones. When daylight came the battle began again with renewed fury.

The Allied artillery and parties from Divisional Cavalry and 7 Anti-Tank Regiment now put down smoke to screen the bridges under construction over the Rapido,

mask movement in the town, and blind the enemy observation posts around the Monastery and [Terelle](#) areas. In addition to the prearranged programmes fired by the artillery as required, B Squadron tanks and the self-propelled guns under regimental command responded smartly and efficiently to calls for support, smoke and concentrations. Nevertheless many of the enemy's well-sited weapons were able to keep up their destructive work. His 170-millimetre guns behind Monte [Cairo](#) and nebelwerfers around the [Piedimonte](#) and Pignataro areas caused casualties to our armour, and his mortars firing from the reverse slopes of Monte [Cassino](#) and Colle Sant' Angelo harassed the infantry. Snipers continued to do deadly work, and spandau nests among the masses of rubble in the town were difficult to locate and to deal with.

From now on the whole of the battle area was under a cloud of smoke. Ruined [Cassino](#), shrouded in a constant greyish pall, became a nightmare town where every device of friend or foe seemed to react against the troops whose task it was to burst through the debris and the defences and secure a safe passage into the valley beyond. The system of canals under the streets had been burst by the bombing, and the rain and the welling up of the water turned what little remained of the roads in the centre of the town into a muddy mess. Tracked vehicles churned up this mud and the pulverised mortar from the wrecked buildings into a sticky dough, which poured into ruts and craters, creating hidden hazards for the tanks and setting almost insuperable repair problems for the engineers.



A German Mark IV tank knocked out at Ruweisat Ridge, 16 July 1942

**A German Mark IV tank knocked out at [Ruweisat Ridge](#), 16 July 1942**





After Ruweisat—Wellington company group: (*standing*) W. J. Coleman, C. J. Stark, E. Taylor, I. Constable; (*sitting*) J. H. Walden, R. W. Patterson, G. W. Baxter, R. T. Lowry, H. McMillan

After Ruweisat— Wellington company group: ( standing) W. J. Coleman, C. J. Stark, E. Taylor, I. Constable; ( sitting) J. H. Walden, R. W. Patterson, G. W. Baxter, R. T. Lowry, H. McMillan



Brig L. M. Inglis, commander of 4 Armoured Brigade, inspects 19 Armoured Regiment at Maadi—Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin (*left*) and Col S. F. Hartnell (*centre*)

Brig L. M. Inglis, commander of 4 Armoured Brigade, inspects 19 Armoured Regiment at Maadi— Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin ( left) and Col S. F. Hartnell ( centre)



A knocked-out Sherman tank at Perano. Anti-tank shells have penetrated the driver's position. This was the regiment's first casualty in its first action in Italy (see pages 338-9)

A knocked-out Sherman tank at [Perano](#). Anti-tank shells have penetrated the driver's position. This was the regiment's first casualty in its first action in [Italy](#) ( see pages 338– 9)



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ingro

**Bogged at the [Sangro](#)**

nowed up at  
Orsogna



**Snowed up at Orsogna**

Cassino — from  
the leading tank  
on arrival at the  
railway station



**Cassino — from the leading tank on arrival at the Railway station**



The station attack at Cassino: 1, 19 Regiment Battle HQ; 2, The crossroads; 3, 4, Beswick's tanks, knocked out and set on fire; 5, Hubbard's tank, overturned off road; 6, Milne's tank, disabled but fighting (see page 380)

The station attack at Cassino: 1, 19 Regiment Battle HQ; 2, The crossroads; 3, 4, Beswick's tanks, knocked out and set on fire; 5, Hubbard's tank, overturned off road; 6, Milne's tank, disabled but fighting ( see page 380)

Crew of the leading tank relieved after the attack on the railway station, Cassino — (sitting) Tpr A. S. Furby, unidentified; (standing) Lt J. G. Furness, Cpl W. N. Forbes, Tpr L. A. Strong



Crew of the leading tank relieved after the attack on the railway station, Cassino — ( sitting) Tpr A. S. Furby, unidentified; ( standing) Lt J. G. Furness, Cpl W. N. Forbes, Tpr L. A. Strong

There was frenzied work all day on the 16th in an all-out endeavour to make further progress through the town, both infantry and armour using every device to get forward. A Squadron was switched from the northern end of Cassino and at 11 a.m. began to move to Route 6. The 26th Battalion, which had gone in the previous afternoon to attempt to push on to the second objective, had lost communication with its brigade headquarters and was out of touch until 3.45 p.m. At that hour three

A Squadron tanks, which had fought forward and got on to Highway 6 with the assistance of two Valentine scissors bridgelayers, entered the town and made contact. No. 1 Troop (Lieutenant Morrin) set up its headquarters with Headquarters 26 Battalion in the church just short of the Botanical Gardens.

The meeting is recorded in the history of [26 Battalion](#):

... an officer wearing a black beret was seen walking unconcernedly along Route 6. He turned to enter the Nunnery but a hurried call brought him over to 14 Platoon. The tank officer, Lieutenant Morrin of [19 Armoured Regiment](#), had left his tank a short distance back down Route 6, and to while away the time while sappers filled in a road crater, had come forward to locate the infantry. He was asked to shell the Nunnery. A short while afterwards a dozen shells landed on the building. Corporal [Tombs](#)<sup>8</sup> then led his men into it.

Using the regimental wireless link, [26 Battalion](#) was now able to report on the situation in its sector. In this relief 1 and 4 Troops from A Squadron each had a tank bogged, but particularly fine work by the bridgelayers enabled the rest to enter the town. Despite the slow rate at which this difficult advance into the town was accomplished, the tanks were up with the infantry before dark, firing on targets, passing messages, and preparing for a renewed offensive next day.

B Squadron that day (the 16th) had six tanks well into the northern end of the town in close support of 25 Battalion, in whose area snipers were doing murderous work until they were effectively dealt with by fire from the armour. This squadron was relieved on the night of 16–17 March. In the original plan it was to have been taken out the first night, but its long and previously passive contact with the enemy had culminated in two days' hard fighting following its assault on the town. The squadron left seven tanks in [Cassino](#). The high hopes held by commanders and crews before the battle were still unrealised though each man had done his utmost. The havoc wrought by the bombing had made B Squadron's role unbelievably difficult, but the assistance it had given the infantry in the initial stages of the battle had been invaluable. The squadron now undertook a supporting role in the north of [Cassino](#).

Following close, confused fighting during the morning of the 17th, an attack was

made on the railway station area. C Company [26 Battalion](#) and three troops drawn from A Squadron (which now had eight runners in the town) were used in this assault. No. 4 Troop (Lieutenant [Jim Furness](#)<sup>9</sup>) led. The approach move was a most difficult one and Furness has described it as follows:

... we found that the streets just did not exist: there was nothing but rubble everywhere and all our previous recces and plans went overboard. I couldn't find any semblance of the roads E-Q or G-Q [see photograph following [p. 378](#)] so we nosed the tanks through a few gaps and somehow got in behind the Convent [on Route 6, also referred to as the Nunnery]. From there I had no alternative but to get out of the tank and crawl forward among the rubble to find a track. I was successful in finding a thoroughfare which enabled us to get out to the road somewhere in the vicinity of M. Somewhere here there was an anti-tank gun lining itself up on us—it had actually been sited on to the railway station—and we liquidated it. Machine-gun fire was rattling like hailstones on the tank as we made our way to the station, firing on the move with the 75mm at any building that looked suspicious. At the cross-roads Q we encountered a deep minefield. I decided to move the mines, but in view of the heavy machine-gun fire I endeavoured to put out smoke with the 75mm smoke shells. However these travelled too far, so we fired them into the nearby rubble which held the shells while they discharged their smoke. I intended to do the job alone, but a member of my tank crew, [Cpl Bill Forbes](#),<sup>10</sup> was soon at my side and we soon got the road clear. We got under way again, shooting up a couple of pill boxes and several M/G posts as we went.

The dash along the open concrete road to the railway station now began. The enemy gunners had the approach well taped and No. 2 Troop (Second-Lieutenant 'Dib' Beswick) had both tanks in his troop knocked out and brewed up. No. 4 Troop, however, got two tanks (Lieutenant Furness's and Sergeant 'Snow' Coleman's) onto the objective. They arrived at the station at 11.55 a.m. and immediately began to engage the enemy posts around it.

No. 3 Troop (Lieutenant [Ron Griggs](#)<sup>11</sup>) now followed up fast and arrived with two more tanks. [Griggs'](#) account of the assault and what followed is given below.

As No. 3 Tp advanced down Route 6, Lt Beswick's two tanks could be seen burning and exploding halfway down the built up open road leading to the railway

station. On enquiry, the Sqn Comd informed that the artillery had engaged the A/T gun which had got Beswick's troop, and it was thought to be out of action.

The troop was told to hit the road with the greatest speed and the Sherman tanks were really extended to the limit. The Tp Comd's tank led followed by Sgt [Frank Milne](#)<sup>12</sup> and then came Cpl [Hubbard](#).<sup>13</sup> The general area was being shelled at the time and when the leading tank shuddered to a halt at the end of the road, a quick examination showed what appeared to be a large shell splinter jamming the track (later found to be a bit of the track suspension—an AP shot was firmly embedded in the chassis). Sgt Milne's tank had by this time drawn alongside and the Tp Comd and he changed tanks, then continued on until stopped by the flood waters of the Rapido river [probably the Gari]. At this stage no infantry had reached the Station area.

Frequent calls on the wireless failed to get a reply from Cpl Hubbard's tank, and the infantry who arrived later in the afternoon said that one tank had gone off the road. At approx 5pm, when the fighting had died down, the Tp Comd went back to Sgt Milne who was still fighting the immobile tank, and picked up Milne and his driver [Bert Orr](#)<sup>14</sup> and ran back to the tank which it was found had fallen about 10 feet and was on its side in the mud. This move brought down mortar fire from the Hun but shortly afterwards darkness covered the efforts to extricate the crew—the driver had escaped earlier but had been pinned down in the water for several hours by a spandau.

The only entry into the tank was via the driver's hatch because the turret had sunk too far into the mud. By tapping on the hull, contact was made with the wireless operator, [Mick Cooney](#),<sup>15</sup> but entry from the driver's compartment to the turret was barred by the grilled side of the turret wall. Bert Orr returned to his tank for tools and work was started on this obstacle. The task took from 6 p.m. till 11 p.m. but finally a hole was cut sufficiently large for Cooney to be rescued. Cpl Hubbard and Tpr [Gasson](#)<sup>16</sup> (the gunner) had both been killed by the A/Tk shell which had penetrated the turret. Cooney was severely wounded and he was eventually sent home to NZ after many painful months in hospital.

Effective fire from the tanks on the objective at the station soon resulted in a slackening of enemy resistance from the strongpoint on the Hummocks. But the

infantry were still pinned by deadly sniping and lost many men. They were able to cross the open ground only after a smoke screen had been put down, and did not get to the station until 2.40 p.m.

German troops fleeing from the area were hotly engaged, and by 3 p.m. the station was secured and mopped up by [26 Battalion](#). The three mobile tanks and one disabled remained on the position in close support.

During this engagement Second-Lieutenant Beswick, while evacuating the surviving members of his ill-fated No. 2 Troop, ran into trouble from enemy machine-gun fire. Acting with great coolness and promptitude, he and Corporal Garth Ryder<sup>17</sup> rushed the nearest post and, with a German tommy gun snatched from a body, wiped out the crew and captured seventeen prisoners. These were herded into a dugout, where they were kept under guard all day. After dusk Beswick led his men, with their prisoners, for over 1000 yards across the shambles to Squadron Headquarters at the crypt at the rear of the convent. Their arrival at first caused some consternation.

A Squadron had done magnificent work under conditions which were almost impossible for tank movement, and its efforts had done much to relieve the precarious situation in the central sector of [Cassino](#). For his outstanding example and leadership the squadron commander, Major Thodey, was awarded the DSO, and the squadron also earned several other decorations.

For the whole day (the 17th) C Squadron continued in close support of [24 Battalion](#) in the town near Highway 6. The tanks were kept busy engaging suspected points and knocking down buildings from which the enemy was bringing fire to bear on the infantry, who were then attempting to push on to the Continental Hotel. They had already cleared the Botanical Gardens area during the first two hours of daylight, and this enabled the attack on the station to be mounted. At last light No. 9 Troop, with one tank from Squadron Headquarters, moved south to watch the junction of Route 6 and to stand by in a reserve position ready for further exploitation towards the [Liri](#) valley.

With the bridgehead over the Rapido established and both objectives in the town area now taken, prospects for the break-out seemed better, and the final



moves for fully investing [Cassino](#) were prepared.

The clearing of the western high ground and the town itself was the first task. The three battalions already in the town area were to be reinforced by [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#), which was to come into [Cassino](#) on the night of 18–19 March to complete the mopping-up and consolidation of the town area.

It was evident, however, that the enemy had no intention of relaxing his hold, and throughout the night of the 17th-18th both 25 and 26 Battalions were severely shelled and mortared. In the station area German patrols were very active, and the tanks firing on fixed lines assisted in keeping them at bay during darkness.

Just before dawn Lieutenant Furness called up advising that there were indications that a counter-attack was developing. This startling news alerted all tanks but one in No. 1 Troop. Just as this information had been received the commander of this tank switched on and filled the air with details about a burning camouflage net which his crew were doing their best to extinguish. He had not heard the call from the station and apparently in his excitement forgot to pull his switch. As long as his set remained on 'transmit' it not only jammed the rest of the regimental net but prevented him from hearing the frantic instructions to 'Get off the air.' Some tense minutes passed before he realised his error and switched to 'Receive'. Fortunately the attack did not take place immediately, and when it did the enemy was beaten off. The incident, however, was a telling example of how a small mistake might cause a major disaster.

At daylight the shelling of all areas increased, freshly sited anti-tank weapons engaged our armour, and snipers caused trouble in all sectors. The Luftwaffe also took a hand with some strafing.

The tanks in the town remained in close support of our infantry. A and C Squadrons and No. 5 Troop from B Squadron were split up throughout the occupied areas and engaged as required in fire tasks, but were much in the same positions as those taken up the previous day. During the morning two tanks from Regimental Headquarters under Lieutenant [McCown](#)<sup>18</sup> were brought in to thicken up A Squadron's area, and another tank (Lieutenant Morrin) was sent on a special fire task against buildings from which the enemy was still harassing the infantry. A round

of armour-piercing followed by high-explosive proved an effective method of opening up these trouble spots.

All day long the German artillery was effective and accurate, and most of the tanks in the town received direct hits from projectiles of various calibres. The commander of No. 10 Troop (Lieutenant Peter Brown)—attached to A Squadron—had his tank knocked out by a bazooka, two of his crew killed, and was himself wounded. At Battle Headquarters the CO's tank, which was sheltering at the convent, had the building brought down on top of it. The barrel of the 75 was bent, and a new tank had to be sent in during the night to replace the damaged one. Our armour, however, evened the score and claimed that day to have accounted for two enemy tanks in the town.

Around Points 193 and 202 the infantry made some small but costly gains. The whole programme for 18 March was so solidly opposed that by nightfall there were few changes in the positions of the infantry or the tanks, though No. 9 Troop was successfully withdrawn from C Squadron's area, and moving by Highway 6, joined McCown's two RHQ tanks in the southern end of [Cassino](#).

The engineers' tasks had now progressed considerably. Working from dusk to dawn, they had Pasquale route repaired and Highway 6 clear as far as the southern end of [Cassino](#). The railway route was passable for tanks as far as the station, and the bridges over the Rapido north of Highway 6 were almost completed and were expected to be ready for traffic by the morning of the 19th. Mines had been lifted in all important areas in which our troops were working, and altogether the Engineers had done a prodigious job.

During the night of the 18th–19th the [Maori Battalion](#) moved into [Cassino](#). Bitter fighting took place in front of the Continental Hotel where the Maoris, attacking immediately they moved in, advanced from the Botanical Gardens and by dogged street battles fought their way almost to Route 6 before being held up by fire from the enemy strong-points above the hotel. During this attack a number of trouble spots were eliminated and a good bag of prisoners taken. These gave information of the enemy's armament and methods and positive identification of the German units opposing our forces. The enemy had handed the responsibility for the defence of [Cassino](#) to his best troops: 3 Parachute Regiment was in the line.

With their supply dumps located in the ground floors of the bomb-wrecked buildings, well hidden by rubble and known only to themselves, the Germans were confident of their ability to hold the town and expected shortly to launch a two-battalion counter-attack with flame-throwers. In the area, too, were operating seven or eight Mark IV tanks and the same number of self-propelled guns. The ruins were the enemy's greatest ally. They gave excellent concealment and cover, confused our infantry, and immobilised our armour.

During the day the Maoris took more prisoners, but every one had to be winkled out of the debris from which they had been fighting. Quick to appreciate the effectiveness of the tanks, the Maoris won the admiration of the crews by their coolness in going out from cover to indicate to the armour just where enemy strongpoints or snipers were located. A Maori warrant officer (RSM [Martin McRae](#) <sup>19</sup>) went within five yards of a large building where a group of enemy was known to be. He asked for fire to be put in at certain windows. This was done at point-blank range by Lieutenant Morrin's tank, and several Germans came out smartly, their hands in the air. Using dire threats and novel means to tell them what he wanted, McRae had them call out their colleagues. Nearly a hundred prisoners were thus collected from this one building.

Co-operation between the tanks and infantry was good, and in the afternoon A Squadron, which at the time controlled a gunline of seven tanks, had a blitz on snipers who had been worrying [25 Battalion](#). The system used was for the infantry to describe targets over a No. 38 wireless set; these descriptions were received on another No. 38 set in the squadron commander's tank and the target identified. Orders were then relayed to the other tanks by their No. 19 sets. All guns were trained, and one gun fired ranging shots; these shots were observed and corrections received from the infantry until the target was hit, whereupon the whole gun-line—which during the ranging had been making the necessary corrections—fired three rounds. The results were excellent.

Resistance continued as strong as ever in the town area, especially on the higher ground, and neither infantry nor armour could make much forward progress. On the hills, too, things were not going well, for part of the Essex Regiment, on its way to reinforce the [Gurkhas](#), was badly cut up, and the remainder, moving in for an

attack on the Monastery, was pinned down by fire. In a strong counter-attack the enemy recaptured Point 165 and threatened our position on [Castle Hill](#).

One attack which might have done much to relieve the position took place from Colle Maiola when two columns, comprising tanks from 20 Regiment, some American Honey tanks and self-propelled guns, and light tanks from 7 Indian Brigade, surprised the enemy and temporarily caused him some confusion. On Colle Maiola a well camouflaged route had been in course of preparation for two months. It was not discovered by the enemy and was now used for the first time. It was unfortunate that the attack could not be pushed home. Minefields and bad going encountered once the end of the road had been passed made further armoured progress difficult, and several 20 Regiment tanks attempting to get forward were knocked out by German infantry with bazookas. There was no infantry to support the armour or to enable the situation caused by this surprise move to be exploited before the enemy had reorganised.

That night (the 19th–20th) there was a reshuffle of responsibilities, and 6 Brigade handed over the town area north of Route 6 to 5 Brigade. The battalions of the former brigade now concentrated on a line from Route 6 to and including the railway station. On their southern flank was the Divisional Cavalry ( [Major Stace](#) <sup>20</sup>), with some units from 78 British Division. The 6th Royal West Kents took over the castle, but the troops on Hangman's Hill and Point 202 could not be relieved and, though virtually surrounded, still held out and fought vigorously. They were supplied by air. Supply and replenishment was a problem, and though the tanks had a distinct advantage in safety and carrying capacity, they too had some exciting incidents, as this extract from a letter written from hospital by Lieutenant Strat Morrin shows:

We went out again that evening for more ammunition. I took three tanks out and we also collected some rum and bread. After arriving back where we had our dump, we had spent about five minutes getting things going, three of the crew were on ammo, whilst the other and myself were sorting out the bread and rum when the Hun started to shell the area. The four of us who were outside the tank ducked in close behind, were alright for a short time but one landed right in close behind winging the lot of us. Three of us were winged in the back, the fourth in the legs as well. [Percy Priest](#) <sup>21</sup> the driver and self were not bad, [Cliff Stark](#) <sup>22</sup> was able to walk with difficulty while [Jack Thomson](#) <sup>23</sup> the spare driver had a very nasty one in the

back. (He subsequently died.) [Morrie Webster](#)<sup>24</sup> the operator, the other member who was in the turret, got out to see what was happening, as the shell had also set alight to our dump, and was winged from one of our own shells, A.P. casing I think, in the arm.

Percy and I managed to get Jack Thomson back and we all made an infantry RAP in the crypt of the Church. After having our wounds attended to we later made back to our own RAP which was very handy. Morrie, Percy and I walked out while Cliff was a stretcher case. Jack was to come out in the next batch, none of us saw him again as he died the following day. We were well looked after when we made our own RAP, the most welcome thing of all being the big mugs of cocoa which the Padre Jack Somerville was dispensing.

We were sent on back and about six o'clock next morning we arrived at 2 G.H. at [Caserta](#), where we still are and have been looked after wonderfully well.

During darkness, too, the tanks carried out some necessary reliefs. C Squadron took over from A. Nos. 9, 11 and 12 Troops of C Squadron, plus one disabled tank from A Squadron, carried on in the northern end of the town while Nos. 3 and 4 Troops went out to reorganise. Later B Squadron took over from Nos. 11 and 12. Lieutenant Jan Suter succeeded Captain [Geoff Wiles](#)<sup>25</sup> as technical adjutant; the latter, having been wounded the day before, finished a strenuous tour in which he had gone five days and nights almost without sleep. Throughout the whole of the [Cassino](#) operation the work of the technical personnel was of the highest order. Aided by an American Sherman recovery tank (Lieutenant Allan Tupper-Brown and crew of four), they had done some magnificent work in getting vehicles back on their tracks and keeping all the tanks in the town in fighting trim. Their impressive recovery work—often under heavy fire—to some extent offset the unfavourable conditions under which the armour was operating and kept the regimental tally of runners surprisingly high considering the circumstances under which the battle was being fought.

The 20th saw more hard house-to-house fighting by both 28 and 23 Battalions (Lieutenant-Colonel [Connolly](#)<sup>26</sup>), with the tanks in the town supporting them by fire as required. Two Regimental Headquarters tanks were sent in to reinforce A Squadron and at 11.30 a.m. Nos. 3 and 4 Troops, which had been taken out twelve

hours earlier, were ordered back. No. 4 was sent right into [Cassino](#) to a position near Point S [see photograph following [p. 378](#)], and No. 3 remained on call near the Bailey bridge.

That night (20–21 March) [21 Battalion](#) (Lieutenant-Colonel [McElroy](#) <sup>27</sup>) was put in to cut the southern entrance to the town and to link up with the troops on Point 202. The battalion met solid opposition, which increased as the day wore on. Fire from above the Hotel des Roses was very severe and prevented any move towards the south along Route 6. There were no decisive moves made on the 21st.

The battle had now been raging for seven days. Shelling on both sides was almost continuous, and the volume of fire coming from the enemy strongpoints clearly showed that he had been able to reinforce considerably since the 15th. Every move was met by well-directed shooting, and our infantry suffered severely. The enemy had the better of the battle, for his observation posts were sited on all the commanding points, while his guns were not only directed from these points but were receiving information from hidden observers located in the ruins of [Cassino](#) itself.

One of these observation posts in the town—an enemy Mark IV tank—was discovered by some astonished infantrymen who had heard it running its engine to charge its radio batteries. It had been completely sealed into a building next door to the one they were occupying. Several rounds of armour-piercing high-explosive from [Lieutenant Jock McPhail's](#) tank were put into the building. When the site was investigated after the tank had brewed up, it was found that the radio was set up and no doubt had been used as a valuable link in the enemy's forward observation organisation during the seven days our troops had been in [Cassino](#). The crew (all of whom were killed) had a specially constructed underground passage which ran from the room in which their tank was incarcerated to the basement, under the courtyard and road, and across to the embankment on the other side.

On the 21st all tank moves were made in the early hours of the morning while it was still dark. Nos. 5 and 6 Troops from B Squadron and the two tanks from Regimental Headquarters, which had gone down Highway 6 the previous day, relieved A Squadron in the southern end of the town. During this relief No. 4 Troop lost a tank and A Squadron's strength was reduced to eleven runners, this total

including one new vehicle from the tank supply depot.

On the night of 21–22 March all B Squadron runners were assembled near the church and A Squadron went back into the town. Lieutenant Carey who, despite having been wounded on the first day, had commanded B Squadron since its original two commanders had successively been severely wounded in the first few hours of the battle, now handed over the squadron to Lieutenant 'Rup' Glendining,<sup>28</sup> and was evacuated.

At 6 p.m. Nos. 9 and 12 Troops of C Squadron passed to the command of the Buffs. The total strength of this squadron was down to nine tanks. Relief to both men and vehicles was now a matter of considerable concern, for the battle tension had been unremitting. Some tanks could not be moved, though they were still being fought, and in the case of No. 9 Troop it was possible only to exchange crews so that the men who had been longest in action could come out and get some rest.

Inside the tanks sleep was almost impossible, for each member of the crew was required to be constantly on the alert. The frequent smack of bullets, shrapnel, and debris on the outside armour always held the threat of something larger and more penetrating. Several commanders had their periscopes sniped and snatched away from their eyes when the glass above splintered and the tube on its ball joint swung violently upwards; one man received a nasty face wound this way. The air inside the cramped quarters, though foul, could get icy cold, especially in the early mornings or when the engine had been stopped for a long period.

From the beginning of the action communications had been a big problem though successfully handled. The many telephone lines laid by the infantry signallers lasted only for the briefest periods, despite determined efforts to repair and replace them. The 19th Regiment's wireless network soon became the mainstay of the system. It comprised fifty-five stations within the unit and eight others linking attached units and units being supported by the regiment. The magnificent way in which the regimental operators coped with this crowded net was the result of the high standard of training and radio discipline attained by the unit's signallers under Lieutenant John Milliken.<sup>29</sup> A performance worthy of particular mention was that of Corporal Ian Munro,<sup>30</sup> who maintained 'control' at the CO's battle headquarters for the full time under conditions which called for the highest degree of alertness and

efficiency.

By the 22nd it was evident that the [New Zealand Corps'](#) attack was spent. The troops had been in the line for almost six weeks, and the last eight days had been spent under conditions which were miserable beyond description. The strain on all ranks had been tremendous, for not only was the fighting severe and continuous, but the shambles over which the battle was being fought made even the most routine tasks gruelling. Supplies had to be manhandled. Hot food or drink was almost impossible to arrange. There was no defined line; the enemy might be anywhere, and his minefields and booby traps were a constant hazard.

The continuous working in the half light of smoke screens and in darkness, and the uncertainty and danger attending even the shortest move, were factors which added to the exhaustion of the individual. Nevertheless the troops were still determined, and efforts were made even in the last hour to swing the balance. The 21st Battalion again attacked in the western area, while [23 Battalion](#) made another attempt on the slopes below the Monastery road. Little headway was made at either point.

On the night of 22–23 March A Squadron of 20 Armoured Regiment relieved A Squadron of the 19th, and the following morning the regiment began to move back to [Mignano](#). A and B Squadrons withdrew that day but C remained in [Cassino](#), still in support of the Buffs, and the disabled C Squadron tank attached to A Squadron, which after six days was still being fought but which could not be got out, was left under the command of Sergeant [Sargent](#) <sup>31</sup> to keep up its supporting role as long as it was needed. The 'flying fitters', though loath to leave this tank, were finally ordered off. The A Squadron team, Sergeant Brian Buchanan, Corporal 'Ding' Byrne, <sup>32</sup> Lance-Corporal Jim [Walden](#), <sup>33</sup> and Trooper 'Fitz' Fitzpatrick, <sup>34</sup> a redoubtable quartet at any time, had excelled themselves during this action, and fully justified the above-establishment quota of rank which they had clung to despite official attempts to break up the combination.

These armoured reliefs were part of the plan to temporarily abandon the offensive while [New Zealand Corps](#) reorganised its line. Orders were to hold all gains securely, and as this still involved armoured support of the infantry in the town, tanks were relieved one at a time.



The following day (the 23rd) C Squadron passed from the command of the Buffs to that of 20 Regiment, and the squadron moved back finally on the 26th to rejoin the rest of the 19th in the dispersal area at [Mignano](#).

The regiment was now completely withdrawn from its active role and began to refit immediately. In [Cassino](#) it had left twenty tanks; eight others were in workshops or with the Light Aid Detachment, and the remaining thirty runners all required much maintenance.

Casualties, though regrettable, were lighter than might have been expected. Seven men were killed in action and forty wounded during the eleven days of active operations under conditions completely unfavourable for armour. In addition to these [Cassino](#) battle casualties, B Squadron had lost one man killed and fourteen wounded while waiting outside the town. These losses, plus considerable wastage caused by sickness, left the regiment's strength at low ebb, and much reorganisation was necessary.

Of the battle and the part the 19th played in it, it can be said that, despite the limiting factors, the causes of which were outside the control of the unit, a good account had been given by all squadrons. The narrow streets of the bomb-shattered town imposed conditions completely unfavourable for the employment of armour. Manoeuvre was impossible and every movement hazardous. Nevertheless our hard-pressed infantry was given every support and assistance possible.

The Gustav Line still held and the road to Rome was still closed, but a bridgehead over the Rapido had been established and the town was virtually in Allied hands. This and the foothold gained on the hills would continue to cause the enemy the utmost anxiety. Because he was forced to garrison the [Liri](#) valley position strongly, relief was afforded the [Anzio](#) beachhead, where the situation was critical.

From the DICKENS operation tank commanders and crews gained much valuable experience in close co-operation with the infantry. Throughout the fighting it had been their constant endeavour to be well up with the assaulting troops, and though some of the tasks had been beyond the mechanical capacity of the tanks, the crews were always willing. The 19th, having once fought as an infantry battalion, soundly appreciated the dangers and difficulties confronting the units it had been supporting

in what was perhaps the toughest job the New Zealand Division had yet tackled—a job that clearly confirmed the old axiom that in battle only infantry can finally force a decision. Air, artillery and armour, no matter how great the concentrations employed, cannot alone capture an objective held by determined troops.

Back in the bloody squalor of [Cassino](#) other 4 Armoured Brigade units were carrying on in support of the battalions now concentrating on the defence of the area. Then, on 26 March, [New Zealand Corps](#) was disbanded, and as Fifth Army reorganised for a fresh offensive, [2 NZ Division](#) was withdrawn at the end of March to the [Volturno](#) valley for a short, much-needed rest before taking over a sector of the Allied line in the Apennine Mountains.



San Michele (left centre)—from one of the aerial photographs used during the advance to Florence. Cerbaia is in the bottom right-hand corner

**San Michele (left centre)—from one of the aerial photographs used during the advance to Florence. Cerbaia is in the bottom right-hand corner**

A 19 Regiment  
Sherman enters  
Florence — from  
*Parade*



**A 19 Regiment Sherman enters Florence—from Parade**



A German Tiger tank knocked out during the advance up the  
Adriatic coast

**A German Tiger tank knocked out during the advance up the Adriatic coast**



Gunnery training at Fabriano

**Gunnery training at Fabriano**



B Squadron gunline at Faenza,  
Christmas Day 1944

**B Squadron gunline at Faenza, Christmas Day 1944**



Tests with tank-track extensions  
( 'grousers' ) at Faenza

**Tests with tank-track extensions ( 'grousers' ) at Faenza**



A billet in the regimental rest area at Faenza

**A billet in the regimental rest area at Faenza**



Sergeant-Major N. J. Stewart has a bath while in the  
gunline at the Senio

**Sergeant-Major N. J. Stewart has a bath while in the gunline at the Senio**

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<sup>1</sup> Lt A. R. Monson; Greymouth; born Nelson, 9 Dec 1920; clerk.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col R. R. T. Young, DSO; Richmond, England; born Wellington, 25 Jun 1902; oil company executive; CO School of Instruction Feb-Apr 1943; 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1943-Jul 1944, Aug-Nov 1944; wounded 26 Dec 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Maj-Gen K. L. Stewart, CB, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US); Kerikeri; born Timaru, 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; 1 NZEF 1917-19; GSO 1 2 NZ Div 1940-41; Deputy Chief of General Staff Dec 1941-Jul 1943; comd 5 Bde Aug-Nov 1943, 4 Armd Bde Nov 1943-Mar 1944, and 5 Bde Mar-Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944; comd 9 Bde ( 2 NZEF, Japan) Nov 1945-Jul 1946; Adjutant-General, NZ Military Forces, Aug 1946-Mar 1949; Chief of General Staff Apr 1949-Mar 1952.

<sup>4</sup> Sgt I. H. Hercus; born NZ, 31 Jan 1916; school-teacher; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Brig I. L. Bonifant, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; Gisborne; born Ashburton, 3 Mar 1912; CO 25 Bn Sep 1942-Jan 1943; Div Cav Jan 1943-Apr 1944; comd 6 Bde 3-27 Mar 1944; 5 Bde Jan-May 1945; 6 Bde Jun-Oct 1945.

<sup>6</sup> Maj D. Carey, m.i.d.; Huntly; born Hamilton, 5 Aug 1916; beekeeper; twice wounded.

<sup>7</sup> Capt P. G. Brown; Wellington; born Wellington, 14 Jul 1921; shepherd; wounded 18 Mar 1944.

<sup>8</sup> Sgt W. Tombs, MM; born NZ 7 Sep 1919; labourer; twice wounded; killed in action 8 May 1944.

<sup>9</sup> Capt J. G. Furness, MC; Blenheim; born Blenheim, 9 May 1915; reporter.

<sup>10</sup> Sgt W. N. Forbes, MM; Silverstream; born Wellington, 14 Jan 1919; painter; wounded 4 Jul 1942.

<sup>11</sup> Capt R. N. Griggs, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Wellington, 12 Dec 1917; mercer; wounded 28 Jul 1944; now Regular soldier.

<sup>12</sup> Capt F. M. Milne, MM; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 21 Nov 1918; shoe examiner.

<sup>13</sup> Cpl G. R. Hubbard; born Whangarei, 23 Sep 1918; rubber-mill hand; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Cpl G. M. Orr; Rongotea; born NZ, 18 Jul 1914; grocery manager; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped; returned to Egypt Jun 1942.

<sup>15</sup> Tpr M. L. Cooney; Christchurch; born NZ, 1 Jul 1918 farmhand; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

<sup>16</sup> Tpr W. G. Gasson; born Christchurch, 28 Mar 1915; carpenter and joiner; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Lt G. Ryder, MM; Motueka; born Motueka, 4 Oct 1920; grocer.

<sup>18</sup> Capt R. C. McCown, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Jul 1919; farm manager; wounded 15 Aug 1944.

<sup>19</sup> WO I M. McRae, DCM; Rotorua; born Rotorua, 22 Feb 1907; engineer's assistant; wounded 23 May 1944.

<sup>20</sup> Lt-Col G. H. Stace, Order of the Phoenix Silver Cross (Greek); Omaka, Blenheim; born Blenheim, 26 Apr 1912; farmer; 2 i/c 2 NZ Div Cav 28 Jan-18 Apr 1944; CO Div Cav 4-27 Mar 1944.

<sup>21</sup> Tpr P. J. Priest; Pleasant Point, Timaru; born NZ 17 May 1910; agricultural contractor; wounded 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>22</sup> Sgt C. J. Stark; born England, 19 Aug 1915; salesman; twice wounded.

<sup>23</sup> Tpr J. W. Thomson; born Scotland, 26 Jun 1912; truck driver; died of wounds 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>24</sup> Tpr M. Webster; born Christchurch, 24 Jun 1919; clerk; wounded 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>25</sup> Maj G. O. Wiles; Auckland; born Auckland, 31 Aug 1919; clerk; squadron commander 19 Armd Regt 1945; wounded 18 Mar 1944.

<sup>26</sup> Lt-Col J. R. J. Connolly, m.i.d.; Ashburton; born NZ, 13 Aug 1910; petrol serviceman; CO 23 Bn Apr-May 1943, 1944; twice wounded.

<sup>27</sup> Lt-Col H. M. McElroy, DSO and bar, ED; Auckland; born Timaru, 2 Dec 1910; public accountant; CO 21 Bn Jun 1943-Jun 1944; wounded four times.

<sup>28</sup> Lt R. H. Glendining; born Wairoa, 16 Jan 1912; farmer; killed in action 15 May 1944.

<sup>29</sup> Lt J. M. Milliken; Temuka; born Timaru, 6 Aug 1912; commercial traveller.

<sup>30</sup> Sgt I. D. S. Munro; Auckland; born Wellington, 7 Jul 1916; customs and shipping clerk.

<sup>31</sup> Sgt T. G. Sargent, MM; Featherston; born Woodville, 30 Apr 1911; labourer.

<sup>32</sup> Cpl D. H. Byrne; Lower Hutt; born NZ, 18 Oct 1914; mechanic.

<sup>33</sup> L-Cpl J. H. Walden; Stokes Valley; born Wellington, 2 Nov 1916; welder.

<sup>34</sup> L-Cpl E. A. Fitzpatrick; born Dunedin, 13 Aug 1922; storeman.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

**CHAPTER 20 – THE BREAK-OUT INTO THE LIRI VALLEY**

## CHAPTER 20

### *The Break-out Into the Liri Valley*

O there was horsing, horsing in haste  
and cracking of whips out o'er the lee.

—Border Ballad

Once back in the dispersal area at windy, desolate **Mignano**, **19 Regiment** set to work to smooth out the dints suffered by all departments during the two weeks' hammering in **Cassino**. The winter weather and the battle had both been severe, and in the unit there was much to attend to, physically and mechanically. The past two months had been tough for man and vehicle, but as crews, troops and squadrons settled down to the routine of living and working together under quiet if not too comfortable conditions, the necessary overhauls, tackled with a will, were speedily accomplished.

The bright spring weather in the first week in April was as welcome in the daytime as was the undisturbed sleep at night. Duties were many, but there were many men to share them. Leave parties to **Naples**, where **Vesuvius** had blown its head off as the **Cassino** attack petered out, shuttled back and forth on a rotation quota, generous enough to give everyone a chance. Those men most in need of a completely free spell were sent off in batches for a week at the divisional rest camp.

In the frequent natter sessions the war quickly took second place, for during the Easter weekend fourteen original **19 Battalion** men marched in on return from ten months' furlough in New Zealand. Though their eagerly sought personal accounts of what was happening back home showed no degree of unanimity, they were welcome visitors individually or collectively at any gathering. Never was any band of lecturers given a more attentive hearing. **Brigadier Inglis**, who had just resumed command of **4 Armoured Brigade**, had already whetted all appetites for news from New Zealand when, the week before, he had given a breezy, informal chat on his own impressions.

Officially the **Cassino** battle was far from forgotten, and Regimental Headquarters was busy compiling the full report it was required to furnish on the

19th's activities during the operation. This report was of its kind historic. The high level to which it was delivered was evidence of its importance, as was the fact that the CO was required by the Army Commander to fly to [Egypt](#) to add his personal account.

The regiment's part had been a pioneering one for armour, and its experiences in operating over a built-up area which had been wrecked by heavy bombing could well be the basis for determining future Allied strategy. The careful work done by the 'I' section on radio interception during the battle now proved to be of immense importance, and [19 Regiment's](#) radio log became the most valuable document available for the accurate reconstruction of the events under examination.

Evidence that the work done by the unit was officially appreciated was in the list of immediate awards. The twelve who received decorations were: the CO, Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin, DSO; OC A Squadron, Major Thodey, DSO; OC No. 4 Troop, Lieutenant Furness, MC; OC No. 1 Troop, Lieutenant Morrin, MC; OC No. 2 Troop, Lieutenant Beswick, MC; Sergeant Sargent, MM; Sergeant Milne, MM; Sergeant [Churton](#), <sup>1</sup> MM; Lance-Sergeant Forbes, MM; Corporal Ryder, MM; Trooper [McCulloch](#), <sup>2</sup> MM; and Trooper [Hislop](#), <sup>3</sup> MM.

It was 14 April before the regiment was required to undertake another active role. On that date it was assigned to an indirect fire task in support of 21 Indian Infantry Brigade from the Trocchio feature. This task was taken over from 18 Regiment by C Squadron ( [Major Parata](#) ), which remained in this position until 18 April, fired a total of 581 rounds and had some good shooting. On the night of 18–19 April C Squadron was relieved by B Squadron (Major [Wakelin](#) <sup>4</sup> ), which maintained the same programme, engaging with success a variety of targets and getting in some interesting practice in indirect fire. On the night of 22–23 April nine of the tanks were moved forward to the [Terelle](#) area in support of 11 Canadian Brigade. The remainder of the squadron's tanks went back to the regiment with drivers only. The three officers and twenty-five other ranks remaining were required to take over seven Canadian tanks sited on the Monte [Cairo- Terelle](#) route in a defensive role as road blocks. Of the tanks taken over only three were runners.

On the 24th the unit (less nine of B Squadron's tanks and extra crews) began to move to [Pietramelara](#). As the regiment's tanks pulled out their places were taken

one by one by rubber dummies manufactured by a British camouflage unit and inflated on the spot. Before dawn the changeover was complete and by mid-afternoon the 19th was re-established in a bivouac area among fertile farmlets in an almost arcadian setting.

In these lovely surroundings the unit was to enjoy a programme of almost three weeks' interesting but not too tough training, a full and varied round of sport and entertainment, and a happy liaison with other units and with the friendly Italian farming folk, collectively the most pleasant members of their race yet encountered.

B Squadron, in the [Terelle](#) area, had its headquarters and No. 5 Troop ( [Lieutenant 'Opie' Barnett](#) <sup>5</sup>) and No. 7 Troop ( [Second-Lieutenant Jock McPhail](#)) located near the [Hove Dump](#). The role of this part of the squadron was that of forming a firm base for the South African infantry in the sector and of being in readiness to counter-attack should the enemy put in a thrust down the valley.

No. 6 Troop (Lieutenant Glendining) and No. 8 Troop ( [Second-Lieutenant Mac Opie](#)), under Captain Carey, the second captain for B Squadron, took over the seven Canadian tanks previously mentioned. These tanks, in their road-block role, were sited along the roadway on the S bend just short of the crest of [Terelle](#) peak. They had been taken up by Canadian crews, left there, and manned in succession by various armoured units.

The area was most unhealthy, for the roadway was under full observation and movement was possible only during darkness. The Maori Battalion also had some mortars sited near the tank positions, and there was a constant duel between these and the German mortars and artillery. The tanks themselves were built into the side of the road with stone sangars, and from their positions there was nothing to see or to shoot at. The 19th Regiment's crews, however, found plenty to do.

All the tanks were in a bad state through lack of maintenance, but in three days all had been fuelled, fully overhauled and polished up. Two flying fitters from the squadron assisted the crews to get the four non-runners in going order, and work went on despite shelling. That tough soldier, Trooper [Gifford](#), <sup>6</sup> did a grand job bringing up the fuel. He made many solo trips with jeep and trailer through [Cairo](#) village—a real hot spot—and up the steep roadway to the tanks with a full load of

four-gallon cans. His return trips with the empties made enough noise to wake the whole of the [Gustav Line](#) and invariably brought down a hail of shells on the roadway.

The nights were always noisy, for 5 Brigade, in the southern sector of the [Terelle](#) line, was keeping the enemy needled up by aggressive patrolling and raids. The tank crews, hoping for a less static job, kept their vehicles in fighting trim and arranged protection so that they could be got out with the minimum of delay. On 2 May an attack with flame-throwers on [21 Battalion](#)'s area alerted every man, but by daylight the position was restored and the tanks stood down once more. Tank commanders and crews all visited the various observation posts on the crest and returned to their tanks chagrined by the tempting targets they had seen and could have shot up if they had been permitted to move their tanks.

On 3 May they got their one offensive assignment when a tank commanded by [Second-Lieutenant Opie](#) was trundled up the hill, round a hairpin bend at the top, and into position to deal with a cave on which our artillery, owing to the angle of the entrance, could make no impression. In nine minutes (there were five stops to allow the smoke and dust to clear) a total of sixty-two rounds—nineteen armour-piercing high-explosive, four armour-piercing and thirty-nine high-explosive—were pumped into this previously snug strongpoint. This tricky and risky task was done in daylight and it naturally roused the resentment of the opposing artillery.

The tank could not be turned round for the return journey and had to back over the crest and down the road. With a drop of some 250 feet on the left-hand side, the hairpin bend required careful negotiating. [Mac Opie](#), directing his driver over the inter-communication, got to the critical turn and ordered: 'Right stick!'—no response, and the tank continued to back towards the drop. 'Right stick!'—still nothing happened. 'Right stick, right stick, driver!' By this time the rear-end left track was in mid-air. The tank commander shot out of the turret like a rocketing pheasant, smote the driver on the skull, and yelled 'STOP'!

The subsequent proceedings involved directing the driver forward on to firm ground again and then, by gesticulation and word of mouth, indicating the movements required to get round the corner and down the hill. The performance had few onlookers, but it was well worth witnessing, for [Opie](#) was in Olympic class as a

plain or fancy curser, and the failure of the tank wireless during so delicate an operation under fire gave him adequate cause. The obliteration of the cave and the successful return of the tank despite enemy shelling and the failure of the inter-communication were both excellent performances, and are still recounted with glee by the few men who took part.

On 8 May B Squadron came home, having been relieved in both positions by 18 Regiment. By this time at Pietramelara the full range of regimental amenities were functioning for the comfort and enjoyment of all ranks. The YMCA recreation tent, with its library, radio, and purchasing organisation, plus the always available tea and biscuits, provided off-duty relaxation for all but its genial sponsor, [Les Charters](#).<sup>7</sup> An ENSA party and a mobile cinema turned on highly appreciated evening entertainment. But perhaps the most successful show of all was the regimental 'at home' held on 10 May and attended by some 200 other ranks from divisional units. A dinner and a concert—at which 4 Armoured Brigade Band co-operated—were the set pieces of the evening. Guests and hosts alike enjoyed themselves thoroughly and the function was exuberantly successful.

Other notable events during the [Pietramelara](#) period were the GOC's parade at which the [Cassino](#) awards were presented—a proud day for the regiment, and especially for A Squadron, which had gained nine of the twelve decorations which came to the 19th. This parade was remarkable also for a rare slip by [Brigadier Inglis](#) who, while his troops were at the 'Present', gave the command 'Order Arms!' The resulting confusion would have delighted the cartoonist Bateman.

Back in the unit area celebrations were held to commemorate the regiment's honours. A Squadron's officers' 'do', however, was marred by the action of a misguided humorist—not a 19th man—who, when the party was well warmed up, tossed several small German smoke canisters into the tent. Lieutenant Jan Suter sustained nasty burns while attempting to remove them.

Sports days held in bright, warm weather combined strenuous competition with picnic relaxation, and, a certain indication of a change of season, battle dress was changed for summer uniform. A large New Zealand mail, letters and parcels, added further to the regiment's satisfaction with life in general.

The winter weather was at last over, and with the change of season came inevitably a change in the Allies' tactics. Attack was now to replace defence, and a full-scale advance of both armies from coast to coast was planned. By 11 May preparations were complete and the offensive against the [Gustav Line](#) was due to reopen. The plan for this operation involved a two-corps attack. The 2nd Polish Corps (Lieutenant-General W. Anders) was to isolate [Monastery Hill](#) and [Cassino](#) from the north-west and join up with [13 Corps](#) (Lieutenant-General S. C. Kirkman), whose task was to secure a bridgehead over the Rapido between the town and the [Liri](#) and isolate [Cassino](#) from the west by cutting Route 6.

The [2nd NZ Division](#), with [5 Infantry Brigade](#) in a defensive position in the [Terelle](#) sector, and 4 Armoured and 6 Infantry Brigades resting, now formed part of 10 Corps, which had a holding role on the right flank. The Division was not expected to have any early commitments. Two days later, however, [19 Regiment](#) was once more moving into action.

On 13 May, at 8 p.m., the regiment received an unexpected warning order to be ready to move at short notice. At 9 p.m. the evening picture show was interrupted and the audience hurriedly recalled to reality from the celluloid fantasy of 'The Man in Grey', and in a few minutes began hastily to pack up. At that hour the unexpected warning order had already been altered and the action time put forward by seven hours. The regiment was now required to move at 1 a.m. to form a firm base for [4 British Division](#) (Major-General A. D. Ward), which as part of [13 Corps](#) was to resume the attack on [Cassino](#) on the night of 14–15 May.

The second-in-command (Major Thodey) immediately left for Headquarters [13 Corps](#) for instructions and details and, while packing up was proceeding, the CO called his orders group together. It was now 10.30 p.m. The Brigade Commander ([Brigadier Inglis](#)) arrived for the conference and gave the general plan, which was:

- ( That [19 Regiment](#) would move to the Porchia area at 1 a.m., but would NOT be a) required to cross the Rapido until noon.
- ( That the regiment (less one squadron) would come under the command of 10 b) Brigade. One squadron was to come under the command of 12 Brigade. The task was to support these British brigades in enveloping [Cassino](#) and Route 6 from the south.

The CO then issued the following orders:



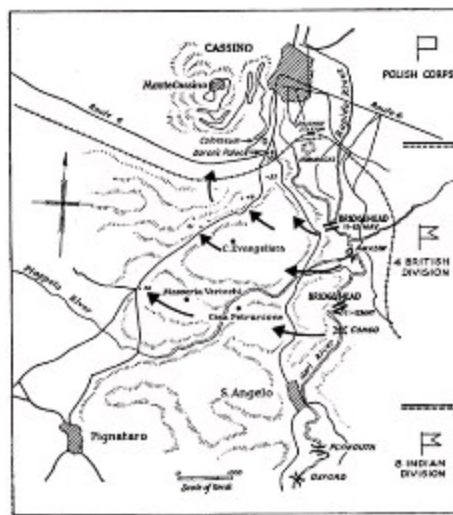
1. Tanks, A1 Echelon, plus necessary petrol, oil and lubricant vehicles were to cross the start line at [Pietramelara](#) at 1 a.m. and proceed to the vicinity of Porchia.
2. The Adjutant was to follow later in the morning with essential vehicles, including 'I' section and Regimental Headquarters' office, RAP, etc.
3. B1 Echelon, under Captain [Dawson](#),<sup>8</sup> was to proceed to Porchia at 11 a.m. and B2 Echelon to remain in the present regimental area until further notice.

The 'I' officer now left for Brigade Headquarters to mark up all maps, pick up reference codes, and gather all possible information before rejoining the tanks in the Porchia lying-up area. In stygian blackness, precisely at 1 a.m. on 14 May, the tanks rumbled forward to begin their 30-odd mile move across country that had not been reconnoitred.

While the tanks were tackling this tricky forward journey, the second-in-command at Headquarters [4 British Division](#) had had further startling instructions. These were to the effect that the 19th would not go into a laager area at Porchia but would be required to go across the river and straight into the front line. On the grounds that the tanks could hardly be expected to make a hurried dash of thirty to forty miles at night across unknown country and then go immediately into action, Major Thodey protested. He was overruled by the British GOC and GSO 1 and instructed to inform the CO that the plan would stand; but they added, 'We can imagine no conceivable circumstances whatever that will necessitate any immediate further move by the tanks once they reach their action locations across the Rapido River'—an over-optimistic forecast, as later events would show.

At the Porchia turn-off the guides arranged by the second-in-command now waited for the regiment's arrival. It was still dark when the head of the column, with the CO's tank leading, loomed into view. Despite the pitch-black night, all but two tanks—a Sherman and a Honey which took tosses over steep banks—made it successfully, and by 5.45 a.m. were refuelling in the lying-up area. Promptly at dawn the forward move began again.

This sudden pack-up and successful night move was a superb performance and a convincing demonstration of the high degree of efficiency attained by all sections of the unit.



4 British Division's operations, 11-18 May 1944. The bridges over the Gari River are given their code-names

#### **4 British Division's operations, 11–18 May 1944. The bridges over the Gari River are given their code-names**

Never were the spirits of the regiment higher, and those who took part in the move to the [Liri](#) valley and in the actions which followed it have every reason to be proud of what many well-experienced 19th men regard as the highlight of their armoured service. Organisation, skill, and stamina were called for; the regiment proved that it could produce all three.

The 4th British Division, on the right of [13 Corps'](#) attack, had by this time crossed the Gari in assault boats. On the night of 11–12 May it had won a shallow bridgehead after solid fighting, and since then had been subjected to fierce enemy fire and had had heavy casualties. On the whole of [13 Corps'](#) sector first-day results had been disappointing, and by the evening of 12 May only about half of the first objectives (which it had been expected would have been captured by first light) were in our hands. On the 13th the depleted brigades made some further gains, while the Royal Engineers worked on the vital bridges across the Gari and the Rapido so that the sector could be reinforced and the bridgehead enlarged.

C Squadron ( [Major Parata](#) ) was first over the Gari. At 7.45 a.m. it crossed [AMAZON](#), the Bailey bridge south of [Cassino](#), and took up positions in support of 2 Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, which was in a reserve and counter-attack role. B Squadron (Major Wakelin) followed and had two troops over when it was recalled. Later in the day this squadron crossed the [CONGO](#) bridge and moved up with 2/4 West Hampshire Regiment, which was to put in a local attack that evening.

A Squadron (Captain [Scotland](#)<sup>9</sup>) crossed AMAZON bridge at 10 a.m. and then lay up awaiting instructions. Regimental Tactical Headquarters, with Regimental Headquarters' tanks, was ordered to the south-eastern side of Trocchio, close to the grouped headquarters of 10, 12 and 28 Brigades of [4 Division](#). At noon, with the regiment all in position, the CO went forward, visiting each squadron headquarters in turn.

Though all set for action, the unit still lacked the reference codes for the front on which it was to operate and the wireless call signs and frequencies of the units with which it was to co-operate. These had not been available at Porchia, and the omission made the situation most uncomfortable, especially as the regiment, already well split up, was almost immediately required to undertake further commitments. It was evident that squadrons could expect little time for checks and maintenance before going into battle.

Shortly before 2.30 p.m. (during the CO's absence) the commander 10 Brigade called at Tactical Headquarters and instructed that two troops from A Squadron should move out to support 2 Duke of [Cornwall's](#) Light Infantry, which was expecting a counter-attack. In the absence of wireless communication, these orders were taken to Headquarters A Squadron by Captain [Saxton](#),<sup>10</sup> officer commanding Reconnaissance Troop.

This move now left two troops of A Squadron under the command of 28 Brigade, while Squadron Headquarters and the other two troops passed to 10 Brigade's command. The plan for [4 Division's](#) part in the offensive had already been outlined at a conference held at 11 a.m. Squadrons were all in position and ready to give armoured support to the infantry battalions with whom they were working. The battle order was as follows:

10 Brigade: 2 Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire,  $\frac{1}{6}$  East [Surrey](#), 2 Duke of [Cornwall's](#) Light Infantry.

12 Brigade: [2 Royal Fusiliers](#), 6 Black Watch, 2 Royal West Kent.

28 Brigade: 1 King's, 2 Somerset Light Infantry, 2/4 West Hampshire.

The main moves in the next phase of [4 Division's](#) advance were to be made on

the following day in conjunction with 78 Division, but the Divisional Commander considered it advisable to push forward immediately on the left flank and so conform with the dispositions of [8 Indian Division](#) on the western sector. This move immediately involved B Squadron.

In furtherance of the Divisional Commander's decision, 2/4 West Hampshire—the only battalion in 28 Brigade still with an effective fighting strength—was ordered to attack across the Pioppelo River and take Masseria Vertechi. The operation began at 6 p.m. For the tanks it involved crossing the Pioppelo on a scissors bridge which was in poor shape, having been hit during the day. It collapsed when the tank of OC No. 6 Troop (Second-Lieutenant [Bramwell](#) <sup>11</sup>) was halfway over. This tank was tipped into the stream; the next tried to jump the eight-foot-wide gap, but just failed to make it; the third rolled over on to its side in the run-up on the opposite bank.

No. 8 Troop (Second-Lieutenant [O'Callaghan](#) <sup>12</sup>), going further down stream, tackled a temporary bridge constructed of green willow logs about four inches in diameter, plus a lot of lighter material. By a miracle three tanks got safely over this flimsy structure and reached the objective ahead of the infantry, despite bitter opposition from the defenders of the feature.

By 6.30 p.m. 2/4 West Hampshire Regiment had captured its objective and was consolidating. It was supported by fire from the tanks still on the near side of the river, while the troop on the objective gave all possible forward assistance. The attack was completely successful, though the infantry suffered a considerable number of casualties. One of the West Hampshire company commanders (Captain R. Wakeford), who was severely wounded, was awarded the VC for very gallant conduct during this operation.

Simultaneously with this attack 2 Royal West Kent Regiment (12 Brigade) struck down the road towards [Pignataro](#), but was held up by fire from Point 86.

During these engagements A and C Squadrons remained in their positions, but after last light the former squadron was moved to a harbour area. The movement attracted shelling and mortaring, and Sergeant [Buchan](#) <sup>13</sup> was killed and Second-Lieutenant Carmichael wounded.

On the night of 14–15 May a liaison officer visited all squadrons and distributed

marked maps and call and code signs required for working with 4 Division units. The wireless diagram was issued and the regimental net enabled full control to be maintained despite the scattered nature of 19 Regiment's commitments, involving dispositions along the whole of the divisional front. Immediate moves required B Squadron to support in hull-down positions 2 Royal Fusiliers, 6 Black Watch and 2 Royal West Kent Regiments. The reserve half of A Squadron was ordered to contact 3 Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, which was in divisional reserve, and to tie up a plan for co-operation should that battalion be used later in a counter-attack role. The position now was that the 19th, less one squadron and Regimental Headquarters, was under the command of 12 Brigade on the left of the line, while A Squadron remained under the command of 28 Brigade on the right.

Early on the morning of the 16th it became apparent that 78 Division's formations which were to pass through 4 Division during the night had not made the progress expected, and 2/4 West Hampshire's position on Masseria Vertechì was in the air. To secure this flank against any possible enemy counter-attack, two troops of B Squadron, under the command of Captain Carey, remained there in support, while Headquarters B Squadron with the other two troops moved to the forward company areas of 2 Royal Fusiliers on Colle Evangelista and worked with that battalion during the day. These B Squadron tanks destroyed one Ofenrohr gun and crew, and a strongpoint in a house from which machine guns and mortars had been causing trouble. Four machine-gun posts were also silenced.

Meanwhile the two troops with 2/4 West Hampshire Regiment moved south-westwards to assist 2 Royal West Kent in a further attack on Point 86, at the crossroads on the Pignataro road. The tanks advanced with the infantry and took up hull-down positions just south of the objective, where they were able to give supporting fire and assist the advance. Point 86, however, was not captured that day. During this attack one tank ran onto a minefield and was disabled, but another tank of the same troop (No. 7) secured an unexpected prize in an equally unexpected manner. The tank gunner, testing his coaxial guns, put a burst of Browning fire into a haystack. To his surprise the bullets ricocheted. He lost no time in following up with several rounds of 75-millimetre armour-piercing, whereupon the haystack brewed up, disclosing a German Mark IV tank.

The radio log records the incident as follows (names have been used instead of call signs):

Time	To	From	Message
1224	OC 7 Tp	OC Tk A	Comd Engaged haystack with co-ax. Ricochet noticed so put in AP. Appeared to be hornet by shape, burning now.
1232	OC 7 Tp	CO	Can you give us reference for vehicle you set on fire.
1232	CO	OC 7 Tp	No not at present but will get it.
1250	OC B Sqn	2nd Capt B Sqn	CO of Inf has message for you (CO of RWK speaks). I think that was rather grand. Thank you so much for your help. Have you any further commitment? I understand you want to get away.
1250	CO RWK HQ HQ B Sqn	B Sqn Sqn CO RWK	Comd away at moment. Back in few minutes. Will you wait? Yes I will.
1300	OC B Sqn	CO RWK	I thought that went magnificently. Thank you ever so much. Have you another commitment?
	CO RWK	OC B Sqn	Yes I think so but will call my CO. Have you finished with us?
1305	OC B Sqn	CO 19 Regt	Good show. Carry on with original instructions and go to allocated position.
1305	OC B Sqn	CO RWK	I will inform my people that you are leaving us.

Later in the day Squadron Headquarters and two troops moved again, this time to support 6 Black Watch close to the [Pignataro](#) road. They engaged targets to good effect and late in the afternoon the whole squadron withdrew to a harbour area at Casa Petrarcone, being shot at en route by an anti-tank gun but fortunately without loss. The tally for the 15th was one tank, one mobile pillbox, one self-propelled gun, one ammunition dump blown up, several machine-gun posts destroyed, and some prisoners. The squadron had the misfortune, however, to lose its second captain, Lieutenant Glendining, who was killed while reconnoitring on foot to contact the infantry. Two officers, Joe Carmichael and Jack [Stewart](#),<sup>14</sup> were wounded during the

operations.

A and C Squadrons stood by all day in readiness to assist the infantry, who were expecting the enemy to counter-attack at dawn. Despite a heavy ground mist, which reduced visibility in the morning to almost nil, these expected attacks did not eventuate, and by 10 a.m. the front, except for shelling and mortaring, was quiet. That night (the 15th-16th) C Squadron remained forward to guard a gap between 2 [Royal Fusiliers](#) and 6 Black Watch. The regiment at this stage had forty-seven runners.

On the 16th B and C Squadrons co-operated with the infantry in a general attack across the [Pignataro](#) road to reduce an enemy salient which divided 10 and 12 Brigades. The 2nd Royal West Kent Regiment, with B Squadron in support, had Point 61 as its objective, while 2 Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, on the right with C Squadron in support, was to capture Point 49. The attack, which was to have been preceded by artillery concentrations, was several times postponed and was not finally mounted until 6.30 p.m. As an opening to the attack, the artillery appeared to fire only four rounds. In the Royal West Kent area the enemy disconcertingly chose this same hour to attack, but the English battalion made good progress until nightfall. The failing light and the infantry's inability to make the best use of their No. 38 wireless sets resulted in confusion and halted their advance. Small-arms and defensive fire from machine-gun posts which had been overrun by the tanks caused the infantry many casualties. The tanks spent much time trying to determine the exact dispositions of the Royal West Kent companies in the hope that they could be assisted forward to consolidate the ground already won. Total darkness at last made any further advance impossible, and at 8.15 p.m. B Squadron's tanks were ordered to withdraw and remain in close support behind the few surviving infantry. These Tommies earned the admiration of the tank crews; for sheer guts and unhesitating obedience to orders they were outstanding. The battalion started the attack woefully under strength. Two of the company commanders were second-lieutenants and the other two were sergeants. Already they had done four days' hard fighting, but they went into this attack in true textbook style. In one spot the tank crews saw two sections lying dead, every man still in perfect alignment and properly spaced; each section had been struck by a heavy mortar bomb while advancing through a wheatfield. One company finished the attack with only nine men.

Two tanks were lost during this engagement, and both commanders, Second-Lieutenants [Bramwell](#) and O'Callaghan, were killed; seven other ranks were wounded. These tanks fell to daring German gunners who, lying concealed in the long grass, engaged them at close range with Ofenrohr anti-tank weapons. Evidence of the determined fighting by both sides was seen next morning when thirty-five German dead were counted in front of the foremost tanks of No. 5 Troop, and a total of 150—all killed by tank fire—in B Squadron's sector.

The 2nd Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, with C Squadron in support, made a rapid advance simultaneously with the above attack until it reached the line of the [Pignataro](#) road. Here the infantry was held up by fire from a house near Point 50. This strongpoint was disposed of by the tank guns, but resistance over the whole area became most determined, and there was a veritable hail of mortar and machine-gun fire, which caused very heavy casualties. Despite excellent co-operation between the infantry and armour, the left-hand company was forced to remain some 300 yards east of the road. The right-hand company was also badly hit, but managed to get further forward before it was pinned down. Both company commanders were wounded.

On the right flank Lieutenant Don Kerr (OC No. 12 Troop) took over and organised the defence of his area. Visibility was now bad and he sent out patrols from the tank crews to ascertain the position on the left and reported the situation back to Squadron Headquarters: the infantry was out of touch with its headquarters, and the tanks provided the only communication link forward. At dark it was obvious that any further attempt at progress would be costly, and the line was stabilised. Headquarters 10 Infantry Brigade instructed that the ground gained would be consolidated overnight, with the tanks remaining in close support.

Kerr's sterling work during this attack earned him the MC. His efforts were not only confined to organising defence; during the night he attended to the wounded, evacuated several on his tank, and returned with stretchers and formed bearer parties from the prisoners to take the rest back for medical attention.

Anti-tank fire from the south-west brought down an artillery 'stonk' during the night, and next morning it was discovered that a 75-millimetre concentration from No. 12 Troop on a house near Point 50 had destroyed an anti-tank gun. Thirty-two



prisoners from 1 Paratroop Machine-Gun Battalion were taken from this area, and a mass of gear was found lying around.

A Squadron spent a fairly quiet day on the 16th in support of 2 Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry and 2/4 West Hampshire Regiment. No. 4 Troop (Second-Lieutenant Adair <sup>15</sup>) had the only active task, that of destroying a machine-gun post in the vicinity of Point 50; this post had been harassing B Company Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry until it was successfully silenced by the troop.

That night patrols along the 4 Division's front saw little sign of the enemy and took a total of forty prisoners—all of them paratroops. It was clear that the presence of tanks in the attacks made at dusk and pushed on during early darkness had forced a general withdrawal of the German infantry forward positions.

That night at B Squadron Headquarters a tense and anxious group stood round the wireless. Sergeant John Churton's tank, of which there had been no news since the stage early in the attack when his troop commander's tank had been hit and brewed up, had suddenly come on the air. It was learned that it had a number of wounded aboard and was in charge of Trooper Lawson. <sup>16</sup> He was ordered to return to Squadron Headquarters immediately, and the query came back, 'Where is it?' The crew was completely lost. Flares were fired by Squadron Headquarters in the hope that they would be seen by the tank. Numerous fires burning all over the area and tracer flying about confused the issue, and the watchers in the tank did not spot the flares. The risky business of reversing the procedure was now tried, and as Squadron Headquarters had a general idea where the tank might be, the third flare was picked up. A bearing was quickly given by radio telephony and the journey home began, fresh flares being fired from time to time, until at last the tank was guided right in.

Lawson had done an outstanding job. He had taken charge after Churton had been wounded in the head while they were rescuing the survivors from Bramwell's tank. With four wounded men aboard and being attended to, the tank was hit on the hull by something heavy, and the second driver suffered concussion. Trooper Donald, <sup>17</sup> the driver, kept the tank moving towards the objective, leaning over from time to time to fire the hull gun to discourage any lurking enemy.

By the time the wounded were fixed up it was quite dark, and all on board had

lost any sense of direction. The tank was hopelessly lost in wooded country among olive groves and pines. From time to time it was fired at by small arms and bazookas, but the tank was kept moving and any target seen was engaged with the 75-millimetre and turret Browning guns. Bursts of fire could be heard on the wireless after Squadron Headquarters had been contacted and the tank commander let go a Very light and waited for further directions. Eight flares were fired altogether, and at 1 a.m. on the 17th the tank got back to the squadron. Since it had moved out at 6 p.m. it had fired over a hundred rounds of 75-millimetre and 7000 rounds of Browning.

All the able men in the crew had done a grand job, and the cool and efficient manner in which the difficult situation had been handled by Lawson won him the DCM. Other members of the crew were mentioned in despatches, and Sergeant Churton, who despite a nasty wound on the face and head had encouraged and heartened his crew from the floor of the turret, received a bar to his MM.

Just before dawn on 17 May there was a general scare along the front when it was reported that German tanks were moving in the vicinity of Point 55, and B and C Squadrons quickly dispersed to positions to meet the threat. A Squadron, still with the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry on the other flank, was warned to be ready to move over if this became necessary. Nothing was seen of the enemy tanks, however, and daylight found the front quiet, with some enemy infantry coming in tired and hungry to give themselves up.

At 10.35 the previous evening Headquarters Eighth Army had issued orders for 2 Polish Corps and 13 Corps to launch their concerted attack to isolate the German forces in Cassino. Seven o'clock on the morning of the 17th was named as the zero hour. The 78th Division at that hour began its advance to the 'Bedale Line', while 4 Division began a wheeling movement to cut Route 6 and the Poles attacked and took Colle Sant' Angelo ridge.

B Squadron was withdrawn at 6 a.m. for maintenance, and the CO left Tactical Headquarters to make the rounds of the squadron positions. During his absence 12 Brigade issued orders for B Squadron to return to the Royal West Kent sector, but after its hard fight the squadron was in no shape to furnish adequate support immediately. On being contacted the CO therefore sent forward No. 2 Troop of A

Squadron. This decision was confirmed by the commander of 12 Brigade, who met the commanding officers of [19 Regiment](#) and 1 Royal West Kent in the area.

At 7.15 a.m. Royal West Kent, with No. 2 Troop in support, then pushed on to its objective of the previous night. It passed the objective and advanced just forward of Route 6. Little opposition was met and when the infantry support weapons had come up the troop went back to A Squadron. At 7.45 a.m. C Squadron sent No. 11 Troop to cross Route 6. This troop advanced to Point 50 with only light opposition, and 2 Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire then moved to just south of Route 6 while No. 2 Troop of A Squadron (Lieutenant Griggs) went on with 2 Duke of [Cornwall's](#) Light Infantry to Point 55. Only light machine-gun fire was encountered on this advance and only four prisoners were taken.

The 19th Regiment's tanks were now at last on the general line of the final objective set for their attack through [Cassino](#), where they had seen so much bitter fighting two months before. There was great elation when, during the afternoon, it was learned that next day the regiment would once more provide tank support for the attack on [Cassino](#). This time they would go in from the south. The assault was to be mounted by 2 Duke of [Cornwall's](#) Light Infantry and 6 East Surrey at 10 a.m. on the 18th. During the wait that evening an enemy anti-tank gun was destroyed and a sniper accounted for by the forward troops, but otherwise everything was quiet; in keen anticipation of tomorrow's battle all stations signed off the air at 8 p.m. The tank crews stood down for a few hours' much needed sleep.

Plans for the attack on [Cassino](#) from the south were completed at a GOC's conference held at 9.30 p.m. Orders were given for one troop to support each battalion, with two troops each in reserve. A and C Squadrons were given the forward role, with B Squadron standing by until required.

At 11 p.m. the quiet night was shattered by an unexpected enemy air attack, during which the regimental area was bombed and strafed without damage. This proved to be the enemy's last fling. Early next morning reports were received that he was evacuating the town. A quick conference was held and the attack pushed forward at 9.30 a.m. Even while the units were getting into position prisoners began to drift in, and when the advance began there was no active defence. Except for mines, entry into the town was unimpeded, and by 11 a.m. [Cassino](#) had fallen.

Simultaneously, the Poles raised their red and white flag on the Monastery.

Cassino had fallen, the Gustav Line was broken, and the Canadian Corps went through to keep up the momentum of the attack and rush the Germans from the Hitler Line, their last organised barrier across the route to Rome.

It was a proud and elated regiment which heard the CO's message to Headquarters 4 NZ Armoured Brigade: 'Cassino in our hands. Poles in the Monastery. Regt in at the kill.' In the town itself the tanks passed the now silent but still sinister spots which had received so much attention in the previous attack. The Baron's Palace and the Amphitheatre, where there were several knocked-out Mark IV tanks, the Hotel des Roses and the Continental could all now be studied at close quarters. Major Parata and Lieutenant Kerr paid a quick visit to the bar of the Continental Hotel: it was not open for custom, but despite the battering the building had taken, parts of the interior were found to be remarkably well preserved.

The infantry was having a field day; mopping-up operations were going ahead rapidly, and the few remaining Germans in the town seemed only too glad to give themselves up. The place had been well booby-trapped, and these and mines caused many casualties. Great care had to be taken when investigating buildings, for the whole area was dangerous. Tank crews were warned not to forage among the ruins and especially not to touch any of the 19th's knocked-out tanks which were still in the town.

At 11 a.m. 10 Brigade Headquarters replied to the regiment's request for further orders with the signal: 'Am now able to release you, many thanks for excellent support.' The CO immediately gave orders for the tanks to find suitable positions, and for the crews to stand down and brew up pending orders to withdraw. During this period Brigadier Inglis arrived at Rear Headquarters and arranged to meet the CO at the AMAZON bridge over the Rapido, and 4 British Division gave permission for the regiment to withdraw to an area reserved for it south-west of Trocchio. Despite a slow move back through the congestion of traffic on Route 6, all vehicles were in the laager position in the vicinity of San Vittore by 7 p.m. The crews now stood down for a well-earned rest.

In its tour of duty with 4 Division 19 Regiment had taken part in some of the

toughest and bloodiest fighting it had experienced in [Italy](#). The enemy had stood his ground firmly and had had to be blasted out of his positions or killed still fighting in the open. Of the work done by the regiment, Major-General Ward, in a letter to the CO, wrote: 'I cannot thank you enough for the simply splendid way you and all your chaps supported us during the last few days and I am delighted that you were in at the end at [Cassino](#). All my soldiers are full of praise for your first class co-operation and I hope very much that we may fight together again some day. All the best of luck to you and your Regt.'

On 20 May the regiment began to make its way back to peaceful [Pietramelara](#), moving slowly through the great convoys of forward-moving traffic. In a last desperate attempt to delay the advance, the [Luftwaffe](#) sent over several air sorties to bomb Route 6. Though there were some near misses, the regiment came through unscathed, and at 7.30 a.m. on the 23rd the last tank got in to the rest area. As maintenance and refitting went on there was an atmosphere of solid satisfaction throughout the whole regiment, for all ranks were agreed that in the engagements just ended the unit for the first time in its armoured career had had the type of role for which it had been waiting. The five days' fighting in the [Liri](#) valley had proved that, given 'tankable' terrain, it could move fast, hit hard, and hit frequently.

On the 29th another move was made, this time to Sant' Elia, quite close to [Cassino](#) itself. Many men now took the opportunity to visit the bomb-wrecked town and to climb to the Monastery to see from the enemy's angle the grim battlefield on which both sides had lost so many lives. In the unit area, among the tangled vineyards and poppy-speckled fields, Padre John Somerville conducted a deeply moving memorial service to the men of the 19th who had fallen in the fighting at [Cassino](#) and in the [Liri](#) valley. Here, too, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Rt Hon Peter Fraser, clad in grey army jersey and leather jerkin, called on the unit, spoke informally on topics of interest, and answered questions. Among soldiers on service, politicians are apt to be graded to a somewhat lower scale than the enemy, but in speech and presence Mr Fraser struck so genuine a note that he left with many hearty handshakes and with more friends than critics.

Sant' Elia will long be remembered by those who, after the clash and clangour of the battle, found themselves gazing in safety towards the now silent, ruined [Cassino](#). On the still, humid, spring nights the quietness had an unearthly quality. The

menacing roar of the guns and the flashes and flares now gave place to the noiseless flickering of the fireflies, whose soft points of pale blue light pricked aimless patterns in the darkness; yet somehow it was an uneasy peace, for with the stench of unburied dead in the nostrils and with the twisted, shell-stripped olives standing like spectres in the fields, yesterday's battle could never be wholly forgotten.

Within a week of the fall of [Cassino](#) Fifth Army had linked up with the troops from [Anzio](#). The German Army was in retreat, the pursuit was on, and the fall of Rome was not many days away. The 19th's sister regiments had now taken up the chase. On the 25th 18 Regiment, under the command of [8 Indian Division](#), began to advance up the [Liri](#) valley, and on the 29th 20 Regiment, supporting 5 and 6 New Zealand Brigades, began the move from the upper Rapido. It was 1 June before the 19th went forward to join up with the Division in an operational role once more.

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<sup>1</sup> [Sgt J. W. Churton](#), MM and bar; Hokitika; born [Wanganui](#), 25 May 1914; storekeeper; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> [Tpr W. McCulloch](#), MM; [Kaitaia](#); born NZ, 14 Jun 1914; shop assistant.

<sup>3</sup> [Tpr D. T. Hislop](#), MM; [Palmerston North](#); born [Waipukurau](#), 7 Mar 1919; commercial traveller.

<sup>4</sup> [Lt-Col B. H. Wakelin](#), m.i.d.; Rangiora; born NZ, 16 Jul 1912; school-teacher; squadron commander [19 Armd Regt](#) Mar-Nov 1944; CO NZAC Trg Depot May-Aug 1945.

<sup>5</sup> [Capt O. P. Barnett](#); Hastings; born [Tauranga](#), 2 Dec 1911; mercer.

<sup>6</sup> [Tpr A. A. Gifford](#); [Morrinsville](#); born [Morrinsville](#), 18 Feb 1920; shepherd; wounded 15 Apr 1945.

<sup>7</sup> [Mr L. R. Charters](#); [Tauranga](#); born NZ, 2 Feb 1916; [YMCA](#) secretary.

<sup>8</sup> Capt E. V. Dawson; Wellington; born Wellington, 3 Jul 1914; architectural draughtsman; wounded Jun 1942.

<sup>9</sup> Maj E. J. Scotland, ED; Otumoetai, Tauranga; born Wellington, 28 Feb 1910; master stevedore; squadron commander 19 Armd Regt Apr-Oct 1944; 2 i/c 19 Armd Regt Jun-Oct 1945.

<sup>10</sup> Maj C. K. Saxton, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Kurow, 23 May 1913; commercial traveller.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Lt N. W. Bramwell; born Feilding, 21 Dec 1906; grocer; killed in action 16 May 1944.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Lt R. J. O'Callaghan; born Masterton, 2 Jan 1917; clerk; killed in action 16 May 1944.

<sup>13</sup> Sgt A. W. Buchan; born NZ, 12 Sep 1917; labourer; killed in action 14 May 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Lt J. C. Stewart; Tikokino; born NZ, 12 Oct 1916; grocer; wounded 15 May 1944.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Lt W. H. Adair; born NZ, 10 Oct 1914; farmer; died of wounds 3 Aug 1944.

<sup>16</sup> Cpl S. E. Lawson, DCM; Christchurch; born Dunedin, 30 Oct 1918; plumber's apprentice.

<sup>17</sup> L-Cpl G. L. A. Donald; Takapau; born Tolaga Bay, 9 Feb 1914; farmer.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT



## CHAPTER 21 – ROME AND THE PURSUIT NORTH

## CHAPTER 21

### *Rome and the Pursuit North*

So Rome fell to the Allied armies in [Italy](#), two days before the Anglo-American invasion was launched against the shores of [Normandy](#). It was but the latest of many captures of Rome in History, but it was the first time since Belisarius captured it fourteen centuries ago that the Eternal City had been taken by an invading army from the South.

—Field-Marshal Alexander's Despatch

June opened auspiciously: on the 4th Rome fell and on the 6th the Allies landed in [Normandy](#). The Mediterranean theatre was now less important, but some bitter battles lay ahead. Although the German armies in [Italy](#) now faced a numerically smaller opposition, the quality of the Allied arms kept all their formations fully engaged right up to the end of hostilities and forced the German High Command to reinforce them at a time when it was sorely pressed elsewhere in [Europe](#).

After the breakthrough into the [Liri valley](#) [2 NZ Division](#) began to move northwards with the rest of the pursuing forces. In the last days of May 18 and 20 Armoured Regiments took their share of the spearhead actions, but the 19th, busy refitting, did not leave the now peaceful backwater behind [Cassino](#) until 1 June when, with the task of protecting the right flank of the divisional advance towards [Avezzano](#), it began to move forward again.

The main attack by this time was well past [Sora](#), and the move up the [Belmonte- Atina](#) valley was made under a dense pall of choking dust stirred up by endless convoys of vehicles pushing onward in fast pursuit. In the vicinity of [Alvito](#) the first active opposition was encountered. The regimental area was sharply 'stonked' for fifteen minutes by light-calibre guns. Beyond some slight damage to several vehicles, there were no serious results, and the following morning (2 June) A Squadron formed a gunline to support [12 Lancers](#), which was attacking a ridge behind [San Donato](#). The tanks, commanded by Captain [Ellingham](#),<sup>1</sup> engaged suspected enemy positions and took on a self-propelled gun during the three days' operations. Captain Morrin acted as observation-post officer with Headquarters [12 Lancers](#) at San Donato.

The plum for this period of service fell to a force commanded by Captain Saxton consisting of the Reconnaissance Troop, one platoon of infantry from 22 (Motor) Battalion, and No. 4 Troop from A Squadron. Its task was to seek out the enemy's forward positions and ascertain if the Valle di Rio would be suitable for tanks if chosen as a future axis of advance. Saxton Force moved from [Alvito](#) on the 3rd and spent two interesting days on this assignment. The enemy was known to be thinning out and, though the small force was once engaged at long range by his guns, it did not make contact with the retreating foe but must have been hot on his heels.

As it moved up the valley and through the small agricultural settlements, Saxton Force was greeted by the Italian villagers as liberators and given an enthusiastic welcome. There were many amusing incidents, and the hospitality offered was so profuse that at times the situation became embarrassing. This was the 19th's first experience of what in the closing stages of the campaign became a regular feature.

Sunday, 4 June, began a week rich in controversial chatter. The long-discussed and vexing question—the end of the war—at last seemed in sight of being resolved. The regiment, not employed on operations and cooped up in bivvies and temporary billets by daily drenching thunderstorms, received the stirring intelligence that Rome had fallen. Then, two days later, while the excitement was still simmering, it heard news of the opening of the Second Front. Every radio was now permanently tuned to the [BBC](#), and the opening bars of the signature tune for the news bulletins were the signal for groups to assemble ready to applaud and discuss the latest communique. It was not long before the lively strains of the traditional British Army march 'Liliburlero' caught on, and soon this bright [BBC](#) revival almost ousted that tearful, war-torn lament, 'Lili Marlene'. The change was long overdue.

During this slack period full opportunity was taken to practise and improve co-operation between infantry and armour. The 19th Regiment and 5 Brigade units began a series of exercises which lasted throughout the month. The first exercise, happily given the code-name KORERO, was undertaken with [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#); in it theories developed during the hard fighting on the [Gustav Line](#) were put to the test of practical demonstration, and the work of those taking part was under the critical appraisal of experts from both arms. Conferences held after each performance fully examined both the method and the execution of each task, and

discussion brought to light many valuable suggestions which were tried out in the following exercises. This training was to prove of considerable worth, for as later operations were to show, close co-operation between infantry and armour was to achieve successes which left no doubt about the high degree of efficiency attained.

While the New Zealand units were training and re-equipping, the Allied advance in [Italy](#) was still pressing onwards; [2 NZ Division](#) was now left well behind. On 12 June orders were received for [19 Regiment](#) to move to a rest and training area in the vicinity of [Arce](#), where it was expected all New Zealand units would be concentrated for approximately one month. The tanks left by transporter the same day, and the rest of the regiment followed by road on the 13th.

The new area was ideal for recreation and training, and a full programme of tactical exercises, sport, and general physical limbering-up was quickly got under way. While the regiment was moving in, the Italian farmers feverishly harvested the growing crops from the surrounding fields which would shortly be churned up by tank tracks and hobnailed boots, and from garden plots which would most certainly suffer from the depredations of foraging parties in search of something fresh and succulent to supplement their rations.

Mid-June to mid-July was spent in this area. [Arce](#) and [Fontana Liri](#) were the chief townships. The fine, warm weather, and the many excellent swimming spots available, made the stay extremely pleasant; regimental, brigade and divisional sports meetings were held, and these competitive games, in addition to the stimulating and challenging tactical training, soon had every soldier on his toes. All types of operational workouts proved men, weapons and vehicles, and gave units the chance to achieve that cohesive quality which is only attained by hard practice out of the line—a time when easy comfort might well be expected.

Inspections of captured enemy equipment (including tanks), a visit to the [Cassino](#) and [Liri](#) valley battlegrounds, and many happy social occasions within and between units were highlights; but the brightest event of all for those who were fortunate enough to get there was leave to Rome. This began on 18 June and naturally was a privilege greatly sought after and much appreciated. [Cairo](#), [Athens](#), and now Rome—an impressive grand tour when viewed in retrospect. Of them all, Rome will always remain the most satisfying, for in addition to its fame and its rich

attractions, its occupation by the Allied forces was the most convincing evidence of the success of our arms yet experienced by our troops, some of whom had had almost five years' active service to look back on. To visit the Eternal City was to experience in some small measure the triumph of conquest.

As in [Cairo](#) and in [Bari](#), the New Zealanders on leave were well catered for, and as usual the facilities they enjoyed were the envy of the soldiers of many nations. The sumptuous hotel Quirinale, in the centre of the city, became the [New Zealand Club](#). Until the close of the campaign it was to remain the doyen of the several outstanding leave centres arranged for New Zealand troops in [Italy](#).

While at [Arce 19 Regiment](#) made several important changes in its senior appointments. Major Everist, returning from a staff course in [England](#), took over as second-in-command from Major Thodey, who marched out to command [21 Battalion](#). The full cycle was now complete, for with this significant promotion—a tank officer to command an infantry battalion—the integration of the two arms became more than a mere text at a training conference. It set the official seal to the matter; not only was full co-operation demanded, but commands were interchangeable. The armour, as the younger of the two arms, felt the appointment to be one of confidence not only in the officer chosen but also in the arm he represented. All ranks agreed that in big, rugged, reliable Jock Thodey the 21st was getting one of the best of soldiers. His bright-eyed, slow-breaking smile, no less than his solid soldierliness, had made him a splendid influence in the 19th since it was first formed. He had held with distinction many appointments in infantry as well as in armoured days; he was one of the old originals; he carried away from the 19th the good wishes of all who had served with him.

Other changes involved the move to the New Zealand Armoured Corps training depot in [Egypt](#) of Majors [Parata](#) and Scotland. Both officers had had considerable battle experience in armour and the use of their knowledge in the training of the reinforcements would ultimately be of great benefit to the brigade. [Captain McInnes](#) now took over C Squadron, with Captain Koorey as second-in-command. Captain Hutchinson became OC Headquarters Squadron, and Captain Wilson second-in-command, while Captain Morrin went to A Squadron as second captain under Major [Robinson](#),<sup>2</sup> who marched in from 18 Regiment as OC.

On 12 July [19 Regiment](#) began to move forward with the rest of the Division on the first stage of a 200-mile advance to take part in the actions being fought in [Tuscany](#), where the enemy, after his long retreat, was now making a determined stand on the high country to the south of the [Arno River](#). Two weeks were to elapse before the regiment was in action again, and during that time the move forward was made in three bounds. The first was along Route 6 via [Frosinone](#) and Rome then on to Route 3 to Civita Castellana, where a night and a very hot day were spent in a staging area. On the 14th the next bound—on Routes 3 and 71—took the unit to Citta delle Pieve, where a concentration area near [Lake Trasimene](#) was occupied until the 22nd.

During the wait in this area forty-one married men of the 4th Reinforcements were marched out after the usual celebration to join the Taupo draft on furlough, and a few days later eighteen reinforcements were taken on strength. Meanwhile preparations were being made for the coming operations, and 142 Field Regiment, [Royal Artillery](#), was affiliated to 4 Brigade, the commander of 384 Battery coming to [19 Regiment](#) on attachment. On 17 July it was announced that 5 Brigade and [19 Regiment](#) would form a battle group in the advance towards [Florence](#).

Thirteenth Corps, of which the New Zealand Division was part, had attacked [Arezzo](#) on 15 July, and after fierce fighting in which the New Zealand infantry played a distinguished role, the way was clear for a further advance against the important [Gothic Line](#), which here ran along the summit of the northern [Apennines](#) and formed a defensive barrier extending from the Gulf of Genoa to [Pesaro](#) on the Adriatic. [Florence](#), required as a base for [Eighth Army's](#) offensive against the [Gothic Line](#) itself, was the immediate objective. Though declared an open city, [Florence](#) was defended by two lines (Olga and Paula), which were based on the high ground south of the Arno. Both were to be stoutly held by the enemy who, having regained his balance after his headlong flight up the middle third of the Italian Peninsula, had reorganised and was preparing for a stand which would hold up the Allied advance once winter set in.

Our armies in [Italy](#) were by this time considerably reduced in numbers and therefore in their ability to follow up their recent successes. Large formations of troops, quantities of equipment, and many of the supporting [Air Force](#) groups had

been withdrawn for service on the Second Front or were being held in readiness for the landing on the south coast of France. But now that Arezzo had fallen Eighth Army had secured a road and railhead for its forthcoming operations, and by 24 July 2 New Zealand Division and 6 South African Division were facing up to the Olga Line. Route 2 was the axis of the proposed advance, and 19 Regiment, which had travelled 68 miles on its tracks the previous night and had established its headquarters at Fornacelle, was now committed.

A Squadron moved out to come under the command of 5 Brigade (Brigadier Stewart) and became part of a force known as Armcav, which also comprised C Squadron Divisional Cavalry, 2 Company 22 (Motor) Battalion, No. 1 Troop 31 Anti-Tank Battery, two platoons 6 Field Company, a detachment of 4 Squadron 2 NZ Divisional Signals, one bridge-layer tank, and one bulldozer. On the 25th Armcav began to move against Fabbrica from an area near San Donato. Fifth Brigade at this time was astride the Pesa River and Route 2, and Armcav was acting as the spearhead of its advance, probing along Route 2 and along the parallel road which also led to the hilltop town of San Casciano. This was the key objective in the Olga Line.

Fabbrica was occupied at first light on the 25th and Armcav, after making good the crossroads, continued on to Bibbione. Demolitions and light machine-gun fire had caused only short delays up to this time, but now heavy shellfire and mortaring caused many casualties to the infantry and held up forward movement. Air support was called for and San Casciano was not entered until 9.30 a.m. on the 27th. There had been reports of a concentration of enemy armour on the right flank, but no German tanks were encountered. One hour later, during mopping-up operations, Armcav ceased to exist; A Squadron 19 Regiment passed to the command of 22 Battalion, and then at 9.15 p.m. to the command of 20 Armoured Regiment. During this period mopping-up was completed, one half of the squadron, under the second captain, being employed on this work. With the infantry riding on the tanks, a systematic house-to-house search was carried out, and the few remaining pockets of resistance were cleaned up. A good bag of prisoners was taken.



4 Armoured Brigade's advance to Florence 25 July-4 August 1944. Each regiment's main moves only are shown.

#### 4 Armoured Brigade's advance to Florence 25 July-4 August 1944. Each regiment's main moves only are shown

The Olga Line was now broken, but to the north of the Pesa River the **Paula Line**, based on the semi-circle of hills fronting **Florence**, was the next barrier. Sixth Brigade (Brigadier Burrows), supported by B and C Squadrons of the 19th, now prepared to assault this line at a point north-east of **Cerbaia**. B Squadron (Major Wakelin) was under the command of **24 Battalion**, and C Squadron ( **Captain McInnes**) under **26 Battalion**. Both squadrons joined their infantry units on 26 July. Each was operating less one troop, these two troops having been kept back at **San Pancrazio** as a regimental reserve group under the command of Captain Kerr.

At first light on the 27th C Squadron, after having advanced from **Lucignano** during the night, was in position at **Montagnana**. In close support of the infantry, the tanks moved down towards the Pesa River, where the forward troop quickly came under spandau fire. This opposition was soon overcome. While the tanks were crossing a bridge about 700 yards short of the main riverbed the structure collapsed and the leading tank fell into the stream, where it rolled over on its side. Engineer assistance was required to bulldoze a track, but within ten minutes No. 12 Troop, plus one tank of No. 10 Troop, had gone ahead and secured the crossroads. Here instructions were received for the tanks to halt until called for by the infantry.

The area was under observation from the high ground around **Cerbaia** and to the north-east, and the enemy lost no time in engaging the squadron with armour-piercing and high-explosive shells. The tanks replied vigorously and, by firing



armour-piercing shells into the houses on the crest above [Cerbaia](#), quietened the enemy guns, but his artillery and mortars continued to be troublesome. One tank was hit five times, once with armour-piercing and four times with high-explosive shells. One officer and one other rank were wounded, and the damaged tank overturned when a spare driver from another vehicle tried to get it under cover.

A Company [26 Battalion](#) reached the Pesa River at 7 a.m. and called for tank assistance an hour later. While crossing the river two tanks struck mines and were immobilised, and there was a delay until the bed was cleared. Meanwhile Squadron Headquarters and No. 9 Troop went forward and from positions under cover engaged the enemy on the high ground. They were heavily shelled in return, one tank having its turret severely damaged. This shot also ignited a smoke canister carried on the outside of the tank and the crew, three of whom were wounded, were forced to evacuate.

The Pesa River crossing was not completed until 4.15 p.m., and the tanks then entered [Cerbaia](#) and took up positions in close support of [26 Battalion](#), which had established its headquarters in a building at a corner of the town's square. No. 11 Troop moved forward to support No. 9 Platoon of A Company while the rest of the squadron was assigned to covering positions watching the roads. At 9.30 p.m. information was received that the enemy had withdrawn to the hills north and west of [Cerbaia](#), and C Squadron, in close support of [26 Battalion](#), was ordered to consolidate at Point 281.

This move was part of an attack on a two-brigade front being made by the New Zealand Division. The object was to clear the enemy from the heights south of [Florence](#) and so permit further progress along the main roads in the [Pesa](#) and Greve valleys.

During the day (the 27th) [24 Battalion](#) had gone forward into position and half of B Squadron had moved from [Lucignano](#) in the morning to Molino di Maiana, taking some prisoners en route. The Reconnaissance Troop then having reported the way clear, the remainder of the squadron joined up in the afternoon, and the whole moved to [Talente](#), where enemy posts were engaged from a position on the ridge. At 9 p.m. orders were received to proceed through [Cerbaia](#) to [Castellare](#) to support [24 Battalion](#) in an attack on Points 261 and 281 timed for 1 a.m. on the 28th.

On the 28th A Squadron moved forward with the infantry some 4000 yards to Gentilino. There heavy shelling caused much concern until an enemy observation post was discovered several hundred yards behind the new area. During the afternoon's operations No. 3 Troop ran into trouble when Lieutenant Griggs' tank (commanded at the time by Corporal Frost,<sup>3</sup> Griggs having been wounded earlier) was hit by an armour-piercing shell. As the crew were escaping they ran into machine-gun fire. Corporal Jim Frost was killed, Trooper Hec McNair<sup>4</sup> was mortally wounded, and one other man was wounded. This squadron had two killed and ten wounded in the six days' fighting. So constant was the movement that it was reckoned that sixteen hours' sleep was the total rest the crews had been able to snatch in the whole period.

At 8 p.m. on the 28th A Squadron was withdrawn to an area four miles south of San Casciano for a badly needed spell.

B Squadron's night move on the 27th–28th from Talente to Cerbaia was a most difficult one. It was a black, moonless night, and the steep route had not been previously reconnoitred, so two of the squadron officers, Captain Carey and Lieutenant Jordan,<sup>5</sup> set out on foot to lead the tanks. The hair-raising journey was accomplished despite mines, intermittent fire from scattered enemy posts encountered en route, and bad going. By 4.45 a.m. only ten tanks had reached Cerbaia, and Second-Lieutenants Hobson<sup>6</sup> and Opie, with three tanks, were ordered forward at 5 a.m. to support 24 Battalion's advanced positions. These tanks moved up to the infantry forward positions and successfully carried out observed shooting against enemy strongposts while Lieutenant Jordan, working on the left flank with three more tanks, carried out a similar role.

C Squadron, in close support of 26 Battalion, had also had a slow journey forward, but by 4.30 a.m. its tanks had dropped the anti-tank guns they were towing and set down some medium machine guns and crews at the crossroads beyond Castellare. At 5.15 a.m. the first tanks were in position with C Company 26 Battalion across the valley from the village of San Michele; during the move these tanks had made contact with A Company 24 Battalion. Five tanks were now positioned in the infantry forward positions while two more were sent back to bring up anti-tank guns. The enemy had observed the approach of the armour, however, and from the

direction of [La Romola](#) armour-piercing fire was unpleasantly active. The tanks engaged all suspected areas, but from 7.30 a.m. the whole position was being heavily shelled by enemy guns of all calibres.

At 9.30 a.m. enemy armour was seen moving in an area forward of [La Romola](#), and from a range of 1700 yards these tanks engaged C Squadron commander's tank, scoring a direct hit after six rounds in quick succession. The shot penetrated the Sherman, killing two of the crew and severely wounding [Captain McInnes](#), who died at the main dressing station two days later.

One of the tanks from No. 9 Troop quickly got into action and engaged the enemy, and the armour-piercing fire ceased as the German tanks pulled out of danger, but a heavy concentration of high-explosive shells wounded two more C Squadron officers. During this 'stonk' No. 11 Troop commander's tank was hit in the radiator and immobilised. It blocked the road and, owing to the intense fire, could not be got clear before the enemy mounted his counter-attack.

About 9.30 a.m., after a terrific bombardment, enemy infantry appeared, and C Company [26 Battalion](#) fell back behind the ridge, the crews of the three immobilised tanks going back with it. During this reverse one of the forward tanks hooked on an anti-tank gun and attempted to tow it to the rear, but the gun was hit on the drawbar by armour-piercing fire and cut loose. From 10 a.m. until 4.40 p.m. the five C Squadron runners remained in the vicinity of a house; they then came under the command of B Squadron.

B Squadron, whose left flank was quite open, spent an anxious day. The tanks engaged targets as required by the infantry, and the area came in for its share of the heavy shelling and mortaring. By 4.15 p.m. three tanks had been knocked out, all receiving direct hits. Lieutenant Jordan's tank went out several times during the day and successfully dealt with enemy infantry attempting to infiltrate on the left flank, and during the counter-attack in C Squadron's area Opie's and Hobson's tanks gave all the support possible. They were right out in the open and remained in close support throughout the day. Had they been withdrawn, the German armour which was known to be in [San Michele](#) would undoubtedly have ventured out against our own infantry. Two members of the crews of these tanks have supplied accounts of their experiences during the day. The wireless operator of Opie's tank, Frank [Tolley](#),

<sup>7</sup> writes:

In the very early hours of the morning we arrived at a house on a hill not far from [San Michele](#). Several NZ boys, wounded, and two Jerry prisoners were already in this casa. I did not get out of the tank but presumed they were inf chaps who were wounded. (Later in the day this house was taken over by Jerry again.)

3 tanks of 6 Tp and 3 of 8 Tp were our original strength but during the move up through the night our number was reduced to 2 of 6 Tp and 1 of 8 Tp—track trouble mostly. Lieut. M. Hobson was in charge of 6 Tp tanks and Lieut. M. Opie in charge of 8 Tp's surviving tank.

After leaving this casa and moving on towards the ridge we eventually stopped overlooking a wide valley with the church of [San Michele](#) on the far ridge on the opposite side. From what I can remember of wireless communication "C" Sqn were first to strike trouble that morning. I know that [Capt. McInnes](#) and his crew received a direct hit, their tank brewing up and two of the crew were later taken prisoner, I think 2 were also burned in the tank.

6 Tp's 2 tanks were both hit before we stopped it. I saw some members of their crew through my periscope staggering dazedly about, one in particular—Alec Cameron's <sup>8</sup>—had a miraculous escape during a heavy mortar stonk. I could see the bombs landing all round him and how he never got hit seemed a miracle to me.

Between 9 & 10am our tank received a direct hit on the left rear bogie suspension and track and she wouldn't move an inch. We stayed with her and throughout the day fired away practically all our ammunition using 125 rounds of AP, HE, and APHE plus all our Browning ammunition. As the hours wore on the heat inside the tank became almost unbearable and it was made worse by the gun fumes and the hot shells on the floor of the turret. Naturally we got rid of empty shells as soon as possible.

About 4.30pm we were very pleased when the order came over the air for us to abandon ship. Jack [George](#) <sup>9</sup> and Snow [Hammond](#) <sup>10</sup> (spare driver and driver respectively) were first out through the escape hatch at the bottom of the tank. Gordon [Riggir](#), <sup>11</sup> the gunner, was next, then myself wireless operator. I took the

head sets (good ones—which were scarce) code sheets etc with me and had so much junk stuffed down my overalls that I got jammed half way out the hatch. Mac Opie, after making a final check and dismantling the 75 and Brownings, was last out. As we made our ways back individually through the FDLs which were dug in, the Inf boys looked at us as much as to say what the h— are you chaps doing wandering round here! When our crew got together we had a photo taken in the courtyard of the casa where a more or less Hqs had been established.

Sergeant Alex Cameron of No. 6 Troop also writes an interesting account. He covers several points already mentioned in the general narrative and also verifies the previous story.

On the morning of the 28th July, 1944, No. 6 Tp "B" Sqn had only 2 tanks in action, one commanded by Lieut Martin Hobson the other by Sgt Roland Lupton.<sup>12</sup> The third tank had lost a track the previous night when crossing a river. I was the gunner in the Tp leader's tank so was not in the best position to see all that was to be seen.

We arrived at a casa on the hill just before dawn and Lieut Hobson went in to contact the Inf commander. When I looked out of the tank I saw a number of wounded Jerries lying against the wall and I also saw an officer of the 27th Bn whom I knew—so some of the MG blokes were about. A little later Lieut Hobson moved his tank to a position forward and to the left and he then returned to the casa where he could get observation from the top windows. A short time after the Jerry fire became very intense and he was unable to return to the tank for some time.

About mid morning Capt Wethey of "C" Sqn came over to our tank and used the wireless to report the wounding of "C" Squadron commander and the loss of some of their tanks. Some little time later our Inf started moving back very quickly past our tank and a tank came back down the road towing a 17 pounder. A little way behind us the towing bar was hit by a shell and the tank went on without the gun—I don't think they knew they had lost it.

About this time Lieut Hobson returned and the situation was looking very sticky so he moved his tanks a 100 yds or so to the rear of the casa and on the other side of the crest close to a No. 8 Tp tank commanded by Lieut Opie.

Here we engaged targets with the 75 mm and after firing for some time—apparently with good effect—we came under very heavy and accurate gun fire. There were fountains of earth and dust and smoke going up all round us and the trees were literally being torn out by the roots. Tpr O’Leary, <sup>13</sup> our driver, received a nasty shell wound on the top of his arm; the splinter came down through the hatch. I was just handing the first aid kit through to him when there was an ear splitting crash, a sheet of flame and then that dry acrid stench of HE. The next thing I knew I was trying to push the No 19 wireless set off myself. The German shell had hit the Aerial base and blown the set right out of its brackets.

Somebody yelled “get out”. We did; quickly. As I landed a burst of machine gun fire hit the ground right at my feet so they were not on that spot many seconds! We all dived under the tank which was the only shelter about, but within a few seconds a shell landed somewhere right beside us and we all received shrapnel wounds. One of our crew was shell shocked and wounded so Lieut Hobson decided to put him into Sgt Lupton’s tank to get first aid. He was no sooner in the Sgt’s tank than that tank also received a direct hit; right on top of the turret. I was told later that the shell cracked the turret clean across.

I was standing on the off side of the tank when this shell hit it and I received the full blast. I picked myself up about 5 yds away and feeling a bit silly ran towards a hay stack and took what cover I could. The stack was in a plough furrow. After some minutes I took a quick look round for the rest of Tp but could find no-one but about 5 or 600 yds down the hill I saw two men and decided to go with them. When I joined them they proved to be Lieut Opie and Tpr Riggir of 8 Tp. Their tank had been hit with AP and had cut one track. I returned to Sqn Hqs with them and was then evacuated.

For the rest of the afternoon B Squadron, with the remnants of C now under command, kept up the duel in the [24 Battalion](#) sector. These tanks were joined by Kerr Force (the regimental reserve) which had been standing by at [Talente](#). No. 7 Troop (Lieutenant McCown) and Captain Kerr’s troop went forward in the late afternoon to occupy the position previously held by C Squadron where, after another enemy counter-attack at 5 p.m., the situation looked grave. Effective fire from these tanks and from our own artillery eventually caused the enemy infantry to retire,

leaving many casualties. The three tanks on the left flank, under Lieutenant Jordan, got in some good shooting during this episode.

After dark B Squadron and its attached tanks moved back behind the [Castellare](#) feature for maintenance and replenishment, but the night was far from quiet and a further six casualties occurred in the laager area. The enemy mortars were particularly active.

There was even more bitter fighting on the 29th for the possession of [San Michele](#), which had been occupied during darkness by our infantry. At dawn No. 7 Troop entered the village in close support of [24 Battalion](#). En route the troop corporal, Corporal [Brenton](#),<sup>14</sup> was killed by spandau fire and the tank wireless disabled. At 8.30 a.m. came the enemy's first 'feeler' attack, and though this was easily repulsed, an hour later he attacked again in force. This time his infantry was supported by tanks, and his guns of all types were most active. No. 5 Troop (Second-Lieutenant [Woolven](#)<sup>15</sup>) went over the ridge to reinforce No. 7, but lost one tank which capsized on the way. The troop commander's and sergeant's tanks both got into [San Michele](#), however, and were to play a full part in the terrific battle which went on there all day.

The enemy counter-attacked at [San Michele](#) on eight separate occasions, each attack being preceded by intense shelling. He seemed determined to retake the village at all costs, and at one stage brought lorried infantry behind tanks to within 800 yards of the forward positions. Our artillery did a grand job in smashing these counter-attacks, and Lieutenant McCown took up a truly precarious position in the church tower where, with a long lead down to his tank wireless, he coolly directed the guns throughout the day. On several occasions he clambered down to fight his tank, and once, when the attackers had penetrated into the streets, he scored a direct hit on an enemy tank. His tower observation post was hit several times, but despite this and the confusion of both sides firing at once, he continued to give directions to our artillery.

McCown was working on a very slender margin of error, as the shells, to be effective, had to just clear the village. The enemy, immediately beyond, was too close for comfort. The 105-millimetre guns were firing directly over the tower and bursting perhaps less than 200 yards away; afterwards McCown was able to give a

graphic description of what it felt like to be underneath a concentration of twenty-four of these shells, which (he claimed) were jostling each other as they passed uncomfortably close to the top of his tower on their way to the target. The fall of shot from both field regiments in support was wonderfully accurate, and their rate of fire was high. The 6th Field Regiment was reported to have used 1000 rounds a gun that day, and the enemy artillery seemed to be doing equally heavy work, for according to many experienced soldiers the shelling was even more concentrated than that encountered at [Cassino](#).

At 5 p.m. the last and most determined effort was made by the enemy to recapture the village. During the artillery concentration which preceded this attack Lieutenant Woolven's tank was knocked out. He immediately switched to his sergeant's tank, but shortly afterwards this too was hit and the turret jammed. By this time the only other surviving tank in the forward area (McCown's) was also out of action with a jammed case in the 75-millimetre gun. Shortly after dark both these tanks were ordered to move to a position down the ridge to put their guns in working order.

The infantry still in [San Michele](#) went to ground in the crypt of the church, and at dark the enemy was in effective control of the village. Sergeant [Jones](#),<sup>16</sup> of No. 5 Troop, after giving up his tank to his troop commander, had remained hidden in a house. He slipped out to reconnoitre the village and rejoined Squadron Headquarters at midnight. He had moved right through the village and reported having seen no one but the enemy since the last two tanks had withdrawn.

At 1.15 a.m. on the 30th a company of [25 Battalion](#), supported by a tank force consisting of one troop each of B and C Squadrons [19 Regiment](#) and A Squadron 18 Regiment (this force was commanded by Captain Carey), attacked San Michele. A heavy concentration had been put down by our artillery and the force met little opposition in its advance to the village. The infantry emerged from the crypt where they had remained undiscovered all night, and thereafter [San Michele](#) was in our hands. In this action the tanks were led forward by Lieutenant Woolven who, despite his hard day's fighting, volunteered to guide the force in. The going was difficult and a tank destroyer—fortunately the last vehicle in the column—capsized. This was bad enough, but when the crew sent a wireless message 'in clear' reporting the incident to their battery commander, giving their exact position and stating their intention of



abandoning the gun, some hard words were said by those in the force whose appreciation of the importance of security was based on more practical lines.

At 7 a.m. 18 Regiment took over the still lively sector and those of 19 Regiment's tanks in running order moved to a rest area south of Cerbaia. San Michele had been a very hot spot; both flanks were open, it was commanded by high ground in front, and was well taped by German guns of all calibres. The formidable Tiger tank had also been in opposition. The village had been defended tenaciously, and it was evident that the enemy had considered it a vital spot in the barrier in front of Florence, for after he was driven from it his repeated and ferocious attempts to recapture it were abandoned only when it became evident that the area was likely to be bypassed. The 24th and 25th Battalions had heavy casualties in these actions, and B and C Squadrons of the 19th in close support had as many casualties during the two days of the action as the whole regiment had sustained during operation DICKENS at Cassino. The 25th Battalion and 18 Regiment were still to see some hard fighting in this sector.

From 30 July to 3 August was spent regrouping. A Squadron came back under command on the 31st, and in the midst of the hasty reorganisation and maintenance then in progress came the news that the regiment would probably be required for operations the following day. Feverish preparations followed, but in the early stages of the three-brigade attack which was the prelude to the fall of Florence the 19th was not employed.

On the 31st the Padre brought back from 6 MDS the news of the death of Captain Doug McInnes. This was a sad blow to the regiment, for he had been a popular and gallant officer. Well known for his plain speaking and forthright manner, which he matched by great personal energy and dash, 'Mac' (as he was known to his close associates; he was Captain 'McGinty' to his troops) was the type of man whose passing left all ranks of the unit with a sense of personal loss. He was succeeded in C Squadron by Captain Wilson.

On 1 August the regiment continued to put its equipment in order, and awaited with interest the news of the attack then in progress. One item of intelligence which aroused excitement was the report (later confirmed) that the Commander 5 Brigade (Brigadier Stewart) had been missing all day and was probably a prisoner of war. At

8 p.m. the CO, returning from Brigade, called a conference of squadron commanders and explained that the regiment was to remain in reserve when 4 Armoured Brigade's attack was launched, which would be after the infantry had captured the heights. A Squadron was to stand by immediately because it might be needed to cover the left flank.

On the 2nd the regiment remained in position, and it was not until midday on the 3rd that orders were issued for A Squadron to move to support [23 Battalion](#) (Lieutenant-Colonel W. B. [Thomas](#)<sup>17</sup>) in an assault on San Cristofano and the ridge immediately beyond. The move was made with B Company [23 Battalion](#) riding on the tanks, and by 3.30 p.m. the leading troops were on the first objective, but resistance now became most stubborn and No. 1 Troop had only one tank still mobile. Second-Lieutenant Adair was mortally wounded while reconnoitring on foot, and No. 2 Troop was held up by a demolition. Quick work by Lieutenant [Davidson](#),<sup>18</sup> who went forward on foot to find a way round and led his tank to a position where it could deal with some of the most troublesome enemy posts, eased the situation, but the infantry had many casualties.

Nos. 3 and 4 Troops were also held up by a demolition which completely blocked the only open route, and as night was falling the infantry and tank commanders decided to hold their present position and to push on again the next day. The wounded were evacuated that night, among them Trooper George [Perkins](#)<sup>19</sup> who, when the sniping and mortaring was at its peak, had carried in several wounded men, including his own troop commander, before he was struck down himself.

On the following day (4 August) the infantry and tanks advanced unopposed to Capponi, and then, after crossing the River Greve, continued on with excitement at its peak to the outskirts of [Florence](#) itself. It was a thrilling experience. No. 2 Troop went on to Ponte della Vittoria and reported that the bridges over the [Arno](#), which flows through the centre of the city, had been blown. The tanks ran into considerable fire from enemy posts in the houses on the opposite bank, but this fire was not returned because [Florence](#) had been declared an open city.

There was great rejoicing among sections of the civilian population, and A Squadron shared with 5 Brigade and with the South Africans the honours accorded

that day to the 'liberators'. Despite sniping and machine-gunning from posts on the north bank of the river, the tanks were festooned with flowers by wildly excited partisans of both sexes. It was only with great difficulty that the column was disengaged, especially when, with feeling running high, our troops showed more than willingness to take on the opposition across the river. During the afternoon A Squadron took over from 20 Regiment in the western suburbs, and next day handed over to the Canadians. The changeover was made under severe mortaring from the enemy, whose appreciation of what constituted an open city did not conform to the principles laid down in the Geneva Convention.

Of the advance to [Florence](#) an A Squadron diarist records:

What a grand pair of soldiers 'Long Robbie' (the "A" Squadron Commander) and 'Sandy' Thomas (C.O. 23 Battalion) were. Both big men physically, they literally paced out the whole route, determined to get ahead somehow now that we had been turned off Route 2.... they were irked at the little progress being made on our flank while the Springboks drove triumphantly along the route the Kiwis had done so much to clear. They were determined to share the honours.

Up and down hills they trudged blazing a trail and behind them we crashed through olive groves, climbed hills and forded rivers until with No. 2 Troop leading (Lt. Ewan Davidson) and the infantry of [23 Battalion](#) riding on the tanks we entered the outskirts of the town. There were no South Africans in sight and no other Allied troops. When the shooting started Sandy Thomas who was riding on our tank had the bad luck to be wounded. Still he and 'Long Robbie' had got us in at the kill.

On the 6th A Squadron rejoined the rest of the regiment, now under the command of 4 Armoured Brigade, as it moved to [Geppetto](#) (near the [Pesa](#)), Major Robinson having gone back the day before to take over the convoy. The new area was occupied during the afternoon, and shortly after midnight a message was received instructing that one squadron was to come under the command of each of the infantry brigades at 9 a.m. on the 7th. Accordingly B Squadron was detailed to 5 Brigade and C Squadron to 6 Brigade, and representatives from both squadrons reported to their respective formation headquarters for instructions. The tanks moved out to their new locations at last light.

On 7 August Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin, who had commanded the regiment since April 1942, left to take up the appointment of second-in-command of 4 Armoured Brigade. His period of command had covered the whole of [19 Regiment's](#) active armoured career and from the day he took over he had devoted himself zealously to the interests and efficiency of the unit. His tireless energy was the best possible example to all ranks, for as infantry turned armour they had much to learn. Under his vigorous leadership the new role had been taken up speedily and successfully. There were few officers in the Division with such wide experience in diesel engines and heavy equipment, and in the matter of mechanical maintenance the 19th, under his trained eye, had gained a proud record.

In operations Colonel McGaffin's control and decision had always inspired confidence, as had his habit of getting round with complete disregard for his own safety or comfort on frequent visits to all his squadrons, though they were often many miles apart and sometimes working with different formations.

Although the regiment was still on operations, time was found on the 8th for a brief farewell celebration, and the retiring CO left the 19th with the good wishes of all who had served with him. It was with genuine regret that, shortly after his promotion, the unit heard that he had been admitted to hospital in a serious condition following an internal hæmorrhage. Few realised the strain he must have endured during the last six months of his service, for his capacity for hard work had not diminished despite the painful affliction against which he had been battling.

Lieutenant-Colonel Everist succeeded Colonel McGaffin as commanding officer, and the following changes were made within the regiment. Major Robinson became second-in-command; Captain Ellingham became OC A Squadron; Captain Wiseley second-in-command of A Squadron; and Captain [Hughes](#)<sup>20</sup> became Adjutant.

It was 14 August before the Germans withdrew from [Florence](#), and from the 4th mopping up and patrol work kept the Division active. Fourth Armoured Brigade was constantly employed on these operations, and [19 Regiment](#) had a number of small assignments, the most rewarding being that undertaken by B Squadron in support of 28 Battalion in a walkover attack on [Empoli](#). Little opposition was encountered and the two troops employed—Nos. 5 and 7 Troops—'liberated' several cases of wrist watches, these being one of the chief manufactures of the town. As this windfall

arrived after a serious and protracted watch shortage in the regiment, B Squadron struck a sellers' market.

On 16 August the regiment began to hand over to United States armoured forces, each squadron taking the American relieving officers to its forward area before withdrawing in turn to reassemble at Fornacelle. The handing over was not without its amusing moments. The Americans had come as usual well prepared on the Q side. Their headquarters was a hospitable one, and ice cream, served out lavishly in full pint dollops, was a luxury our troops had never before encountered in the battle area. The refrigerated churn in which it was manufactured, together with a special oven (about the size of a grand piano) used exclusively for frying chip potatoes, were regarded, when the astonishment subsided, as minor marvels of modern warfare.

Six days were spent in the pleasant shade of a grove of large oak trees at Fornacelle. After the heat, dust and din of the [Florence](#) action this opportunity for rest and maintenance was greatly enjoyed. Leave was generous and parties visited [Siena](#), Rome, and a beach camp at Piombino. A regimental race meeting was held, and the mobile cinema was set up handy to the area.

On the 24th the regiment lined the route to see Mr Churchill pass during his tour of [Eighth Army's](#) area. Despite a typical unemotional reception by the New Zealand Division—the undemonstrative character of New Zealand troops had been shown a month before when King George VI visited the battle area—there was no doubt about his popularity with the troops, and his presence in [Italy](#) was construed as a favourable omen for the coming of peace.

The unit held a most successful concert on the last evening at Fornacelle. Padre John Somerville organised it and, as usual, some surprisingly good talent was brought to light. The concert was a splendid end to a pleasant week. The following day the first parties began to move out, and by the end of August the 19th had proceeded in groups across [Italy](#) to the Adriatic coast, where it reassembled and awaited orders in the [Iesi](#) concentration area.

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<sup>1</sup> [Maj W. H. Ellingham](#); [Hawera](#); born Pahiatua, 29 Oct 1913; stock and station agent; comd 1 NZ Special Coy 1941; squadron commander [19 Armd](#)

Regt Aug-Oct 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col H. A. Robinson, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Waipukurau; born New Plymouth, 29 Sep 1912; farmhand; troop leader, later 2 i/c Div Cav 1939–44; CO 18 Armd Regt Mar-Jul 1944; 20 Armd Regt May-Oct 1945; twice wounded.

<sup>3</sup> L-Cpl J. P. Frost; born NZ, 6 Nov 1917; shop assistant; killed in action 28 Jul 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Tpr H. McNair; born Oamaru, 23 Nov 1919; deer culler; died of wounds 15 Aug 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Capt C. C. Jordan; born Tauranga, 6 Jul 1922; Regular soldier.

<sup>6</sup> Capt W. M. Hobson; Takapau; born Waipawa, 16 Jan 1919; sheepfarmer; wounded 28 Jul 1944.

<sup>7</sup> L-Cpl F. G. Tolley; Marton; born Mangaweka, 24 Apr 1916; butcher.

<sup>8</sup> Lt A. J. Cameron; Hunterville; born Hunterville, 7 Oct 1919; farm labourer; wounded 28 Jul 1944.

<sup>9</sup> Tpr D. G. George; Wanganui; born NZ, 19 Jun 1923; farmhand.

<sup>10</sup> Tpr A. G. Hammond; Ashburton; born NZ, 9 Apr 1920; farmer.

<sup>11</sup> Sgt G. V. Riggir; born NZ, 24 Dec 1921; fibrous plasterer; died of wounds 22 Apr 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Sgt R. I. Lupton; Waverley; born NZ, 20 Sep 1915; farmer; wounded 28 Jul 1944.

<sup>13</sup> Tpr D. J. O'Leary; Kumeu, Auckland; born Te Kuiti, 15 Jul 1912; carpenter; twice wounded.

<sup>14</sup> Cpl M. K. Brenton; born NZ, 9 Jan 1917; farmer; killed in action 29 Jul 1944.

<sup>15</sup> Capt A. H. Woolven; Hamilton; born NZ 7 Feb 1911; statistician; Adjnt 19 Armd Regt Feb-Jun 1945.

<sup>16</sup> WO II E. Jones, m.i.d.; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 20 Sep 1920; motor garage assistant; twice wounded.

<sup>17</sup> 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 1944–45; twice wounded; wounded and p.w. May 1941; escaped Nov 1941; Hampshire Regt 1947-.

<sup>18</sup> Lt E. J. Davidson, m.i.d.; born NZ, 7 Aug 1919; clerk; wounded 28 Sep 1944.

<sup>19</sup> Tpr G. N. Perkins, MM; Westport; born Westport, 8 Aug 1912; carrier; wounded 3 Aug 1944.

<sup>20</sup> Maj C. S. O. Hughes; Auckland; born Auckland, 10 Dec 1907; company director; DAQMG 4 Armd Bde Jun-Dec 1945.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT



## CHAPTER 22 – BACK TO THE ADRIATIC COAST

## CHAPTER 22

### *Back to the Adriatic Coast*

I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,  
Straining upon the start.

—Shakespeare

Before the New Zealand Division pulled out from the [Florence](#) sector to cross [Italy](#) for the second time and take part in the Adriatic offensive, a stirring tribute was paid to its past performances by Mr Churchill. While lunching at [Divisional Headquarters](#) on 24 August he toasted the Division and its distinguished commander in these words:

I cannot leave without raising my glass to you, my dear Bernard and the gallant New Zealand Division, whose name is honoured and cherished among the [United Nations](#). Its career and record is one that will live not only in the history of New Zealand but in the history of the British Empire as an example to the youth of the Empire—an example of duty, valour and honour. For four and a half years you have been in the forefront of the battle. I myself have visited you four times in theatres of war—in [England](#) in 1940, in the desert at [Alamein](#), at [Tripoli](#) and now in [Italy](#). Everything is going well and I hope it will not be long before you can rest on your laurels and return to your beautiful country. I wish you all the very best of luck. I drink to the New Zealand Division.

The Division's new assignment held great promise, especially for the armour, who hoped that the plains north of the [Apennines](#) would prove more favourable terrain in which to operate. A quick breakthrough to the frontier was predicted once the [Gothic Line](#) had been turned at its Adriatic flank.

August had been almost tropically hot, and a further full month of dry weather was to be expected. On this factor above all others depended the success of the plan, which was to drive ruthlessly northwards along the coastal sector. The flat going, so seldom met until then, was not necessarily good going, however, for the whole of the [Romagna](#) area



and the vast Lombardy Plains themselves were intensively cultivated. The roads were mostly raised above the level of the surrounding land; rivers, canals and irrigation systems intersected all routes, so that every hundred yards or so a bridge, culvert, or conduit carried the roadway. To an enemy depending on demolitions as part of his plan for defence and delaying actions, each one of these crossings was a potential barrier, one which could be turned to advantage with a minimum of work.

Off the roads the cultivated ground was typical of Italy's long occupied and heavily tilled land. The soil was finely worked, easily pulverised to a fine dust in dry weather, and was quickly converted into thick, clinging mud in wet weather. Though flat, the fields afforded plenty of cover, for vineyards, olive groves and tall grain crops obscured the view, while the embanked pathways and irrigation ditches gave good protection for infantry. Close settlement added further difficulties to the operations of an advancing army.

This, then, was the type of country across which the Division would be called to fight during the final phase of its Italian service. The new front, in fact, had little to commend it from the point of view of the attacking army, and certainly did not deserve the almost jubilant predictions for a fast advance which had been so general. Nor did the weather behave as was usual; the elements and the ground were to combine against us in the operations which were to follow.

The speedy and successful move over the Apennines was an excellent example of the careful movement control and skilful convoy work for which the Division was now well known. The road on which most of the units travelled was not sealed and, before the bulk of the vehicles had made the journey, was deep in fine dust. It was

not unlike one of the hot, dusty, desert moves of the earlier years of the war. The dry weather lasted for the whole of the transfer, and though most men found the trip slow and tiring, there were few who failed to remark on the magnificent mountain scenery, with its spectacular vistas from the high passes through which the winding route ran.

The tanks moved on tracks for the first 60 miles to Foligia, where transporters were waiting. Almost every one had trouble on the way, for the hard roads and hot weather played havoc with the rubber treads. Roadside replacements of bogies were carried out by the unit fitters, who had a busy time getting halted vehicles mobile again. Each tank carried a spare bogie, but some had to have more than one replacement. The trip was completed in groups rather than in convoy. The route, however, was well marked by the provosts, and there was no difficulty about keeping direction. As the transporters were not due to load until the 28th, there was no hurry, and all crews spent a night camped in clusters of two or three tanks at convenient pulling-out places on the roadside.

By Sunday evening most of the tanks had arrived at Foligia, and the crews were entertained by an excellent concert given by the band of the Grenadier Guards. Loading was completed on Monday, and at 3.45 a.m. the following day the last 90 miles of the journey began.

The destination, [Iesi](#), was something of a let down; it did not compare at all favourably with the pleasant staging area the regiment had left outside [Florence](#), but the town, though dingy and uninspiring, was soon found to offer some compensations. It was in the centre of a lush agricultural area, and fruit, vegetables and farm produce could be obtained easily. In fact, shortly after arrival, an enterprising nocturnal foraging party brought back enough pork and poultry to provide a sumptuous dinner for the whole of C Squadron, with enough left over for a very pleasant cold luncheon next day. Draught Spumante, a welcome change from the ubiquitous vermouth, was also in good supply, and with so much good food and pleasant drink available the other shortcomings of the location were soon forgotten.

Furthermore, though the [Iesi](#) area was hot and dusty, the sea was close enough to permit regular trips to the superb sandy beaches of the Adriatic coast.

In the 19th, as in all the armoured regiments, a full programme of heavy maintenance work was in progress, for the Shermans had all had long and gruelling service. As soon as the tanks arrived in the [Iesi](#) area the major overhauls were tackled, and technical personnel and crews were kept fully employed. The usual out-of-the-line training also began, but not all the hours were spent working; time was made for several successful and enjoyable sporting and social functions. The most notable of these was the regimental race meeting organised by the indefatigable John Milliken, regimental signals officer. The evening before the fixture a [Calcutta](#) sweep was held, and the bidding for horses was most spirited. The runners had all been appropriately named, and the card contained some ingenious and witty entries, unit adventures and notabilities of course figuring very prominently. A sample: '[Armcar](#) by Robbie out of [Florence](#).'

The meeting was held on 2 September after a formal parade and inspection of the unit by the Brigade Commander, [Brigadier Inglis](#). When he had completed one of his typical inspections, where even the smallest detail of dress or equipment not up to standard had been brought into the open, the Brigadier commented on the smart turnout and spoke optimistically of the projected operations. The sky above was full of aircraft (ours) at the time, and unfortunately his speech was heard only by those in front. The Brigadier then stayed for the early part of the race meeting, which was favoured by fine weather and held appropriately on a Saturday afternoon. The 'tote' handled over £1000.

This was the last visit [Brigadier Inglis](#) was to pay to the regiment, where, as in the rest of his command, he was regarded with respect and affection by all ranks. Under his firm hand and keen eye many men had had their first taste of serious training for war, and in operations extending from 1941 to the present time he had led his brigade—and on occasion the Division—in outstanding successes. With the exception of the GOC himself, [Brigadier Inglis](#) was perhaps the most colourful—and certainly one of the best known—of the Division's senior commanders. His second-in-command, Colonel Pleasants, an old [19 Battalion](#) officer, succeeded him on 7 September as commander of 4 Armoured Brigade.

September was the month planned for the major moves against the [Gothic Line](#). Though the Allied armies in [Italy](#) had lost seven divisions to other theatres during

the previous two months, adjustments to dispositions had been swiftly carried out, and the forces were already assembled for the attack on the Adriatic flank of the [Gothic Line](#). The first objective was [Coriano](#), where a series of heavily defended spurs ran out to the coast and formed the first natural barrier to the flats which finally opened out north of [Rimini](#), where the sharp end of the vast, wedge-shaped Lombardy Plains began. It was hoped that an attack against this end of the line would draw the German strength down from the west and so give [Fifth Army](#) a clearer field in its difficult advance over mountainous country towards [Bologna](#).

The German Army in [Italy](#) had recently received reinforcements; now eight new divisions faced the Allies, and the official view held at Allied Headquarters was less hopeful of sudden success in the autumn offensive than were the radio strategists. Events would show, however, that had the attack on the coastal sector been favoured by reasonable weather the splendid gains made during September and October would have been even more considerable, and the armour would have played a full part—a part which the early operations showed would have been both spectacular and successful.

Early in September the New Zealand Division had begun to move formations and units into forward areas before taking over an operational role, but the possible selection of a representative Rugby team to tour the [United Kingdom](#) was a topic of much more importance to the average Kiwi than was the move towards the battle zone. Many units had already begun their competition games, and now additional training was undertaken in earnest. A series of selection matches was forecast and the former All Black, Brigadier Burrows, was nominated as divisional selector. On Sunday the 3rd a terrific downpour of rain turned the hard dusty fields round [Iesi](#) into something more like New Zealand paddocks, and after church parade that morning [19 Regiment's](#) team, under the keen and experienced eye of Captain Charlie Saxton, had its first try-out. The newly erected goalposts were destined to come down the following day for, less than twenty-four hours later, a movement order arrived with details of a new concentration area near [Fano](#).

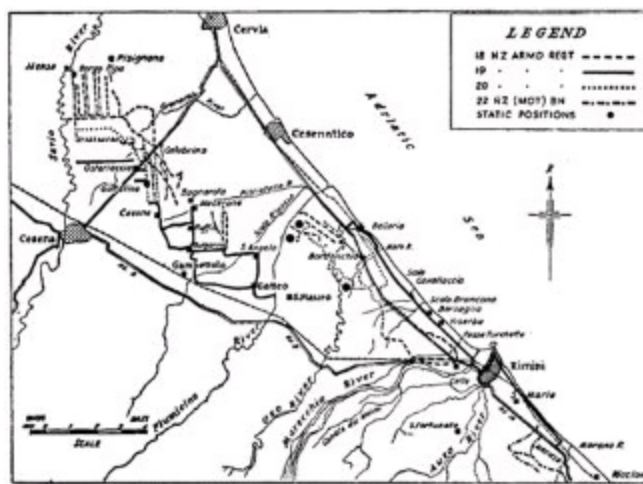
[Fano](#) was right on the seashore and, despite steady rain on the day of arrival and the following day (the 7th and 8th), there were few men who neglected the opportunity to have a swim. The place had not long before been in enemy hands, and a startling reminder of German tactics was given when the LAD breakdown

wagon was blown up while travelling down the road through the concentration area. Fortunately there were no casualties, though the driver and the spare driver were badly shaken and the lorry severely damaged. A thorough search revealed three more demolition charges set in likely positions in the area. These were neutralised, and the engineers were called on for a demonstration of enemy mines and booby-trap methods and how to locate and deal with them. The whole of the unit attended.

On 10 September [2 NZ Division](#), commanded temporarily by Brigadier Weir (the GOC having been injured in an aircraft accident), came under the command of 1 Canadian Corps, and preparations were made for the main Eighth Army offensive to begin on the 12th with an attack on the [Coriano](#) ridge. For this offensive [1 Canadian Corps](#) was to be on the right and 5 British Corps on the left. When the battle began many New Zealand commanders were in the forward areas as observers, and the New Zealand Artillery was used in support of the Canadians. Meanwhile the rest of the Division kept up its football practice, and many men spent the fine days which followed relaxing in the sun and bathing on the Adriatic beaches—in peacetime among the most popular European summer resorts.

The operations in the [Coriano](#) area began well, for the first attack got onto the ridge, and over 1000 prisoners were taken. The second phase involved exploiting over the Marano River, and on the 13th 22 (Motor) Battalion joined 3 Greek Brigade advancing towards [Riccione](#) and, with [20 Armoured Regiment](#), supported this formation in an attack on [Monaldini](#). By first light on the 14th the Greeks were on the banks of the [Marano](#) and the New Zealand Division was preparing to take on a breakthrough role to continue the advance to [Rimini](#). [San Fortunato Ridge](#), which thrust out to the coast in front of that city, held the enemy's main defences and was the key to the right flank of the line.

On the 15th, south of [Rimini](#) airfield, 18 Armoured Regiment struck some solid fighting. Operating with the [Greek Brigade](#), it had run into a nest of excellently sited strongpoints, where dug-in Panther turrets commanded the airfield and its approaches. The previous day the Canadians had lost five tanks to these formidable weapons. The advance was now slowed down while our artillery reduced the



4 Armoured Brigade's operations, September-October 1944. Each regiment's main moves only are shown

#### 4 Armoured Brigade's operations, September-October 1944. Each regiment's main moves only are shown

defences on [San Fortunato Ridge](#), and while this battle was in progress [19 Regiment](#) moved 32 miles forward to Misano, C Squadron going direct to the [Rimini](#) airfield to take over from A Squadron of 18 Regiment. The changeover was completed by 4 a.m. on 18 September, by which time the rest of the unit was waiting expectantly in the concentration area at Misano for orders to join in the operations then in progress.

[Rimini](#) airfield, one mile long and some 1200 yards wide, was sited on the flats close to the shore. It was bounded on the seaward side by Route 16, which ran parallel with and about half a mile from the coast. The area around the airfield was intersected by irrigation canals, and its southern and eastern boundaries were fringed by houses and the usual large buildings found on a commercial airfield. In these buildings and among the cultivated areas to the north the enemy had his anti-tank weapons well sited and well camouflaged, with excellent fields of fire covering all possible approaches.

A Squadron of 18 Regiment had already done some good work in locating and knocking out a particularly troublesome Panther turret at the northern end of the airfield and in dealing with several other strongpoints in the buildings. When C Squadron took over from it, however, the area was still 'hot'. No. 1 Company of 22 (Motor) Battalion, already in the area in a tank-protection role, gave excellent support and assistance to C Squadron during the changeover, which was carried out



when visibility was very poor.

The troop commanders, after a reconnaissance on foot, got their tanks up to the Greeks' forward positions and immediately took on the task of covering the area with an effective fire plan and reducing enemy posts causing trouble to the infantry. Dispositions were: 2 Greek Battalion on the right, with No. 9 Troop in support of 4 Company and 10 Troop in support of 1 Company; 3 Greek Battalion on the left, with No. 11 Troop in support. That morning the [Greek Brigade](#) had extended its front to the right by taking over from the [Royal Canadian Dragoons](#) on the coastal sector.

During the afternoon the Greeks began to advance once more and, with the tanks in support, had by nightfall established a line some 3000 yards ahead of the airfield. During this advance No. 9 Troop (Second-Lieutenant Graham Brown) did valuable work in dislodging some machine-gun and sniper posts in the hospital buildings lining the coast road about 800 yards to the north of the right flank. This area was to prove troublesome the following day when, after the enemy positions had been heavily engaged by our artillery, 3 Greek Battalion attacked [Santa Maria](#). This attack took place at 4 p.m., and half an hour later 2 Greek Battalion swung its right flank northwards and, after fighting down strong opposition, gained the main building of Ospedalletto Camasco by 8 p.m. No. 9 Troop and No. 10 Troop (Lieutenant Peter Brown) were in support of these moves, which brought the [Greek Brigade](#) within one mile of the centre of [Rimini](#) city. The route was well covered by anti-tank guns, but despite this the two troops had tanks up with the forward infantry before dark.

Excitement was intense, for the day had gone well; 5 Brigade had now come up and was occupying the area between the Marano River and [Rimini](#) airfield, and the stage was set for the capture of [Rimini](#) itself. The Greeks especially were tense—and voluble—over the prospect of this important gain, while the units of 4 NZ Armoured Brigade with them (1 Company [22 Battalion](#) and C Squadron [19 Regiment](#)), if somewhat less expressive, viewed the possibility with satisfaction. The weather up to now had been fine, though at times overcast, but during the night heavy rain began to fall. To offset this came the news that the Canadians had taken [San Fortunato Ridge](#), the feature on which the enemy had concentrated his main defences. The way forward was now clear.

That night (20–21 September) No. 11 Troop (Second-Lieutenant [Cross](#)<sup>1</sup>), which had its headquarters on a

secondary road just south of the [Santa Maria](#) church, rounded up some Turkoman deserters, and these confirmed the German withdrawal beyond [Rimini](#). Before dawn OC No. 11 Troop and Second-Lieutenant [Maurice](#),<sup>2</sup> C Squadron's liaison officer with 3 Greek Battalion, went in on foot to [Santa Maria](#) and, finding everything quiet, reconnoitred



<sup>1</sup> Capt. A. H. M. Maurice; Kimberley born Walm. 5 Jul 1909; former Adj. 13 Armd Regt 1943.

### **TOWN PLAN OF RIMINI**

forward to check the route into [Rimini](#). It was a wet, cold and windy morning. They made their way first along Route 16 then into the Via Venti Settembre as far as the Ausa River. They found the bridge damaged but not demolished and were able to cross into the Corso d' Augusto, which led into the centre of the city. This route was badly choked up with rubble from the shell-torn buildings, but a suitable way in for tanks was found through the side streets and, their mission accomplished, the two officers retraced their steps to make arrangements to bring up the troop.

The historic old city, badly damaged and apparently deserted, looked bleak and desolate, and as the two officers hurried back they saw the first civilian—a small boy. At first he was thoroughly scared, but he set up a yell of delight when he realised that these were 'liberators', and his cry brought out from the ruins some half dozen bedraggled Italians, who confirmed that the Germans had left and capered for joy at their deliverance. As it was now light and there was danger of sniping, they

were quickly sent back underground.

While No. 11 Troop was moving up Lieutenant Cross took Second-Lieutenant [Avery](#)<sup>3</sup> and Sergeant [Kenny](#)<sup>4</sup> of 8 Platoon [22 Battalion](#) forward along the same route as far as the Ausa, and it was arranged that the infantry would push on to the square (Piazza Cavour) by the shortest route, and that the tanks would join them there after fording the river and coming in on the Strada Circonvallazione, on the western side of the city. No. 8 Platoon, accordingly, at once made for the square and arrived there at 6.30 a.m.

The tank crews, eager to get quickly into the town, were faced with a tricky river crossing. Fortunately not much water was flowing, though the banks and bottom were very soft. The troop commander's tank, with driver only aboard, made the first attempt, charging down into the riverbed at full speed. With some difficulty it safely negotiated the opposite bank and stood by. The next tank, trying the same method, bogged down in the river but was speedily hauled out by the first. The last tank was then winched over, and the troop, turning left, followed the [Mercatino-Marecchia](#) tramway and made its best speed into the Piazza Cavour, where the infantry was already established. On arrival the three tanks drove up the steps of the Palazzo dell' Avengo, next to the Town Hall, and parked under the portico.

Meanwhile, at first light, 3 Greek Brigade began its general advance on the city, with 2 Battalion on the right, 3 Battalion in the centre, and 1 Battalion on the left. The first Greek infantry arrived in the city square some fifteen minutes after the tanks, and at 7.30 a.m. the mayor of [Rimini](#) informed Captain Apostalakis—the senior officer on the spot—that he was ready to hand over the town to the Allies. [Rimini](#), the key to the Adriatic sector, was in our hands. The Gothic Line had been turned.

The Greeks were jubilant and signalled their success by hoisting flags at various points in the city. Our troops were naturally more wary. Lieutenant Cross writes:

The first ceremony I witnessed was a brief one in front of the Arch of Augustus, when the Greeks mounted a guard with fixed bayonets and presented arms while their flag was being hoisted on, I think, one of the arms of the railway barrier—we at the time were in the process of getting our last tank over the stream.

The only civilians I saw in the main square were an Italian and his wife and daughters who appeared before the Greeks reached the square. They had resided in [London](#) about thirty years before, the woman spoke good English and told us they were delighted to see us and had waited for a long time to see British troops. They had had a tough time. I told them to get under cover as although we had not then contacted Jerry I expected we would do so at any minute.

When the Greeks appeared in the square, which they did while I was forward making a recce, they hoisted their flag on the tallest building. When I got back and saw the flag I told one of my chaps, Miller <sup>5</sup> by name, to see the flag was taken down as we did not want to advertise our presence. I then went forward again to the Marrechio.

Miller by means of signs and a smattering of Italian indicated to the Greeks that the flag was to come down; they were annoyed and at first refused. (Miller told me later that I had told him to see the flag came down whatever the Greeks thought.) He pulled out his pistol and told the Greek captain that the flag would have to come down or there would be trouble. There was no trouble!

While the formal handing over of [Rimini](#) to the Allies was taking place in the main square, the advance into other sections of the city and its outskirts was still continuing. On the right 2 Greek Battalion was already in the modern area —divided neatly from the old by the railway line—and, like its compatriot unit in the old city, was making its arrival as dramatic as the unopposed entry permitted. Nos. 9 and 10 Troops, in support of this battalion, had been held up by demolitions and lost one tank on a mine, but the squadron commander, reconnoitring forward, found that the bridge nearest the coast could still carry tanks. He sent a wireless message to the two troops to take the coast route in, and the tanks were quickly on their way.

No. 12 Troop, the squadron reserve, had been sent up Route 16 to support No. 11 in the centre of the town, and in attempting to ford the Ausa had one tank so badly bogged that it could not be extricated until the following day, when bulldozer assistance was required to get it clear. Two tanks of this troop, however, got forward to the square.

It was during this period of moving up that a most important discovery was

made—a discovery which caused the greatest excitement in 4 Armoured Brigade. The circumstances were as follows. While No. 11 Troop was fording the Ausa and 9 Platoon was making for the square, Lieutenant Maurice found that the Via Venti Settembre bridge would carry his scout car, and with this and a Greek carrier he crossed and went straight ahead to the Marecchia Canal, where to his amazement he found the main bridge, the 1900-year-old Ponte d'Augusto, was still intact. The demolition charges which had been placed in position had not been fired; they were now quickly withdrawn and Brigade Headquarters notified that the bridge was intact.

On receipt of this information, the commander 4 Brigade decided to make a quick thrust through the town instead of adhering to the original plan, which had been to bring the armour forward over the now muddy and badly cut up Fortunato track.

Accordingly, early in the afternoon C Squadron and 1 Company 22 Battalion crossed the Ponte d'Augusto and, driving the enemy outposts ahead of them and demolishing the buildings as they went, got to the Marecchia River proper and engaged the enemy positions on the other side of the river along the north bank. During the morning Lieutenants Maurice and Cross and an engineer officer of the Canadian Corps had got as far forward as this point and had reported that the Route 16 bridge was well down and that no immediate possible tank crossing could be seen. They considered, however, that if the concrete sides were blown and the approaches bulldozed, a tank crossing could be constructed without resorting to bridging.

During its investigations the party ran into trouble and was pinned down by spandau fire from two points—one downstream on the near side of the river and the other from the opposite bank. All managed to get safely away, though Lieutenant Cross, whose whereabouts was known to the enemy, had to break through the inside wall of a building in which he had taken cover in order to get clear.

Fourth Armoured Brigade took over the Rimini sector and made preparations to attack over the Marecchia. The plan was for 1 Company 22 Battalion to advance along Route 16 to the Celle junction and for 2 Company to attack along the coast. At 7 p.m. the infantry waded the river and 6 Field Company began to construct a crossing for 19 Regiment's tanks. The bridgehead was established before first light

on the 22nd, despite bitter fighting by the paratroops at [Celle](#) and on the coast. The tanks of Nos. 9, 10 and 11 Troops were over the river by 2.30 a.m. No. 12 Troop, which had been in reserve, covered the crossing, and the whole of C Squadron moved forward to support the infantry, who were meeting stiff opposition.

The rest of [19 Regiment](#), which had been located at Misano since the 17th, moved up to the airfield during the afternoon of the 21st, and that night A Squadron (Major Ellingham) went into the town itself, where with the rest of [22 \(Motor\) Battalion](#) it awaited orders to go forward into the [Marecchia](#) bridgehead, where C Squadron and 2 Company had surprised the enemy by their speedy follow-up and were still fighting. This was the first move in the New Zealand Division's role of pursuing and destroying the enemy forces between [Rimini](#) and [Ravenna](#).

While crossing the [Marecchia](#) C Squadron's tanks had been engaged by enemy anti-tank guns sited near [Celle](#), and had encountered minefields and demolitions on the opposite bank. Once daylight came the tanks were forced to advance with caution, shooting their way forward, and at times using smoke to screen movement and to cover mine-lifting operations. The troops on both routes—No. 11 with 1 Company making for [Celle](#) and Nos. 9 and 10 with 2 Company on the coast—fired on gun emplacements and houses from which the enemy was opposing the advance. By 9.30 a.m. the immediate objective had been gained, and with the intention of securing a line along the [Fossa Turchetta](#) between Route 16 and the sea, the attack was pushed on without a pause.

The infantry was now supported by A Squadron, which crossed the [Marecchia](#) at 8 a.m. in support of 3 Company [22 Battalion](#), which was to pass through 1 Company and exploit up Route 16. After reaching [Celle](#) crossroads, where contact was made with a troop of 18 Regiment operating on the right and with a platoon of [24 Battalion](#), No. 1 Troop (Second-Lieutenant [Paterson](#) <sup>6</sup>) and No. 4 Troop (Second-Lieutenant 'Russ' Whyte <sup>7</sup>) went forward on the parallel road between Route 16 and the railway. Both troops were heavily 'stonked' by enemy mortars and Whyte was mortally wounded. In the face of constant and heavy opposition, progress was made only with great difficulty; nevertheless by 2 p.m. the objective—the junction of the main lateral road leading into [Viserba](#)—was reached. No. 1 Troop lost two tanks bogged near the [Fossa Turchetta](#).

Farther east, Nos. 9 and 10 Troops of C Squadron, supporting 2 Company in the drive along the coastal strip, had made a spectacular advance. With a section of Canadians attached, they had bypassed a double 'blow' on the road during the night and got well ahead to where they could hear the sounds of an engagement in the vicinity of the cemetery on their left. At first light they shot up a German patrol and went forward, picking up a [22 Battalion](#) man as guide. He overshot the turn-off leading to the vicinity of his company headquarters, and as the tanks met no opposition they continued on. A barricade across the road was charged—a flimsy structure made mainly of household furniture—and the two troops went into [Viserba](#).

Both troop commanders now reconnoitred forward on foot, but excited civilians caused the enemy to take notice and some fire was met. They now went back to their tanks, shot up some enemy-occupied houses, tried conclusions with an anti-tank gun sited outside a German officers' mess, engaged such scattered troops as they could see, and then turned and made their way back to our forward positions.

The enemy was evidently caught on the hop, and the presence of tanks in his territory was a nasty early morning surprise. One German was caught pedalling down the road on a bicycle. [Viserba](#) was undamaged when C Squadron's tanks entered, but by the afternoon it had been well and truly done over by a heavy-calibre gun. The two troops spent some time on their return in a position close to the cemetery, where as retribution for their audacity they were severely mortared. Later in the day attempts to get to [Viserba](#) were stoutly opposed by the Turkoman troops (with German officers and NCOs) who held this sector of the defence line.

At 10 a.m., after a co-ordinating conference called by Lieutenant-Colonel [Donald](#),<sup>8</sup> orders were issued for continuing the advance to the Canale dei Molini. New boundaries were notified, for there had been some confusion over the left-hand limit of 4 Brigade's area. Good progress was made on this move until the buildings of Villa Sacramora were reached at approximately 10.30 a.m. Now the old familiar drill of searching every casa became necessary. The infantry had an exhausting and dangerous time, and the tanks, firing at targets the infantry indicated, opened up the buildings in which the spandau teams were working. By this means the advance was kept going steadily. By midday, however, German anti-tank guns were engaging all tank movement in the area.

One of No. 10 Troop's tanks was hit on sprocket by an anti-tank gun firing down the coast road. Fortunately it was moving when hit and slewed round, coming to a stop under cover, where it remained immobilised for the rest of the day but still did good work with its heavy armament.

By this time the enemy was throwing in the full weight of his artillery, anti-tank weapons, mortars and machine guns in an attempt to stem the advance. It was evident that he was holding from [Viserba](#) north in some strength. For the rest of the afternoon the battle went on with the tanks of C Squadron doing their utmost to search out and silence the enemy strongpoints. There were some exciting duels, and on one occasion the attackers had the satisfaction of seeing a lucky shot dislodge an enemy anti-tank gun, but the Germans were a determined bunch—paratroops no doubt—and despite continued fire by our troops they managed to work on the gun from behind the shelter of a building and get it clear before it fell into the hands of the advancing infantry.

At 5 p.m. A Squadron took over the area and C Squadron, which had been almost continuously under fire since daylight, withdrew. For the day's work there had been, surprisingly enough, only two casualties, one of these being OC No. 11 Troop, who was wounded by spandau fire when going, in response to a message from Brigade Headquarters, to reconnoitre the [Fossa Turchetta](#) crossing.

By nightfall the forward troops were well into [Viserba](#), and on the left 5 Brigade was making equally good progress. A midnight attack was now planned in conjunction with this brigade to keep up the momentum and deny the enemy time to regain balance. For this attack 3 Company 22 Battalion was to pass through 1 and 2 Companies, and A Squadron was to give tank support.

Preceded by a 15-minute artillery barrage on 5 Brigade's front, the advance up the road north of [Viserba](#) began fifteen minutes after midnight. No. 3 Troop (Second-Lieutenant Davidson), in support of 11 and 12 Platoons, and No. 2 Troop (Lieutenant [Whitton](#)<sup>9</sup>), supporting 15 and 16 Platoons, made good progress until a short hold-up occurred on the coast-road crossing of the [Scolo Brancona](#) at Bersaglio. This hold-up was soon sorted out, however, and both tanks and infantry got on to the first objectives without much difficulty. A halt was then called until it was certain that 5 Brigade was firm on its new line. Though darkness and fog had made this move



hazardous, the same conditions had also contributed to its success, for at dawn, with improved visibility, resistance became most determined.

At 5 a.m. 4 Brigade began to move forward again, and almost immediately this group ran into trouble. At 6 a.m. OC No. 3 Troop's tank, on the coast road, was hit by a bazooka and brewed up, but the crew bailed out safely, Davidson being slightly wounded. As this happened, the area was heavily 'stonked' by mortars and the infantry forced to withdraw to the cover of some nearby houses.

On the parallel route No. 2 Troop, with 15 and 16 Platoons, had an even worse encounter. The tanks had crossed the [Scolo Brancona](#), continued along the railway track, then moved across and over the Scolo Cavallaccio onto a track on the northern bank of the stream. From here Whitton and Sergeant [Windsor](#),<sup>10</sup> of 15 Platoon, reconnoitred on foot up the lane to the Casa Panzini, where they questioned an Italian who told them that there were no Germans in the house. They searched about before returning to the infantry and tanks.

The force then moved forward again, with 15 Platoon followed by the two tanks going along the lane, and 16 Platoon conforming on the right. When the infantry was level with the Casa Panzini they were fired on from the top windows, and Windsor was wounded. Whitton moved his tank up level with the fallen sergeant to give him protection and opened fire on the house. A Tiger tank pulled away from the back of the house, and at the same time the enemy sent down a bazooka bomb. This first shot missed Whitton's tank and whizzed down the lane between the two sections of infantry, but a second hit the turret, set fire to the tank, and badly wounded the driver. Whitton got out and was beginning to assist the wounded driver out when he was seriously wounded himself by another bazooka bomb. A heavy mortar 'stonk' now came down on the area, and under cover of this the enemy withdrew from the house. One 15 Platoon man was killed. The wounded were moved into the house, where they were attended to, and Windsor ordered his platoon back down the road to Cavallaccio.

When the infantry and remaining tank had gone, the enemy returned and captured the wounded who had been left in the house. About a quarter of an hour later the two infantry section leaders, returning to see Sergeant Windsor, walked straight into the arms of the Turkomen. During the rest of the day the enemy party

fired towards the New Zealand front, but not at any particular target. They withdrew at 6 p.m., taking with them their prisoners, except the badly wounded tank driver and Windsor, who was feigning serious injury. They said that they would be back later to pick up these two. As soon as they were out of the way, however, Windsor made his escape, got back to his platoon, and sent out a party to bring in the wounded driver.

During the day the infantry had held their position under heavy fire from all types of enemy weapons, and the tanks had another misfortune when No. 2B was hit and had to be evacuated. In the afternoon, when the Divisional Artillery took a hand, the forward tanks of A Squadron acted as forward observation posts. At nightfall there were only five

Taking up positions on 6 April 1945 for the initial attack on the Senio



**Taking up positions on 6 April 1945 for the initial attack on the [Senio](#)**

C Squadron moving up to join 22 Battalion at the Senio



**C Squadron moving up to join 22 Battalion at the Senio**

Headquarters of B Squadron and of Divisional Cavalry Battalion at the Senio and German prisoners



**Headquarters of B Squadron and of Divisional Cavalry Battalion at the Senio and German prisoners**



Stopbanks on the Senio  
**Stopbanks on the Senio**



A 17-pounder tank of C Squadron in the position from which it scored a direct hit on a Panther tank at Massa Lombarda (*see page 496*)

**A 17-pounder tank of C Squadron in the position from which it scored a direct hit on a Panther tank at Massa Lombarda ( see page 496)**

At Massa Lombarda after  
having been done over by  
'minnies'



**At Massa Lombarda after having been done over by 'minnies'**



Infantry being taken for-  
ward near Medicina

**Infantry being taken forward near [Medicina](#)**



After A Squadron had pulled back from where 9 Brigade suffered heavy losses at the Gaiana River—G. Frisby, H. L. Myles, G. Prentice, L. McClure, T. McK. Alexander

After A Squadron had pulled back from where 9 Brigade suffered heavy losses at the [Gaiana River](#)—G. Frisby, H. L. Myles, G. Prentice, L. McClure, T. McK. Alexander



Cookhouse at Medicina

**Cookhouse at Medicina**



At Villa Fontana, south of the Gaiana River

**At Villa Fontana, south of the Gaiana River**

runners left, and these were withdrawn to the rear in an anti-tank role. The advance along the sandy coastal strip had been brought to a standstill, and 4 Brigade's forward line was now about 200 yards north of Scolo Cavallaccio. On the left 6 Brigade (Brigadier Parkinson) had passed through 5 Brigade and by the afternoon (the 24th) was attacking **Bordonchio**. The 22nd Battalion, with **19 Regiment** tanks in support, was ordered to conform by making a further move to the north.

For this operation B Squadron (Major Wakelin), which had been standing by in the concentration area at Casa Bianca, came up at 9 p.m. and relieved A Squadron, which in the early morning had recovered its No. 2B tank when the tank commander and driver, with a section of infantry, had gone out and, after working on it, had successfully driven it in.

The attack was mounted at 8.20 p.m. and was preceded by a concentration from **22 Battalion's** three-inch mortars and a detachment of 4.2s. Nos. 1 and 3 Companies, with No. 6 Troop (Second-Lieutenant Martin Hobson) and No. 7 Troop (Second-Lieutenant **Dryden**<sup>11</sup>), moved out towards their objective—the **Moro River**—but the enemy reacted strongly and the advance was soon halted. The infantry was pinned down by mortar fire, and one tank was knocked out on a mine, with three of its crew wounded. Enemy tanks and self-propelled guns were harassing the area and restricting all movement.

During the day the body of Lieutenant Whitton was recovered and buried by the

regiment. He had died from his wounds and had been left behind when the enemy withdrew. Steve Whitton had been one of the few remaining originals and was a popular figure in the unit; he and Russ Whyte, who had been mortally wounded on the 22nd, had made many friends, and their passing was keenly felt.

At 2 a.m. the Brigade Commander came forward and discussed the situation with the commanding officers of 22 Battalion and [19 Regiment](#). The enemy showed no sign of withdrawing, despite the efforts made to dislodge him and the attempts of the forward tanks to search out and engage his guns. At 3.45 a.m. Brigadier Pleasants reported back to [Divisional Headquarters](#) that he considered any further move at this juncture to be impracticable.

Meanwhile, on the left, 6 Brigade's attack had been successful, and at 7 a.m. the coastal force were able to get moving again, though there was still some shelling and mortaring in that area. A dive-bombing attack at 7.30 a.m. helped to discourage the opposition, and by 10.30 a.m. the tanks had reached the [Moro](#) bridge. Here orders were received that [26 Battalion](#) would relieve the 22nd and 20 Regiment the 19th. The relief of the tanks was completed on the outskirts of [Bellaria](#) at 6.30 p.m., C Squadron 20 Regiment taking over from B Squadron [19 Regiment](#).

The 19th spent 26 September in a concentration area at [Viserba](#). After the strain of the past few days' fighting, the good billets (most men had managed to find beds with mattresses) were keenly appreciated. The Italians were friendly and enthusiastic about the Allied advance; they did everything they could to make our troops comfortable. Time for maintenance and rest was hoped for, but by the afternoon it was clear that the rest would be but a short one. Just before noon A Squadron was ordered to stand by, and at 6 p.m. Squadron Headquarters and two troops left to take over from C Squadron 20 Regiment in support of 3 Greek Mountain Brigade, which was advancing towards the Uso River (the [Rubicon](#)), about three miles away.

This advance made good progress, and by 8 a.m. on the 27th the Greeks, with A Squadron in support, were over the river and clearing out [Bellaria](#). By midday the squadron was moving forward again, opposed by artillery and mortar fire. One tank received a direct hit and was immobilised. The area of operations was out of the way of the numerous villages and thickly scattered habitations which up to then had



been a feature of the closely settled countryside. The day was overcast and chilly, and towards nightfall the weather got steadily worse and it rained heavily.

The tank crews spent a wretched night in a very bleak area, sheltering on the lee sides of their tanks and constructing bivvies from any materials which came to hand. Some nearby haystacks provided bedding, but the rain was so heavy that many of the less skilfully built shelters collapsed on their sodden and uncomfortable inhabitants. During the night some successful foraging yielded a supply of cognac, and this, distributed on the basis of one bottle to each tank, helped to maintain some glow of warmth. At dawn welcome news was received of relief by C Squadron 20 Regiment and A Squadron went back to a new regimental concentration area east of the [Uso](#), where the rest of the unit was settling in, having arrived only a few hours previously.

It was now blowing hard from the sea and raining continuously. The absence of the usual houses made the accommodation problem acute, and orders to dig in were not at all popular, particularly as the slit trenches filled with water and mud even while they were being dug. Some mortar bombs landing a hundred or so yards away from the area showed the wisdom of the order, however, and throughout a most unpleasant day the tank crews were kept busy digging, trying to build shelter from the cold wind and guiding the pools which now covered the area away from their bivvies. Instructions which indicated a further move were received late in the afternoon, and the prospect was welcome.

Headquarters 4 Brigade was keen to press on despite unfavourable weather and the rapidly deteriorating state of the ground. The 19th Regiment was required back on the brigade axis and Second-Lieutenant Davidson, who had been posted to Regimental Headquarters from A Squadron, reconnoitred forward and reported the going satisfactory as far as the crossroads, where a demolition would hold up the wheeled vehicles but could be bypassed by the tanks. As preparations were made for the move, orders were received for B and C Squadrons to support [22 Battalion](#), which had a protective role on the Division's left flank.

At the last minute this move was cancelled. There was general disappointment, which was somewhat allayed during the evening when a stock of brandy was distributed among the wet and fed-up troops who were taking a poor view of their

enforced halt in the bleak and barren area. Rain was still falling unabated.

During the night the Bailey bridge over the [Uso](#) disappeared under five feet of water, and the river became a roaring torrent quite impossible to cross. Any anxiety over the projected flank-defence role was fortunately put at rest by the news that the Canadians on the left of the New Zealand Division had made a rapid advance. At this stage 5 Brigade had passed through 6 Brigade, and on 30 September 22 (Motor) Battalion was the only 4 Brigade unit left in the advance. The Motor Battalion came under the command of 5 Brigade that day and relieved [23 Battalion](#).

The continuous wet weather brought almost the whole Division to a standstill. The Fiumicino River, the next objective, which it had been confidently expected would be crashed before the month ended, was now turned into a torrent thirty to forty feet wide. Behind this formidable obstacle the enemy had time to reorganise, and soon began to make his presence felt by shelling 4 Brigade's area.

This shelling was particularly troublesome, and on 2 October A Squadron had one man killed and another wounded. The German gunners had the concentration area nicely taped, and any tank movement soon brought down a shower of shells. To try the practicability of cross-country movement, the tanks were tested over the nearby ploughed ground, as this type of going represented the seasonal norm in this closely cultivated part of the country, where grain crops were grown extensively. These tests proved conclusively that until the ground dried out there was no hope of operating tracked vehicles off the formed roads; nevertheless the armour continued to reconnoitre all likely forward routes in the hope that a break in the weather would enable the advance, which had been going so well, to be resumed.

Two more casualties from shelling occurred on the 3rd. The constant attention paid by the enemy gunners to 19 Regiment's area caused the Brigade Commander to order its evacuation, and that night the unit moved to a position just north of [Orsoleto](#), a less exposed and somewhat more hospitable site.

When the move had been made to the new area the weather took a temporary and welcome change for the better. But the wet and cold had already begun to take a toll in the general health of the troops. The sickness rate in all units was high; jaundice was epidemic, and [19 Regiment](#) did not escape. Several officers and a

number of other ranks were evacuated to hospital, and it became necessary to make a readjustment of commands to keep up a working establishment. Changes notified in orders on 5 October were: acting OC A Squadron, Captain Wethey; acting second-in-command C Squadron, Captain Saxton; acting second-in-command B Squadron, Captain Kerr; acting second-in-command Headquarters Squadron, Captain [Sumpter](#)<sup>12</sup>; acting Intelligence Officer, Second - Lieutenant Davidson.

On the same day the 19th passed from the command of 4 Armoured Brigade to [6 Infantry Brigade](#), and preparations were again made to renew the advance which had now been halted for a week. This check was to prove disastrous to [Eighth Army](#)'s offensive, which up to date had gone ahead rapidly and was now well into the [Romagna](#) flats, from which it had been hoped exploitation to the [Po River](#) would be possible. Given a week or so of reasonable weather at this stage, further successes could have been confidently expected. As it was, there was still an air of eagerness abroad, and despite the still overcast and threatening skies there were great hopes that the advance would be pushed on once more.

Just before midnight on the 6th the tanks of [19 Regiment](#) moved up the coast road and the wheeled vehicles up Route 16 to take up a position facing the Fiumicino. As the unit pulled out heavy rain started to fall and there was some shelling on the road, but by 1.20 a.m. both groups had arrived in the new area ready to support 6 Brigade. It was still raining hard and did not let up all night.

By daylight on the 7th the ground once again was sodden. At 11.25 a.m. 6 Brigade advised that the forthcoming operations would have to be postponed for twenty-four hours, and that evening a conference was held to work out a method of getting the tanks over the Fiumicino. Two engineer officers gave information about the approach routes and bridging arrangements. It rained continuously all that night and all next day, but unit officers reconnoitred routes on foot, a bridgelayer was got into position near a demolition on C Squadron's route, and the tanks stood by in readiness. By then the whole area was waterlogged, and another postponement was reluctantly announced—this time till the 10th.

It rained steadily on the 9th and 10th and the enemy began to reorganise. The 19th Regiment's area received, as its share of attention, a steady shelling by 155s. There were some near misses and at 6 p.m. the unit was not sorry to pull out and

move to the locality of [San Mauro](#), where it came under the command of 5 Brigade.

Early the following morning news that the enemy had retired beyond the river brought sudden action. B Squadron, in support of [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#), and C Squadron, in support of [23 Battalion](#), crossed the Fiumicino. There was but light opposition and by dusk the attackers were at [Gatteo](#). During the night the enemy became more active, particularly in [23 Battalion's](#) area.

At 5.30 a.m. on the 12th [28 Battalion](#), with B Squadron in support, began to advance towards Sant' Angelo. The ground was boggy, and mines were encountered almost immediately. Attempting to operate off the road, three tanks were soon immobilised. Simultaneously C Squadron, with [23 Battalion](#), moved two troops westwards along the [Gatteo- Gambettola](#) road. One troop operated 500 yards ahead of the other as it was impossible to move off the road. Both squadrons had a difficult day, but by nightfall had managed to have their tanks up with the forward infantry, which was facing up to the [Scolo Rigossa](#).

A Squadron that day carried out indirect fire in support of [21 Battalion's](#) advance. An air observation post directed this shoot, in which the squadron expended 480 rounds and found the method as interesting as it was successful. Two fires started in the enemy area sent up black smoke to mark the success of the tanks' gunnery.

Operations during the day had demonstrated that to attempt to operate tanks off the formed roads while the ground was in its present soggy state was inviting disaster, and it was clear that any plans made for the 13th would have to take this restriction into account. At this stage 5 Brigade's front was approximately two miles wide, with [28 Battalion](#) on the right and [23 Battalion](#) on the left, and extended along the [Scolo Rigossa](#). There were only two practicable crossings on this front, one on the [Gatteo- Gambettola](#) road—the axis of advance for [23 Battalion](#)—and the other on the right flank of the [Maori Battalion](#) on the northern route. This second crossing was dominated by the enemy guns in Sant' Angelo, and after a reconnaissance Lieutenant-Colonel Everist recommended to Brigade that the village should be cleared so that the crossing could be used by the tanks.

At nightfall on the 12th C Squadron's forward tanks were up with D Company [23](#)

[Battalion](#), about three-quarters of a mile south-east of [Gambettola](#). B Squadron's tanks were close enough to the infantry positions on the eastern bank of the Rigossa to get in some good shooting at enemy positions on the opposite bank. The bogged tanks also took their share of this work, and during the night the enemy pulled back some 300 yards. At 1 a.m. A Company 28 Battalion attacked Sant' Angelo with one troop of B Squadron in close support. They found the place strongly held and were forced to withdraw from the outskirts of the village at 5 a.m. to a position some 600 yards west.

In the [Gambettola](#) sector, too, the enemy proved most aggressive, and on the morning of the 13th C Company 23 Battalion, supported by three tanks of No. 11 Troop, ran into stiff fighting during an advance towards Point 120, at a railway intersection south of [Gambettola](#). Here both the infantry and the tanks had a bad day. Perhaps the old superstition worked against them, for it was Friday the 13th and No. 11 Troop was working with 13 Platoon; the number of the troop commander's tank was also 13, and its name 'Discord'! Nevertheless the tough little action was very well handled by a comparatively junior NCO.

The first tank in the troop was stopped while moving up the road to support the infantry, who were under mortar and spandau fire, and the OC No. 11 Troop (Sergeant [Lugton](#) <sup>13</sup>) was wounded and the tank wireless put out of action. Corporal 'Rusty' Laird, <sup>14</sup> who took over as troop commander, was working off the road abreast of the sergeant's tank. He immediately called up the reserve tank which, owing to the uncertainty about minefields, had been held back. This tank advanced up the road and successfully got past the knocked-out tank, and then, with the acting troop commander's tank, engaged spandau posts in the buildings round the area. Both these tanks were in wireless communication and at this stage found that they were out of touch with the infantry. When moving to another position Laird's tank bogged down about thirty yards from the other tank, which had taken up a position under cover behind the wall of a house just short of Point 120.

Laird, in an attempt to locate No. 13 Platoon, left his bogged tank and ranged around on foot, but was unsuccessful. Returning, he called up the other tank and ordered it to move back to a nearby house where he could keep it in sight. Enemy infantry was now putting in an appearance, and the three tank crews were soon busy repulsing an attack. As it was evident that the tanks were out on their own, the

crews of both immobilised vehicles were evacuated under cover of smoke, taking with them code books, personal weapons, Browning machine guns, and other vital parts of the tank's armament. The one mobile tank then withdrew to the squadron rendezvous, and the crew of the sergeant's tank followed.

Laird took his crew into a house, which they immediately set up for defence against infantry, and then went out again to try to find 13 Platoon, which he eventually located in another house. He was unable to return to his crew, for the enemy attacked again and surrounded the place. A section from another platoon, with a tank in support, relieved the position shortly before dark. After dark Laird, with three troopers, went out with infantry protection and recovered the two immobilised tanks. The party had a clash with an enemy patrol during these recovery operations.

No. 9 Troop, also working with [23 Battalion](#), lost a tank that day on a mine, but claimed an enemy vehicle which had been camouflaged as a haystack. The troop used its Brownings to good effect in support of our infantry.

On the 14th Regimental Tactical Headquarters moved into [San Mauro](#) and set up in an abandoned hospital, a nauseating, dirty place, still accommodating two long-dead but unburied Italians. All headquarters were well forward, and Headquarters 4 Brigade, near [Gambettola](#), found that our own three-inch mortars were firing from a position in its rear.

A Squadron, which was still at [San Mauro](#) in support of [21 Battalion](#), continued its artillery role, and during the afternoon, in response to a report from the air observation post, which was linked direct to the squadron commander's set, engaged a German tank in the vicinity of [Gambettola](#). This was the last day of the squadron's three days' indirect shooting, in which it fired a total of 2109 rounds.

C Squadron, with [23 Battalion](#), had a further two tanks bogged, but was able to spend the day profitably knocking down enemy-occupied houses across the [Scolo Rigossa](#). The forward troops in this area were under vigorous shelling, and the enemy nebelwerfers were particularly troublesome.

B Squadron, with the Maoris outside Sant' Angelo, stood off and shelled the

village, putting in some 650 rounds, and as the enemy then ceased to react another attack was mounted after dark, when two companies of infantry with two troops of tanks in support moved in. Before dawn on the 15th the occupation was complete.

The capture of Sant' Angelo forced the Germans to withdraw from the [Scolo Rigossa](#), and at first light, while this withdrawal was still in progress, C Squadron brought up a bridgelay. At 11 a.m. No. 9 Troop went over into Gambettola while the rest of the squadron took up a position on the south bank of the river. The troop in [Gambettola](#) had an exciting day dealing with isolated enemy pockets still in the area and engaging strongpoints on the other side of the town. Several prisoners were taken, and 200 rounds of high explosive and fifteen boxes of Browning machine-gun ammunition were used. One tank was hit by an enemy anti-tank gun, but successfully engaged the gun responsible and knocked it out, killing the crew. This was an unusual encounter, as apparently both gunners saw, sighted and fired simultaneously, the tank gunner getting the better strike.

A Squadron, which had moved up with [21 Battalion](#) on 15 October and had established in [Gatteo](#), took part in an attack over the canal ( [Scolo Rigossa](#)) and pushed north-west towards the next water barrier, the Pisciatello River. Nos. 1 and 2 Troops forded the river successfully, and by 3.15 p.m. No. 2 Troop had made contact with C Company, while No. 1 Troop moved up with B Company. Both troop commanders became casualties in this action, [Lieutenant McPhail](#) being wounded while reconnoitring on foot. His tank was later hit by a bazooka and brewed up. A Honey tank following it was also hit.

Fortunately the crews of these two tanks were not hurt, but they had to spend an uncomfortable night in the damp and dubious safety of a nearby ditch. Until they reported in, there was some anxiety not only about the men but also about the codes, which could have fallen into enemy hands. The codes, however, were burnt when the tank brewed up. OC No. 1 Troop (Second-Lieutenant Paterson) was wounded in the head during the afternoon and was evacuated.

Altogether the 15th had been a strenuous day, but the advance was again going well. There was general anxiety among the armour to keep it moving, for the ground had dried out a good deal but the weather was again overcast. The sappers were doing a herculean job metalling the main routes with the rubble from damaged

buildings, and the going in the brigade area was good. The infantry was having to fight every inch of the way, for though it was obvious that the enemy was withdrawing, his rearguards fought to the bitter end and his siting of delaying weapons was superb. Mines and demolitions, too, were constantly encountered, and tank routes especially received his full attention. Obstacles were invariably well covered by anti-tank guns.

On the 16th C Squadron was relieved by B and moved into reserve at [Gatteo](#). B Squadron, supporting [23 Battalion](#), advanced towards the village of [Ruffio](#) under heavy fire, and A Squadron, with [21 Battalion](#), occupied [Bulgarno](#). Both these groups were kept under constant shell and mortar fire, and it was evident that the enemy had good observation over the whole area from the village of [Macerone](#).

Next day [19 Regiment](#) passed to the command of 6 Brigade. To try to spoil the enemy's accurate shooting, No. 1 Troop and some M10s (self-propelled anti-tank guns) demolished the church tower at [Macerone](#), where it was considered the German gunners had their observation post. This was successfully knocked down with armour-piercing and high-explosive fire, and during the day some small gains were made in [21 Battalion's](#) area while B Squadron, with [23 Battalion](#), occupied [Ruffio](#). The tanks had several casualties. The weather, which had been fine and warm, now became overcast, and at 4 p.m. rain began to fall.

Orders for 4 Armoured Brigade to be prepared to exploit beyond the [Pisciatello](#) were received with acclamation, and there was great expectation in the regiment. During the night the preliminary moves were made, the unit coming under the command of 6 Brigade; A Squadron went up to support [24 Battalion](#) and B Squadron to support [25 Battalion](#). Steady rain all night caused the formerly favourable prospects for the operation to worsen hourly.

The 18th dawned dull and overcast, but the rain ceased and plans went ahead for the [Pisciatello](#) crossing. Sixth Brigade's attack went in at 11 p.m., and at midnight the infantry was established on the north bank. The scissors bridging tanks came up, and A Squadron got ready to cross. The first tank damaged the bridgelayer, and the squadron was quickly diverted west to the arc crossing south of [Casone](#). B Squadron had already crossed at this point and was supporting [25 Battalion](#). A Squadron and [20 Regiment](#) now passed through them, and 4 Brigade's advance began.



By 10.30 a.m. on 19 October the leading tanks had made nearly 3000 yards across the flat cross-country going. It was raining again, however, and by mid-afternoon A Squadron was halted outside [Calabrina](#) with [24 Battalion](#) and B Squadron outside [Osteriaccia](#) with [25 Battalion](#). In both villages the enemy was very active. C Squadron, in reserve, had passed in the meantime to the command of 5 Brigade.

During this operation the usual difficulty with cross-country movement was experienced by the tanks, and the wet weather was making the going steadily worse. One of the many boggings down occurred when No. 14 tank of B Squadron [19 Regiment](#) attempted to pull out of the mud No. 14 tank of 20 Regiment and got into difficulties itself. 'Very careless' was the remark of the trooper who took the photograph of the digging-out operations. While these two tanks were being recovered, some agitated Italians appeared on the scene and also began to dig. After working feverishly beside the tanks, they uncovered a carefully buried hoard of valuables, which otherwise would have stood a good chance of being scooped up by the tank crews as they worked to free their tanks.

On the 20th the enemy was found to have cleared out of [Calabrina](#) and [Osteriaccia](#), and these two villages were occupied early in the morning. During that and the next day A and B Squadrons remained static.

C Squadron came up with [26 Battalion](#) as it moved across the [Rio Granarolo](#) to the Savio River sector on the 20th, and was called on next day to form a gunline firing onto the road on the western bank of the [Savio](#), to thicken up the artillery 'stunks' and to add to the general noise of the diversion intended to cover the Canadian attack on the other side of the river. A Squadron also participated in this shoot.

Careful preparations were called for in these gunline tasks; the tanks operated in exactly the same manner as the artillery, with all the usual trigonometrical calculations required for predicted shooting on mapped but unseen targets. The work put in earlier in preparing range tables and in calibrating guns now came into its own, and the good results obtained by the tank gunners were largely due to this and to the pains taken by the regiment to perfect the solid theoretical training required to enable indirect shooting to be carried out with confidence.

C Squadron's commander (Major Wilson) tells the following story of an incident which took place while his squadron was on the gunline at the [Savio](#), an incident which shows, among other things, how preoccupation with the problems of predicted shooting, while undoubtedly contributing to the discomfort of the enemy, could also cause trouble on our own side.

It was while we were in this position that my Sqn Hq was situated beside a farm house. The yard contained the usual haystack and a cesspool. The haystack was somewhat wrecked and the ground around my tank was covered with a thick layer of hay, which also covered the top of the cesspool. Getting down from my tank to go across to another vehicle I took the shortest route across the litter of hay and suddenly to the amusement of all and in a most undignified manner the Sqn Comd disappeared into the cesspool—or almost disappeared. I was certainly pretty well plastered with ordure from the chest down.

The Itie family who were still in their casa were very alarmed at the sorry state of "Majori" and Mama promptly collected my stinking clothes and within a couple of hours they were returned to me thoroughly cleaned, dry and pressed—the smartest crease I'd had in my trousers for months!

The Sqn of course thought it was a hell-of-a joke which of course it was—on me.

On 22 October 4 Armoured Brigade was relieved by 11 Canadian Infantry Brigade, and [19 Regiment](#) withdrew to [Gambettola](#) to await transporters for the move to the rest area at [Fabriano](#). That night, to mark the anniversary of the brigade's arrival in [Italy](#), a special rum issue was made to all ranks. The armour might also have been excused for using the occasion to celebrate its success in the recent operations. The brigade had done well: given dry weather, the armoured thrusts might well have carried the advance into [Lombardy](#). The 'tankies' also got great satisfaction from the close work they had done with 22 (Motor) Battalion, and the squadrons of the 19th especially were grateful for the splendid way that unit had co-operated in the [Rimini](#) battle and during the push up the coast to [Bellaria](#). Mixed with this enthusiasm, however, was some foreboding about the future. Winter was fast settling in, and with it would come again the most potent enemy the armour had yet encountered—mud. Memories of last winter on the [Orsogna](#) front were still vivid.

The unit found [Fabriano](#) a pleasant place, and the stay there lasted just over a month. The town was in the [Apennines](#), elevated and surrounded by high mountains. The inhabitants, though at first shy, were well disposed towards the troops, and all ranks were billeted in their homes. Many of the families received the men as though they were honoured guests rather than invaders forced upon them by a war they had not wanted. Indeed, most billets went far beyond what was required of them by regulations, and numbers of men enjoyed the luxury of clean sheets and the hospitality of the family table—to which many of them contributed their share of army rations.

After the first week very little rain fell and the weather was crisp and bracing, with clear nights and hard morning frosts, admirable weather in which to regain physical vigour and to recuperate after the strain of battle. The mornings were spent in training and maintenance, and most afternoons were devoted to sport, with a programme wide enough to appeal to almost every taste. The regiment fielded teams for Rugby, soccer, hockey, basketball and cross-country running. A divisional boxing tournament was staged, and first-class recreational facilities were provided by picture shows and [ENSA](#) and Canadian concert parties.

Reorganisation during this respite from action included changing over the members of tank crews who had had long spells of fighting service with men who had little battle experience. Twenty-three men of early reinforcements (up to the 5th Reinforcements) went back to the Armoured Corps Training Depot at [Maadi Camp](#), where they would instruct future reinforcements for the corps. Both New Zealand leave centres, Rome and [Florence](#), saw a proportion of the unit during the weekly rotation of leave parties in which all units had a quota. Some excellent sightseeing trips were run, and a few enthusiasts managed to get in some ski-ing after a long run in and a stiff climb up to the snow line on the friendly side of the [Apennines](#).

Opportunity was taken at this time to send home on furlough a number of officers who had had continuous service with the Division since the days of the first three echelons. A round of farewell functions was held throughout the brigade as the various old identities left on their way back home. Lieutenant-Colonel Everist, CO [19 Regiment](#), and Major Robinson, his second-in-command, were among those who, after the appropriate celebrations, temporarily left their posts for a well-deserved

furlough. Their successors were appointed immediately: [Lieutenant-Colonel Parata](#) took over the regiment, with Major Wakelin as his second-in-command. Simultaneously the command of 4 Armoured Brigade passed to Colonel [Campbell](#),<sup>15</sup> who held the appointment of second-in-command from 6 November 1944 to 25 January 1945, when he assumed command.

On the entertainment side perhaps one of the most enjoyable occasions was the presentation of the '4 Bde Revue' in the [Fabriano](#) opera house. The fast-moving, witty and topical show, put on by a versatile and talented cast in which the 19th was well represented, was applauded to the echo by the troops and by a sprinkling of their uncomprehending but politely enthusiastic Italian friends. A dance held by A Squadron was another very good show, much enjoyed by the Italian girls who attended.

As the days passed the physical well-being of the men was reflected in their improved bearing and smartness, while morale benefited from the break from battle and the pleasant conditions in which the rest was spent. Regimental messes set up for the first time since [Maadi](#) days contributed greatly to the atmosphere of unit pride and spirit.

On the 23rd warning came that the rest would soon be over, and arrangements began for a move to [Pesaro](#) on the Adriatic coast, but on the 28th this destination was changed to [Cattolica](#), a seaside resort some miles further north. On 1 December the unit, not without regret, said goodbye to the friends it had made at [Fabriano](#). There were some moving farewells, for the [Fabriano](#) folk were genuinely upset to see the 19th go; they lined the streets waving and, in many cases, weeping.

Three days before the main body pulled out rain began once more. After a wet, muddy journey it was a relief to find that at [Cattolica](#) there were quarters under cover for all troops and firm standing for the vehicles. Though cold and damp on arrival, the regiment was soon comfortable, and for the next nineteen days was not required to leave this quiet and much appreciated area. Service chevrons issued during the stay here made a patch of colour on the drab battle dress and gave the Italian women an opportunity to earn some 'mungaree' with needle and thread.

Normal training was carried out for the next two and a half weeks, and the 19th

prepared for an operational role. The vacant appointments within the unit were filled, and several newly commissioned officers took over as troop commanders. Some officers returned from furlough in New Zealand and others were reposted after spells in hospital. The 19th was up to full establishment once more. But though all set to go again, the unit was troubled for a time by persistent rumours about a big reorganisation shortly to take place in the Division. Other formations in [Eighth Army](#) were already being converted, and it was said—perhaps sometimes mischievously—that 4 Armoured Brigade would lose its tanks and become infantry before the winter operations began. Needless to say, this caused some dismay. The armoured brigade already had lost its commander to 5 Infantry Brigade, and perhaps this added colour to the story. At all events the whisper took some stamping out, and it was only after a series of conferences which began on 4 December that the matter was satisfactorily resolved. Some



German prisoners from the turret of a B Squadron Sherman

**German prisoners from the turret of a B Squadron Sherman**



Crossing the Sillaro  
**Crossing the Sillaro**



Waiting to cross the Po  
River

**Waiting to cross the Po River**



On the advance to  
Trieste

**On the advance to Trieste**



Lt-Col F. S. Varnham

**UNIT COMMANDERS**

**Lt-Col F. S. Varnham**



Lt-Col C. A. D'A. Blackburn

**Lt-Col C. A. D'A. Blackburn**



Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell  
**Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell**



Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin  
**Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin**



Lt-Col A. M. Everist  
**Lt-Col A. M. Everist**





Lt-Col H. H. Parata  
**Lt-Col H. H. Parata**



On the waterfront at Trieste  
**On the waterfront at Trieste**



The last day with the tanks near Trieste  
**The last day with the tanks near Trieste**

changes in organisation and establishment were pending, but nothing so drastic as rumour had suggested.

On the 2nd the unit welcomed back two officers from furlough, Captain Swinburn and Lieutenant Stewart. The former was posted to B Squadron as second-in-command, and the latter to the same squadron as second captain. Captain Ron Griggs took over the Reconnaissance Troop.

During the break at [Cattolica](#) squadrons arranged their own tabloid sports, and B Squadron had a hard Rugby match with a South African team at [Rimini](#), the result being a scoreless draw. Route marching, too, came back into favour as an official means of keeping fit, and was the daily experience of all who were unable to produce an excuse good enough to pass an unsympathetic squadron sergeant-major.

On 6 December members of [3 Tank Battalion](#)—a large number of whom were still serving with the unit—held a highly successful reunion. It was now almost two years since they had arrived in the [Middle East](#) and had been absorbed into 4 Armoured Brigade. They had done well and by now many of their ex-officers had been recommissioned.

The death of 'Major', [19 Regiment's](#) bull-terrier mascot and the No. 1 dog in the New Zealand Division, occurred at [Cattolica](#). Since 1939 he had served continuously with the unit, suffering wounds in battle but surviving several times when his keepers had been killed in action. His history is briefly recorded in an appendix to this volume. As befitting the rank he had earned and as was his due after the devotion which had characterised his service with the unit, he was accorded a military funeral. A suitably inscribed headstone marks his grave.

On 18 December orders were received from [Eighth Army](#) for the regiment to move to [Forli](#) the following day. The CO and an advance party left almost immediately, and the unit packed up. The 19th was a clear fine day; the wheeled vehicles were away by 8.45 a.m. and the tanks followed on transporters in the evening. By 10 p.m. the whole of the unit was in its new area, but as Brigade had already ordered a further move timed for 10 a.m. next day, very little unpacking was done.

[Faenza](#), which had been captured four days earlier, was the destination for 20 December, and this move brought the unit back into a forward operational zone. The trip was made without incident, and again all troops were billeted in houses. The area was quiet, but some shelling on the north-western outskirts of the town gave proof that the battle, now almost forgotten, was still being waged. The 19th awaited news of its role with interest and some impatience.

Next day the Brigade Commander called and outlined the plan. The regiment was to support 5 Brigade in a two-battalion crossing of the [Senio River](#) south of Castel Bolognese. This assault was to be preceded by an attack on the left by the [Gurkhas](#), who were to secure the ridge north of Ossano. For the [Gurkhas'](#) operation, which was to precede 5 Brigade's attack by two or three days, B Squadron would form a gunline and work with an air observation post. That day, also, a conference was held at Brigade Headquarters and a plan made to set up a mobile reserve for the Division for use in a flank-protection or counter-attack role. Campbell Force, consisting of [19 Regiment](#), one infantry battalion, one field battery, one company of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, and other units to be allotted as necessary by Division, was to be ready to move to any threatened sector in the divisional area, and all its units were therefore put on three hours' notice. A base was selected at the junction of the [Lamone River](#) and the railway line on the northern outskirts of the town. A Squadron reconnoitred the area set aside for 19 Regiment and selected troop positions, but was not required to move from its present position.

During the afternoon B Squadron formed a gunline of eight tanks and began shooting. Targets were engaged successfully, both by observation and prediction. This squadron was on the [Senio](#) gunline from 21 December to 6 January and, finally employing a total of 14 tanks, fired some 12,236 rounds during the period. Both day and night shooting were carried out, one of the principal tasks being counter-mortar work.

On the 23rd a jeep train was organised and proved most useful in carrying supplies, which included Christmas and Patriotic Fund parcels, to the tanks in the forward areas. An extra issue of food to the value of two shillings a man had also been donated by the [National Patriotic Fund Board](#), and an excellent variety of fare was available. On Christmas Eve, as the regiment was still on three hours' notice, a

warning was issued against over-indulgence in liquor, of which supplies were plentiful in the town. It is to the credit of the unit that, despite a highly enjoyable round of festivities, reasonable sobriety was observed.

During the night of Christmas Eve there was a light snowfall, and the troops awoke to the doubtful pleasure of a traditional white Christmas. Dean Goffin,<sup>16</sup> of 4 Brigade Band, had organised small groups of bandsmen as carol parties, and the Padre conducted well-attended services in each squadron area. The cooks, official and amateur, were early on the job, and many excellent meals were served. Tinned turkey and plum pudding were the main dishes on the lavish menus.

The day was not wholly given over to pleasure, however, for a crowd gathered to watch a demonstration of a new type of 'grouser'<sup>17</sup> fitted to the tank tracks to facilitate crossing heavy ground. In the evening two [Luftwaffe](#) planes bombed the town, and though one of their bombs landed no more than fifty yards from the houses occupied by C Squadron, no damage was done beyond blowing in the shutters of the already broken windows.

On Boxing Day the regiment was notified that 5 Brigade's attack would probably take place about 30 December. The reconnaissance officer arranged to go forward to the [Senio](#) to find a tank crossing, but enemy patrolling caused his reconnaissance to be deferred. The [Luftwaffe](#) again came over the town during the evening, but released only two bombs.

As opportunity offered, the troops spent their time rummaging around [Faenza](#), sometimes finding something worth salvaging for extra comfort in their billets, or something of more personal value as a souvenir. One night one such foraging party stumbled on to a coffin lying in a dark street; it was uncovered and held the body of a nude, shapely, and very beautiful young woman. There were smothered exclamations—more devout than profane—and the three men, appalled and uncomfortable, crept shamefacedly away. Drawn back to the spot in daylight, with additional helpers to arrange a decent burial, they found that their praiseworthy intentions were but the last act in a first-class hoax. The coffin contained nothing so pathetic as the gloom of the night had led them to believe: though the corpse was certainly all they had described, it was a plaster shop-window dummy, as alluring as only some of the modern continental stores would dare to display.

The farmlands surrounding [Faenza](#) still held a certain amount of livestock, some of which was gathered in at fairly regular intervals by 'recce parties' and dealt with in due time by the unit cooks. There were of course encounters with a few Italians who inevitably appeared unexpectedly at apparently deserted casas while the foraging was in progress. On one occasion the enemy gunners took a hand and ranged on a [19 Regiment](#) jeep which had ventured into a forward area in search of an ox calf reported to be fat and eminently suitable for human consumption.

On 29 December another squadron of [19 Regiment](#) moved to the forward area when C Squadron took over from 18 Regiment. B Squadron was still in the line, and A Squadron, in [Faenza](#), was still on three hours' notice with the rest of [Campbell Force](#), but the role of this group was now changed to a defensive one, with one squadron available to counter-attack within a limited area.

This was the position when the year 1944 ended. It had been a year packed with action, and in an imposing list of battles the 19th had played its part: [Orsogna](#), [Cassino](#), [Liri Valley](#), [Florence](#), [Rimini](#), and the advance up the Adriatic coast. There had been many new developments in the methods of warfare, some of them amusing, such as the enemy's leaflet propaganda campaign; some of them spectacular, such as our use of artificial moonlight; some of them horrible, such as the powerful, new, and terrifying flame-throwers.

All in all it had been a successful year for the 19th. Casualties in the unit had been far fewer than in any similar period of battle service as an infantry battalion. The operational employment of the tanks had at times been severely restricted by the ground over which the battles were being fought, but the thrust up the Adriatic coast had clearly proved the worth of the armour in forcing a quick decision. In the new year the regiment looked forward to taking part in a further series of the swift advances which had added such exhilaration and satisfaction to the role the tanks had played in their first year as part of [2 NZ Division](#).

In the regimental logbook several entries made during the last few months recorded details of bets made on the dates of the ending of the Italian campaign and the final defeat of the Axis: 1945 was a firm favourite for both events.

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<sup>1</sup> Lt C. G. E. Cross, m.i.d.; Papakura; born England, 1 Apr 1911; bank clerk; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> Capt A. H. M. Maurice; Kimbolton; born Wales, 5 Jul 1909; farmer; Adjnt 19 Armd Regt 1945.

<sup>3</sup> Lt F. A. Avery; Blenheim; born Blenheim, 29 Jul 1916; company director; wounded 2 Dec 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Sgt H. W. Kenny, m.i.d.; Tawa Flat; born Johnsonville, 29 Dec 1917; machine operator; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Not traced.

<sup>6</sup> Lt C. L. S. Paterson; Christchurch; born England, 12 Oct 1917; road works manager; wounded 15 Oct 1944.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Lt R. K. Whyte; born Wellington, 28 Sep 1912; farmer; killed in action 22 Sep 1944.

<sup>8</sup> Lt-Col H. V. Donald, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Masterton; born Masterton, 20 Mar 1917; manufacturer; CO 22 Bn May-Nov 1944, Mar-Aug 1945; wounded four times.

<sup>9</sup> Lt S. H. Whitton; born NZ, 22 Aug 1911; clerk; died of wounds 24 Sep 1944.

<sup>10</sup> Sgt W. C. Windsor, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 2 Oct 1917; driver; twice wounded.

<sup>11</sup> Capt B. Dryden; Mangahoe, Hunterville; born NZ, 22 Nov 1909; farmer.

<sup>12</sup> Maj D. J. Sumpter; Milton; born Oamaru, 16 Sep 1904; solicitor.

<sup>13</sup> Lt T. K. Lugton; Walton, Waikato; born NZ, 28 Apr 1912; dairy farmer; wounded 13 Oct 1944.

<sup>14</sup> WO II R. W. Laird, m.i.d.; Hawera; born Wellington, 4 Oct 1919; shepherd; twice wounded.

<sup>15</sup> Col T. C. Campbell, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Fiji; born Colombo, 20 Dec 1911; farm appraiser; CO 22 Bn Sep 1942-Apr 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Jan-Dec 1945; Area Commander, Wellington, 1947; Commander of Army Schools 1951–53; Commander Fiji Military Forces 1953-.

<sup>16</sup> Hon Capt. J. D. Goffin; Petone; born Wellington, 9 Jul 1916; shop assistant; OC 4 Bde Band Jan 1941-Feb 1945.

<sup>17</sup> Heavy pieces of angle-iron attached to a tank's tracks to give a better grip in heavy going.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT



## CHAPTER 23 – FAENZA TO TRIESTE

## CHAPTER 23

### *Faenza to Trieste*

... it is not the beginning but the continuing of the same, until it be thoroughly finished, which yieldeth the true glory.

—Sir Francis Drake

In January 1945 the New Zealand Division was on the [Senio](#), with its headquarters at [Forli](#). The 19th Armoured Regiment was wintering in [Faenza](#), with one squadron (B) forward on gunline duties and another (C) astride Route 9 behind the [Senio](#) crossing in a supporting role. The weather was bitterly cold. Those who had served on the [Orsogna](#) front a year earlier knew just how fortunate the unit was to be billeted in this dingy, unattractive town where there was ample shelter for everyone, firm standing for the vehicles, and a certain amount of cover, even when moving about on duty.

Stores and personal equipment could be kept dry, meals were regular and served hot, and in most billets the men had managed to rig up a stove or a drip-fed oil burner to keep the temperature pleasantly warm during off-duty hours. Even on the gunlines and in the support position there were casas for the tank crews, and despite icy roads and muddy approaches, the jeep train called daily with supplies. Rations, fuel, and ammunition came up without interruption, for B Echelon did a grand job. Its efforts in [Faenza](#) from December 1944 to March 1945 deserve the highest praise.

As an example of the ingenuity displayed in billets, No. 5 Troop's effort is worth mentioning, for not only had this troop made its quarters very comfortable but it had appropriated a porcelain bath. Last thing every night this bath was wheeled into position in front of the fire, where it was filled with water from tins which had been heating all evening, and in turn each member of the troop enjoyed the luxury of a hot bath. When the bathing was completed, the tub was moved—water and all, to the passageway, and next morning the water was a solid block of ice. This of course was easily disposed of; tedious bailing or special plumbing fixtures were unnecessary.

The infantry were far less fortunately situated, for their forward positions along the [Senio River](#) line were exposed, bleak, and deep in mud. The enemy front line was bastioned in the great earthworks which formed the stopbanks of the river, and his forward troops, burrowing into the reverse slopes, had not only the security of the solid bank between them and their opponents but also a good slope where dry dugouts could be constructed. They overlooked all our positions, so that all daylight movement was perilous and at night supplies had to be manhandled forward over the badly churned up, muddy approaches. At this time, the battalions were doing two weeks in the forward positions, one week in [Faenza](#) in reserve, and then one week resting at [Forli](#). Even so, their lot, compared with that of the units in support, was harsh and strenuous.

The German infantry, fighting a defensive campaign, welcomed winter as an ally and was in an aggressive mood. Patrolling by both sides was a nightly feature, and in the vulnerable area occupied by the New Zealand Division, elaborate precautions were taken against surprise attack. A comprehensive counter-attack plan was worked out, and both forward and reserve units were constantly on the alert; bridges were mined, and civilians evacuated from the forward areas. On 3 January C Squadron, supporting 5 Brigade, was ordered to stand by ready to move on one hour's notice, and at dawn each morning thereafter stand-to was rigorously observed. This squadron had the satisfaction, while in support of the infantry, of retaliating when enemy nebelwerfers and mortars shelled the forward positions. Casas in the enemy's rear areas and dugouts on the stopbanks were shot up by the tanks, and our infantry patrols more than once saw signs of the success of the shooting. The tank crews took up defensive positions around their tanks and after dark posted sentries against the possibility of patrols penetrating the area.

On the 5th [Campbell Force](#) was disbanded, and [19 Regiment](#) reverted to the command of 5 Brigade. Headquarters 4 Armoured Brigade left [Faenza](#) for [Forli](#), and Regimental Headquarters took over the four-storied building it vacated. It was dry, roomy and partly furnished, a headquarters in which the unit could cope with administrative problems in comfort and entertain in style if not in luxury. During tidying up operations the keen eyes of a unit philatelist spotted some very early issues of Italian postage stamps among the litter of papers being thrown out. They became a valuable addition to his collection and were studied with interest and envy

by many whose boyhood hobby had been reawakened by overseas service opportunities. There were keen collectors in all units.

B Squadron was relieved on the 6th and A Squadron took over the gunline, the outgoing crews returning to [Faenza](#) as it began to snow. B Squadron considered its relief to be well timed, for the fall continued for two days, covering the whole countryside to a depth of six inches and in some places piling up into drifts as much as nine feet deep. Thereafter it was a constant job to keep the tanks, ammunition dumps, and routes clear. Calls to the gunline for counter-mortar and harassing fire were frequent, and to date the expenditure of ammunition had been 12,236 rounds. Fire from the tanks in response to infantry requests was prompt and effective, especially on the few occasions when enemy patrols had penetrated; then a sticky situation would be relieved before it had time to develop into a serious one.

One task at the gunline which caused great excitement at the time was the call for fire on a train which could be heard operating at night on the other side of the river. As the railway was known to be extensively damaged, it was surprising, to say the least, that the enemy had been able to get anything to run on it. When subsequent air reconnaissance revealed that no repairs to the track had been done, it became apparent that the noises heard were of some other origin. There were many theories put forward, the most likely being that a powerful radio amplifier was being used to broadcast railway noises and so draw our fire onto an unoccupied area.

There was great keenness to show the utmost speed in bringing fire to bear on targets indicated by the infantry, and the 'tank artillery' became very proficient in this role. At night the duty crews slept alongside the field telephone, and the first ring caused a scamper for action stations, each tank being ready and waiting by the time the fire orders had been received. When the series had finished it became the custom to elevate the gun to the maximum and send over the last round as 'one for the B Echelon'.

Considering the amount of work it did, it was remarkable that the main gunline position was never picked up by enemy aircraft or artillery. The only shells ever to find their way into the area—which was just off the road—were two strays. These fell on the improvised cricket pitch not five feet from the stumps. The players

fortunately had just adjourned for the luncheon break, and the only two men in the open were digging a large pit for rubbish and happened to be below ground. Damage, therefore, was confined to the cricket pitch, which required considerable repair before the game could be resumed.

On the 16th B Squadron returned to the forward area, relieving C in support of 5 Brigade. The changeover was made without incident over frozen ground which was ideal for tank movement. The following day the Reconnaissance Troop moved a tank up to Headquarters [21 Battalion](#), where it was to act as a link to the two forward squadrons. For the remainder of the month, which continued cold with occasional snowstorms, the gunlines and the tanks in the support position fired as required in answer to calls from the forward positions. Owing to a shortage of 75-millimetre ammunition, however, the main tasks became counter-mortar work.

From the beginning of February the tempo of the winter war showed signs of quickening. Both sides increased their patrolling, and each tried by various subterfuges to make the other uncomfortable. Even A Squadron, from its reserve position in the town, was called upon to fire on several suspected enemy observation posts, among them the tower at Castel Bolognese, which was successfully demolished. The Division at this time began a series of 'Chinese attacks'—carefully prepared fire programmes in which all available weapons were used and fake wireless traffic passed, planned to trick the enemy into preparing for a full-scale attack and to accustom his troops to heavy fire from our side so that when the real thing did come they would be unimpressed by the preliminaries.

The first of these demonstrations on the [Senio](#) was controlled by [23 Battalion](#) which, in a special souvenir operation order, styled its arrangements: ' [23 Battalion's](#) All Time High Chinese Attack—to celebrate [Egypt's](#) entry into the war—Vellee Big, Vellee Fine, Vellee Stupendous Pyrotechnic Display: the greatest ever staged on any front in any war.'

The fire was mainly directed against the positions held by 9 and 10 Companies, III Battalion 2 Parachute Regiment. Guns of all calibres were used by supporting arms, while 23 Battalion used everything it had—flame-throwers, Piats, mortars, medium machine guns, .30 Brownings, and rifles. The fire plan was most carefully organised to ensure that every known and suspected enemy position in the target

area was thoroughly done over.

As seen from the forward positions, to which several members of the 19th had been invited as spectators, the show was most spectacular. The stopbanks were lit up by the lurid glare of the flame-throwers, and streams of tracer patterned the darkness. An enormous amount of ammunition was expended, but the enemy did not seem to be unduly put out and very little counter fire was experienced. A suspicion was voiced at the time that security had slipped and that too much talk prior to the show had resulted in the enemy getting wind of it.

The 19th Regiment's part in this 'Chinese attack' was played by B Squadron, which took on five casas known to be occupied, and by C Squadron, which had as its target the suspected headquarters of 1/10 Parachute Regiment.

During the month the Reconnaissance Troop (Captain Griggs) was active, its duties varying between reconnaissance work in the forward area, road repairing, and shooting up the stopbank opposite [28 Battalion's](#) positions, where four enemy dugouts, awkwardly sited for treatment by infantry weapons, were destroyed.

As an important addition to the establishment of the armoured regiment, the unit was allocated two new 17-pounder Shermans while at [Faenza](#). This heavily gunned tank was capable of taking on a Panther or a Tiger on something like equal terms. Its solid shell could, with a direct hit, penetrate the heaviest armour plate, as a demonstration using a knocked-out Panther as a target clearly showed. Owing to the large size of the gun and the space required for ammunition, the 17-pounder Sherman carried a crew of four, one fewer than the conventional 75-millimetre tank.

Later each squadron was to have one troop consisting of one 17-pounder, two 105-millimetre and one 75-millimetre, all Sherman tanks. The 105-millimetre gun took longer to get into action than the other two weapons, especially when the hollow-charge armour-piercing shell was used, and the lack of a powered traverse made this tank useless for close co-operation with the infantry. It was decided during the advance to the Po, therefore, to add a 75-millimetre tank to the troop. This was drawn from Headquarters Troop.

Some [19 Regiment](#) stalwarts said goodbye to the unit they had served so faithfully and well when the Ruapehu and Wakatipu furlough drafts left [Faenza](#) on

the first stage of their journey home. These men had been with the 19th since [Trentham](#) days. Their going caused a considerable amount of reorganisation, for some important posts had to be filled. Those who left included RSM [Rench](#), RQMS [Brown](#),<sup>1</sup> TQMS [Oliver](#), SSMs [Robertson](#) and [McGregor](#), Staff-Sergeants [Mainwaring](#),<sup>2</sup> [Neilson](#)<sup>3</sup> and [McKinlay](#),<sup>4</sup> Sergeants [Bush](#)<sup>5</sup> and [Booth](#),<sup>6</sup> Corporals [Johnston](#),<sup>7</sup> [Muschamp](#),<sup>8</sup> [Padbury](#)<sup>9</sup> and [Cottingham](#),<sup>10</sup> and Lance-Corporals [Hiskens](#) and [Le Lievre](#).<sup>11</sup>

By the beginning of March the countryside around [Faenza](#) showed the first signs of spring, and as the vines and trees began to bud the New Zealand Division was withdrawn from the [Senio](#) front to the rest areas where, three months earlier, its units had spent such an enjoyable period. Regrettably for those who had formed warm attachments at [Fabriano](#), 4 Armoured Brigade, in exception to the general rule, was sent instead to the Adriatic coast, the 19th moving to the seaside resort of [Cesenatico](#).

When the regiment, its tanks on transporters and its wheeled vehicles going by road, pulled out from [Faenza](#), the vehicles resembled well-laden gipsy wagons, for a reconnaissance of [Cesenatico](#) had revealed that it lacked the amenities and comforts with which the men had managed to equip their winter billets. Nothing likely to be useful was left behind: a piano, many stoves, and even some glass windows were transported to the new area.

The [Cesenatico](#) billets, recently vacated by coloured troops, were in a filthy condition, and much hard and dirty work was done during the first few days to make them sanitary and comfortable. Once cleaned up, the accommodation was excellent, but the regiment was not satisfied. Under the direction of the Technical Adjutant (Captain Bob McCown), the electric lighting system was put in running order and added considerably to the civic amenities. The weather in the daytime was now pleasantly warm, but swimming at the beaches was not possible for the coastal strip in this area had been heavily mined and had not yet been cleared.

As was customary during periods out of the line, opportunity was taken to improve military and mechanical standards. Courses for officers and NCOs, tests and demonstrations of new equipment, and comprehensive overhauls of the old equipment began immediately. The light aid detachment and unit fitters had a full

programme, for each vehicle was thoroughly checked, and a schedule of work was drawn up to ensure that every point received the attention needed for maximum efficiency. Sports, so important to physical fitness, were again well catered for. Teams were selected among the squadrons for Rugby, soccer, hockey, and athletics. The unit Rugby team had a match each week against various teams from [RAF](#) and [SAAF](#) units stationed nearby, and two representative matches, though played some miles away— [Eighth Army](#) v 9 NZ Brigade and [Eighth Army](#) v [RAF](#)—drew a good muster of spectators from the regiment.

Several day-leave parties made trips to the tiny mountain-top republic of [San Marino](#), whose distant spires and walls had been such an intriguing sight when seen through binoculars during the wait outside [Rimini](#) and in the early stages of the advance up the coast. The Easter Festival fell during the unit's stay at [Cesenatico](#), and in addition to the special church services, Padre Somerville organised a sacred concert and produced a play appropriate to the occasion. Both functions were well attended, and congregations at the voluntary church services were good.

On the 30th a special ceremonial parade was held and the GOC presented the ribbons of decorations awarded to members of 4 Armoured Brigade for gallantry during the campaign. Those from [19 Regiment](#) so honoured were: Lieutenant-Colonel Everist, DSO; Captain McCown, MC; Captain Kerr, MC; [Lance-Corporal Ross](#), MM. <sup>12</sup>

By the end of March the 19th had completed all reorganisation, and like all other units of the Division was ready to take part in the forthcoming offensive. On the 17th Lieutenant-Colonel Everist had returned from furlough and resumed command, [Lieutenant-Colonel Parata](#) being posted to 20 Regiment. A few days earlier Major Daryl Carey had left for home, and by the beginning of April, when preliminary orders were received for the impending action, the appointments in the regiment were:

Regimental Headquarters

CO: [Lt-Col A. M. Everist](#)

2 i/c: Maj B. H. Wakelin



Adj: Capt A. H. Woolven

Tech Adj: Capt R. C. McCown

IO: Lt J. A. McPhail

Assistant IO-Adj: 2 Lt G. C. Laidlaw (attached)

OC RHQ Tp: 2 Lt C. L Don (attached)

RMO: Capt H. G. Bremner

Padre: Rev J. S. Somerville

LAD officer: Capt O. L. Jenkins

YMCA representative: Mr G. W. Edwards

## Headquarters Squadron

2 i/c: Capt T. G. S. Morrin

QM: Lt G. S. Hampton

Sigs officer: 2 Lt A. H. M. Maurice

OC Recce Tp: Capt W. D. Blair

2 i/c Recce Tp: 2 Lt R. W. Wayne

spare: 2 Lt R. G. McMillan (attached)

## A Squadron

OC: Maj J. M. Wiseley

2 i/c: Capt D. Kerr

2nd Capt: Capt R. N. Griggs

OC No. 1 Tp: Lt A. R. Monson

OC No. 2 Tp: 2 Lt C. G. MacDiarmid

OC No. 3 Tp: 2 Lt B. G. Falk

OC No. 4 Tp: 2 Lt R. A. Vazey

spare: 2 Lt H. T. Stribling (attached)

2 Lt C. J. Lorimer (attached)

## B Squadron

OC: [Maj C. K. Saxton](#)

2 i/c: [Capt R. J. Hislop](#)

2nd Capt: [Capt C. C. Jordan](#)

OC No. 5 Tp: 2 Lt A. J. Cameron (attached)

OC No. 6 Tp: [2 Lt F. B. Ryan](#)

OC No. 7 Tp: 2 Lt B. N. Vickerman

OC No. 8 Tp: Lt W. M. Hobson

spare: 2 Lt A. H. White (attached)

## C Squadron

OC: [Maj H. M. Swinburn](#)

2 i/c: [Capt H. N. Davis](#)

2nd Capt: [Capt P. G. Brown](#)

OC No. 9 Tp: 2 Lt T. L. C. Williams

OC No. 10 Tp: [Capt L. F. Brooker \(attached\)](#)

OC No. 11 Tp: 2 Lt W. K. Lloyd

OC No. 12 Tp: Lt G. D. Brown

spare: 2 Lt C. E. Dalwood (attached)

2 Lt G. Ryder (attached)

This list is as at 7 April. It has not been possible to make a further check for the period 7 April to 3 May, during which, owing to battle casualties and other reasons, there were some changes.

No longer could the 19th claim, as it had done for several years, to be a [North Island](#) unit. The provinces it first drew on— [Wellington](#), Hawke's Bay and Taranaki— were still represented, but so was the rest of New Zealand. In fact, the statement was now frequently made, not without some justification, that there were more 'mainlanders' in the regiment than North Islanders.

On 4 April, with high hopes and with morale and physical fitness at their peak, the regiment moved to a concentration area north-west of [Forli](#) in preparation for battle. Though very confident, not even the most confirmed optimist among the troops could have predicted that by the end of the month the campaign in [Italy](#) would be virtually over and that the unit would have taken part in brilliant battles and sensational advances which would culminate in the utter rout of the German forces. During this period the New Zealand Division was to crash its way through the enemy defences from the [Senio](#) to [Trieste](#). Then, within a few days of the Germans' capitulation in [Italy](#), would come news of victory in [Europe](#).

D-day for [Eighth Army's](#) offensive was 9 April, and the initial plan was for 2 [Polish Corps](#) on the left, 2 New Zealand Division in the centre, and 78 British Division on the right to assault the [Senio](#) simultaneously, and to cross and establish bridgeheads on a three-divisional frontage over the Santerno.

While the 19th was in the concentration area, 18 Regiment, with 5 Brigade, and 20 Regiment, with 6 Brigade, were already on the [Senio](#), where the infantry with armoured support drove the Germans across the river and manned the eastern stopbank in readiness for the main assault on 9 April. This action was to prove of the greatest consequence, for it enabled the New Zealand Division to get away to a flying start and was a material factor in the speedy success of the first stages of the

drive north.

Between 5 and 9 April [19 Regiment](#) spent the time exercising with the troops it would support in battle, fitting grousers to the tank tracks, and carefully studying the arrangements for the attack, with the aid of maps and air photographs of the country on the proposed line of advance. In the interests of secrecy operators from the Royal Armoured Corps came over to net the wireless sets. For the operation the 19th was under the command of 9 NZ Infantry Brigade, which comprised [22 Battalion](#), [27 Battalion](#) and Divisional Cavalry Battalion, all veteran units converted from their former specialist roles into infantry. A Squadron was allocated to [27 Battalion](#), B Squadron to Divisional Cavalry Battalion, and C Squadron to [22 Battalion](#).

At a conference at Main Divisional Headquarters, attended by all officers down to squadron commanders, it was revealed that the attack was to be on a two-brigade front of 4500 yards, with 5 Brigade on the right, 6 Brigade on the left, and 9 Brigade in reserve. The 27th Battalion, supported by A Squadron, was given a special task on the right flank of 5 Brigade, the occupation of [Cotignola](#). The main points for the operation were:

- (1) Secure and command the [Senio](#) stopbanks.
- (2) Withdraw during a heavy bombing programme and then assault the [Senio](#), establish a bridgehead and push on to the [Lugo](#) railway.
- (3) Advance and establish a bridgehead over the [Santerno](#) River.
- (4) Break out from behind the bridgehead over the Santerno.

An intensive two-hour bombardment of the area between the Canale di [Lugo](#) and the [Santerno River](#), using 2000 tons of fragmentation bombs, began at 1.50 p.m. on 9 April, a clear warm day. At 3.20 p.m. the artillery took over. The programme was divided into five gun attacks, with ten-minute pauses between each. During these pauses fighter-bombers strafed the [Senio](#) positions. At 7.20 p.m. the artillery became silent and for two minutes flame-throwers went into action against the far bank. Then the barrage opened up and the infantry assault began.

A Squadron was the first to move out of the regimental area; with its A1 Echelon, it left at 7 p.m. under cover of the noise made by the barrage, and moved forward to a lying-up area. This move, though still well behind the fighting zone, was not without its excitements. From the [Apennines](#) on the left to as far as the eye

could see to the right, the gun flashes of the barrage were an almost unbroken line of flickering lights. The din was terrific. There was little return fire, and the few heavy shells which did come back towards the lying-up area exploded harmlessly in the fields.



From the Senio to the Adige. As 19 Regiment's squadrons were attached at different times to different brigades, the route shown is approximate only

**From the [Senio](#) to the Adige. As 19 Regiment's squadrons were attached at different times to different brigades, the route shown is approximate only**

Under this tremendous barrage the infantry of 5 and 6 Brigades crossed the [Senio](#) in assault boats and on kapok bridges and cleared the enemy from the far stopbank. Moving forward again, they encountered tanks and quickly proved the worth of the Piat gun in determined hands. Several Tigers were destroyed, as were some self-propelled guns, by this weapon. By midnight the final objectives, some 4000 yards from the [Senio](#), were taken.

A Squadron, which had planned to be over the [Senio](#) and in a lying-up area by dawn on the 10th, was delayed and could not get up. As Cotignola was already in the hands of 78 British Division, this delay was fortunately not serious. The squadron and [27 Battalion](#) subsequently made contact with 78 Division and learned that the town—apart from stray Germans—had not been occupied by the enemy. Not required to carry out its original role, this force therefore returned to 9 Brigade's assembly area. The rest of the 19th moved during the morning of the 10th over the [Senio](#) to a position about a mile forward of the river, and remained there for the rest of the day and most of the 11th.

The barrage and the bombing had gashed great gaps in the spring crops, and broken and twisted trees and vines held some grim sights, yet none stirred such interest as a pair of hares lying by the side of the tank track. Where dead men had been passed almost unnoticed, these fleet, furry little creatures, stretched stiff in death, seemed by their very insignificance to emphasize the sadness of the scene and to reawaken feelings of pity for the now all too familiar sight—a war-ravaged countryside and its unfortunate inhabitants.

On the evening of the 11th [19 Regiment](#) moved forward again to another lying-up area. From there the CO and the squadron commanders attended a conference at which the divisional plan was outlined. The 5th and 6th Brigades were now to secure a bridgehead over the [Santerno](#), and when this had been accomplished, 9 Brigade was to take over from 5 Brigade and advance parallel to the railway and south of [Massa Lombarda](#). The two brigades not only successfully established this bridgehead on the night of the 11th–12th, but forged well ahead towards the next major barrier during the day.

At 7 p.m. on the 12th orders were received for squadrons to move with their respective battalions to an area facing up to the [Sillaro River](#). The two forward brigades were now firm on their new line, having fought magnificently and advanced twelve miles since the opening of the offensive. Their original opponents, [98 Division](#), were practically wiped out, and the enemy had lost fifteen German officers and 1083 other ranks as prisoners of war.

The policy now was to keep on crashing through the enemy defences, and [General Freyberg](#) decided on a night attack on the [Scolo Correcchio](#), which was held by strong forces of infantry supported by tanks and anti-tank guns. The attack was to be on a two-brigade front and would be launched under a heavy barrage, which would carry the advance forward to the Sillaro. Sixth Brigade was on the right and 9 Brigade on the left, the latter disposed with Divisional Cavalry Battalion and B Squadron on the left, [22 Battalion](#) and C Squadron on the right, and [27 Battalion](#) and A Squadron in reserve and responsible for flank protection.

The attack began at 3 a.m. on the 13th, and by dawn 6 Brigade had captured both banks. Ninth Brigade struck harder opposition and was still fighting when the tanks which had moved up during the night joined their battalions. At 8 a.m. A and B

Squadrons each had two troops up with the infantry, and the other two handy in reserve. C Squadron ran into some pockets of enemy during the move up and had successfully dealt with these when it was held up at the Scolo Viola and had to call on the engineers' assault squadron for assistance in making the crossing. It was 8.30 a.m. by the time the first tanks got to [22 Battalion](#). Here good progress was made, the tanks pushing out in front until pockets of strong resistance were encountered and the infantry vacated their Kangaroos (troop-carrying Shermans) to mop up.

Enemy shelling was heavy, and Divisional Cavalry Battalion had some casualties. Prisoners were coming in steadily from all battalions; noticeably shaken, they were a very mixed bag. Some seemed to be mere boys; others were quite elderly men. During the morning Tiger tanks were reported on the brigade front, but despite these and heavy shelling B Squadron moved several tanks forward some hundreds of yards to a local bound on the [Fosso Squazzaloca](#). C Squadron also moved two troops forward of the main line, but encountered no opposition until the afternoon, when a Panther knocked out No. 10 Troop commander's tank and caused casualties to the infantry. Quick work by 'Amgot', the 17-pounder tank, resulted in a direct hit, and to the intense satisfaction of all who saw the duel, the Panther caught fire.

All the morning our tanks, the artillery, and the medium bombers had been searching out the enemy tanks, but these managed to elude every attempt against them. In the afternoon the brew-up of the Panther was quickly followed by two further victories when the bombers caught two Tigers. Despite this, however, resistance continued to increase, and in Divisional Cavalry Battalion's sector the forward infantry and B Squadron's tanks were forced to withdraw towards the Scolo Viola. It had been an active day, and the 19th's casualties were one man died of wounds and two wounded. One tank (B Squadron's) had been knocked out, a scout car had brewed up, and the Divisional Signals instrument mechanic's truck had been hit and set on fire, but prompt action by Signalmen J. Brady had prevented a full-scale brew-up.

A good eye-witness account of the day's work has been supplied by Second-Lieutenant Cameron, OC No. 5 Troop, who kept a diary and recorded regularly the events which were highlight experiences in his troop:

My troop, No. 5, was with A Sqn Div Cav Bn, and I was fortunate in knowing the Sqn Comd and the three platoon comds. The attack started well; we had prisoners before we had been moving ten minutes and without firing a shot. Later things were not so easy.

The day wore on with all the usual hold-ups for mopping up, negotiating deep muddy drains, making detours to cross small canals as well as stops while dragging information out of very scared civilians.

At some stage during the early afternoon—time did not seem to matter then, only daylight when one could see and darkness when one could not—we came on a nasty obstacle. It was a muddy-bottomed canal with the far bank much higher than the one we were on. My Sgt's tank tried to cross on a small flimsy bridge but that collapsed. He then tried a direct approach and became well and truly bogged. It took some time getting the tow ropes secure owing to the mud but after that we soon got the tank free.

We returned to the collapsed bridge and used our tracks to chew enough of the far bank down to get the troop across.

In the meantime the infantry had de-kangarood, crossed the canal and continued to advance. They had not got far when they came under heavy mortar and machine-gun fire, plus some high-velocity shells which sounded like tank fire. We moved forward past the infantry, and as I was making a wireless report to my Sqn Comd, Maj Saxton, I saw two enemy tanks moving at right angles to my advance about 1500yds away. My gunner, Jack [Ferguson](#),<sup>13</sup> immediately opened fire with the 75-mm but the range was too great. At the same time I called up the 17-pounder tank but by the time he was in a firing position the enemy tanks were out of sight. Then the fun started!

We continued to move the troop forward among the olive trees but the visibility was very bad and the enemy tanks continued to move backwards and forwards along our front. It became a time of great tension. When both sides would come into view, we would fire, the Germans would fire and both would move. We could not afford to stay still, their gun was too powerful—I can still hear those 88-mm shells going past my turret!



I can only remember seeing one hit on a German tank, low down on his tracks, but it did not stop him; their hides were too thick.

On my right flank was an open stretch of semi-swamp land with a road on the far side, and after some time at this pot shooting we had advanced perhaps six to eight hundred yards. Suddenly my Sgt saw an enemy armoured vehicle come out from cover on the far side of the swampy ground. It was an open topped tracked vehicle with an 88-mm gun mounted; a nasty weapon. He immediately gave the necessary fire order and his gunner scored a hit. The vehicle turned off the road and re-entered cover and a few minutes later dense smoke appeared from in the cover. However we were not able to confirm a definite kill.

While this was going on our 'little friends' were having a tough time, casualties were mounting and we seemed to be unable to silence the opposing fire. They called for smoke from the field arty and as usual they were quick to answer this call for assistance. The first I knew of this was when I saw a canister with smoke streaming from it land just in front of my tank. I glanced upwards and the air was literally full of smoke shells. In a few minutes my Tp was completely hidden and of course we could see nothing. I reported back by wireless and was told to return behind the inf at last light—which I was very thankful was not far off.

That night while waiting for rations and supplies to come forward the troop was discussing the day and I realized how fortunate we were that those German tank gunners were not crack shots!

At 2 a.m. on the 14th 9 Brigade put in a further attack on the Sillaro position. By first light Divisional Cavalry Battalion and [22 Battalion](#), with B and C Squadrons in support, were on the stopbanks. A Squadron, supporting 27 Battalion, was on the left flank along the [Scolo Zaniolo](#). With daylight the enemy put down a tremendous volume of fire and some of the forward elements of both battalions were eventually forced to withdraw. D Squadron Divisional Cavalry Battalion, with No. 7 Troop (Second-Lieutenant [Vickerman](#) <sup>14</sup>) in support, hung on and in the afternoon an attack by C Squadron Divisional Cavalry Battalion restored the position. No. 6 Troop (Second-Lieutenant [Bill Ryan](#) <sup>15</sup>) earned high praise from the infantry for its support during this attack. The tanks moved to the crest of the stopbank to give supporting fire, and when the troop commander's tank was hit and set on fire he changed over

to the corporal's tank, from which, with his head out of the turret, he directed the shooting of the troop and dealt quickly and effectively with the enemy posts and mortar positions. Despite sniping and shelling, Ryan maintained his dangerous position until the attackers were firmly established. He was later awarded the MC.

During the whole of the 14th nebelwerfer and mortar fire, particularly from the vicinity of [Sesto Imolese](#), was most troublesome. It was evident that the enemy was making a desperate attempt to stem the New Zealanders' advance. Intelligence reports advised that 278 Infantry Division (a fresh formation) was now facing the New Zealanders. Paratroops, a number of whom had also fallen into our hands, were also being used to bolster the defence.

Casualties in [19 Regiment](#) for the day were one killed and seven wounded, B and C Squadrons each losing a tank.

That night, as a result of the Army Commander's decision to reinforce the successful thrust by the New Zealand Division, the Division left [5 Corps](#) and came under the command of [13 Corps](#). On the 15th preparations for enlarging the Sillaro bridgehead were well in hand.

The barrage began at nine o'clock. In 9 Brigade's sector the infantry surged forward and [27 Battalion](#) was quickly through [Sesto Imolese](#), the trouble spot of the last two days. It took a large number of prisoners, then ran into enemy tanks. Fighting their way forward with determination and daring, the leading troops of [27 Battalion](#) were undeterred by the 60-ton Panthers in their path. Moving boldly in the darkness, they tackled them with Piats and phosphorus grenades, and in a very short time performed the almost incredible feat of knocking out or setting on fire no fewer than four of these monsters.

By 4 a.m. on the 16th the engineers had a bridge over the Sillaro. The tanks crossed and by dawn were up with the infantry. The reserve squadron (B) and Divisional Cavalry Battalion also crossed.

Throughout the day the advance along the axis of the railway line continued steadily. Tank obstacles were encountered at the [Scolo Sillaro](#) and again at the [Scolo Montanara](#). With the aid of 28 Assault Squadron, these were quickly crossed, and the infantry was able to move much of the way in Kangaroos, with the tanks exploiting

forward in reconnaissance. Isolated pockets of resistance and mortar and machine-gun posts were speedily dealt with by fire from the tanks, and just before sunset patrols pushed ahead into [Medicina](#) and reported the town clear, with 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade in possession.

This attack on the 16th had been a spirited success. Both New Zealand brigades (the 9th and the 6th) were at the peak of fighting form and had forged rapidly ahead. They were ready and eager to keep rolling on.

Supporting arms and reserves, despite the speed of the advance, were well up and the 9 Brigade reserve units—Divisional Cavalry Battalion and B Squadron—were forward of [Sesto Imolese](#). They had helped to handle the many prisoners passed back and had witnessed the excellent air support given the attacking troops, which had been a material factor in the rapid progress made by the Division.

One incident which will be remembered by all in the reserve units was the spectacular crash of a Spitfire, which occurred close to the headquarters forward of [Sesto Imolese](#). The plane had been damaged by anti-aircraft fire and the pilot, attempting to land on the roadway, suddenly swerved into a field to avoid some infantry. He landed upside down and was extricated from the wreckage with difficulty.

At dusk the forward line had its left flank within one mile of [Medicina](#), and in preparation for continuing the advance next morning, reconnaissance parties went ahead for considerable distances. No contact was made, and it was evident that the enemy had pulled well back. As the area immediately in front was crossed by many irrigation ditches running parallel with each other but at right angles to the axis of advance, suitable routes for the tanks and Kangaroos were reconnoitred, and the assault squadron made ready to assist where crossings could not be found.

At 5.30 a.m. on the 17th, without any opposition, 9 Brigade moved off again, [22 Battalion](#) and C Squadron on the right and [27 Battalion](#) and A Squadron on the left. The infantry were in Kangaroos. Apart from the delays occasioned by the many ditches to be crossed, the advance went unhindered until the next major barrier, the [Gaiana River](#), was approached. Here the New Zealand Division's old opponents, 4 Paratroop Division, were holding a line. Bazooka, mortar, machine-gun and small-

arms fire greeted the attacking force, and casualties were heavy, for the terrain in this area was flat and treeless and there was little or no cover from fire or from view.

Nevertheless, without any delay, a forceful attempt was made to assault the stopbanks. On the right 4 Company 27 Battalion, with No. 2 Troop (Second-Lieutenant [MacDiarmid](#) <sup>16</sup>) in support, and on the left 2 Company with No. 4 Troop (Second-Lieutenant [Vazey](#) <sup>17</sup>) in support, moved up smartly to attack. Ron Vazey led his troop to within thirty yards of the stopbank, coolly left his tank, and went forward on foot to climb to the crest to reconnoitre the position. In the face of heavy fire he made his observations and returned to his tank with vital information concerning the canal and the demolished railway bridge. He then directed the troop on to enemy positions and continued to give supporting fire to the infantry until his tank was hit, first by heavy mortar and later by bazooka, and set on fire. Vazey was seriously wounded, but as a result of his bold venture and cool leadership, a hold was secured on the near stopbank. His daring exploits in this engagement earned him the MC. Second-Lieutenant Ryan (OC No. 6 Troop B Squadron), working with Divisional Cavalry Battalion, also distinguished himself by repeating the performance which had earned him such high praise from the infantry during the Sillaro attack. His tank, from the top of the stopbank, once more played a leading part in subduing the enemy fire.

At this stage things were extremely sticky, and self-propelled guns began to engage the tanks from the flanks. The infantry was also having heavy casualties, and the forward troops were withdrawn while the armour and artillery shot up the enemy positions. The paratroops, however, were fighting true to form and reacted strongly with heavy mortar and machine-gun fire. When things were at their worst, Padre Somerville arrived and went about the task of attending to the wounded and organising their evacuation with his usual quiet courage and cheerful efficiency. His presence in the forward area caused no surprise; in fact, the timely arrival of the Padre at hot spots had become so much the usual thing that it was accepted without comment. Considering the practical difficulties of getting forward in a fast-moving advance, it must always remain a puzzle just how he invariably managed to materialise when needed most. Throughout the whole advance from the [Senio](#) to [Trieste](#) his work was a grand example: entirely on his own initiative, he worked with the forward stretcher-bearers, and there are many 19th men who have reason to be

grateful for his ministrations.

By nightfall the enemy had quietened down, and Divisional Cavalry Battalion and B Squadron were able to relieve [22 Battalion](#) and C Squadron. Casualties for the day were one other rank killed and one officer and six other ranks wounded. One tank had brewed up and a 17-pounder Sherman had been hit on the gun. One tank had a track shot off and another was bogged down. The Technical Adjutant reconnoitred the two immobile C Squadron tanks, but the enemy on the stopbanks was keeping them well covered, and recovery was not practicable while the snipers were so active.

The day's operations, so far as they concerned the units on the left flank, were recorded in a narrative entitled 'Operations of "A" Sqn [19 Armd Regt](#) under comd 27 NZ Bn at [Villa Fontana](#)' by the squadron commander (Major Wiseley) a few days afterwards:

At first light (17th) the tanks were back with their inf. coys all grouped in a small area and all anxious for an advance. Some delay and much bustle ensued owing to the late delivery of maps and codes and the necessity for getting such a large number of sets—tank, kangaroo and infantry—satisfactorily linked. About an hour after first light the Bn moved out with two troops of tanks leading, each with a coy of inf in kangaroos in support. The remainder of the tanks followed Infantry and Tank HQ and all tanks but those of the two leading troops carried a smothering array of inf.

Only blown bridges and canals impeded the advance which proceeded at a high rate with the leading tanks doing their own recce and pushing on with little chance of caution. The one idea was to catch the enemy while he was still disorganised and in retreat. Just short of [Villa Fontana](#) a more serious obstacle was encountered and there was a delay while a route round it was found. During this hold-up all vehicles of the group closed up on HQ which was travelling behind the forward elements. A crossing was now found, and [Villa Fontana](#) added to the list of liberated places amid the usual fusillade of flowers and vivas from the populace.

The leading troops had passed on a further 500 yds, and HQ were on a lateral road just clear of the town and in view of an open stretch of country where the stop-

bank of the Gaiana could be seen in the distance. The road of advance led straight to the bank and the leading troop on the right—No 2, Lt. MacDiarmid—called up reporting the position and suggesting an Inf Recce on foot as the possibility of anti-tank defences seemed worthy of investigation. I agreed in principle and the Inf decided to go forward in kangaroos. Two kangaroos proceeded up the road and immediately drew heavy mortar and SA fire which covered the whole area but concentrated mainly on the forward moving vehicles and those at Inf and Tank HQ. There were casualties among the reserve personnel.

No 4 Coy Comd decided to immediately reinforce his one forward platoon and the coy raced forward in kangaroos under very heavy fire. Coy HQ were established in a casa about 80 yds short of the stop-bank. Losses to the Inf were severe; two kangaroos brewed up, others were caught in spandau and mortar fire. It was a dashing operation designed to secure the stop-bank and if possible the initiative. But the dash of the kangaroo crews and the gallantry of the infantry had to compete with stiff opposition. The line was heavily manned by 1 and 4 Para Div men in carefully prepared and well dug in positions.

Our infantry reached the stop-bank and endeavoured under heavy fire from the front and flanks to consolidate: this they never achieved completely, but decided nevertheless to hold on. The tanks throughout had been within three to four hundred yards of the stop-bank giving all possible support with all armament. They now moved in to two hundred yards for more effective observation. During the first hectic half hour they fired continuously inflicting heavy losses on the enemy and destroying many posts which had been raking the stop-banks with spandau fire from the flanks. Targets indicated by Inf HQ over the 38 wireless set were smartly dealt with but the engagement had been so hot that ammunition supplies had been seriously reduced and AP was being used for fire against slit trenches.

By this time the action on the left had required the committal of one reserve troop and with the position still in the balance I had to relieve No 2 Tp with No 1 and for a time be entirely without reserves—a reluctant decision for the battle was yet young.

No. 1 Tp (2 Lt. Stribling <sup>18</sup>) moved in and No 2 Tp came out to replenish and to repair damage—a job which had to be tackled with all haste. Supply were equal to

the task and by the time the troop were clear of the area of mortar and sniper blitz, the trucks were up and waiting. With the arrival of No 1 Tp the action in this sector died down to a continuous hate of fire by both sides from under cover. This sector was flanked on the left by the railway line and about 80 yards from the intersection of the stop-bank with the railway embankment was a casa which with its out-buildings served as Inf Coy HQ.

The decision to attack on this side had been taken simultaneously with that on the right, but more time had been available for a recce. 2 Lt. Vasey [Vazey], Comd No 4 Tp, after a foot recce, decided that the enemy were definitely in strength but that A/T guns were not likely in that area. I agreed. The infantry were hopeful of outflanking the enemy on the railway side, and the attack went in at high speed led by the tanks. Opposition was very heavy; the kangaroos were under punishing fire and in order to try to relieve the difficult situation created by the infantry having to attack the dug in position after a 600 yard approach across perfectly flat country, 2 Lt. Vasey rushed the bank with his own tank. He was supported by the remainder of his Tp and the enemy was thus held at bay for the all important few minutes it took to unload the infantry at their positions.

It was a daring gamble taken with the full knowledge of the risks involved and it succeeded at least in part, for the infantry established themselves in positions to command the stop-bank and in buildings close to it.

2 Lt. Vasey had his tank hit by a bazooka and a hail of mortar bombs came in; the tank brewed, he was seriously wounded and the operator killed. Another tank of this troop was also put out of action and I immediately sent in the reserve troop via the railway line. This troop moved in to support and was forced to occupy open positions close to, and in full view of the enemy. Their only protection was the stop-bank and the railway embankment and this made it necessary for the enemy to show himself in order to bring direct fire on to them. That troop watched those banks!

Contact with the infantry was close and was well maintained with 38 sets for the tanks were scattered in support all within 2–300 yards of Inf Coy HQ. The infantry were roughly handled by very heavy mortar fire and by many snipers, but were themselves in a belligerent mood and at no time did they allow the initiative to slip

from their grasp. Throughout the day the tanks took a good toll of snipers and of Huns who tried to push forward and re-establish on the near bank. For the remainder of the day something in the nature of a fire fight and a sniper v sniper contest ensued, but the position otherwise remained unaltered.

Towards evening the enemy attacked the Inf HQ on the right with heavy stonks and with bazooka fire almost completely demolishing the building and starting fires. At the same time he started to close in. The Inf had not sufficient numbers to resist the attack and 2 Lt. Stribling, seeing their desperate plight but in the failing light being unable to do much to assist, took his Tp in still closer to give moral support and to do what he could with SA fire. His eventual objective was Coy HQ where he thought in the worst of contingencies he could evacuate the personnel or give absolute cover. However the infantry decided to retire. He saw what few were left, leave, and then concentrated on covering the open ground to prevent the enemy from coming forward. I was without reserves to commit in his support, but No 2 Tp was rapidly approaching battle-worthiness and were ordered to make all haste, for it was felt with 6 tanks, even on fixed lines of fire, the enemy could not hope to cross the open country.

The Hun did not risk it and shortly after last light 27 Inf Bn were in a position to commit another company which reached this section of the stop-bank under cover of darkness. By morning they were dug in, consolidated, and prepared to dispute ownership with any Paratroops. The tanks remained in support on each flank.

For the first three hours of the above operation Inf Bn Hq were established in a kangaroo on a lateral road. The Comd tank was immediately behind. Communication between Inf and Tank Comd [was] difficult by wireless and hazardous on foot. There was heavy mortar fire and snipers were located both ahead and in the town (Villa Fontano) at the rear. With the action in the balance however no move was made till noon. A large casa slightly forward had a stable suitable for the purpose required and Hq established here proved more satisfactory, for information from the tanks was then immediately available to the Bn Comd.

The enemy later gave close attention to this group of buildings scoring direct hits with a heavy calibre gun. Late in the afternoon was a trying time, the Inf Comd was at Bde HQ conference, the enemy were in the process of trying to drive [4 Coy](#)



off the stop-bank, and a shell wrecked the ops room. All infantry communications were cut completely, the Adj killed and several others wounded. The only forward link now remaining was the Tank OCs represented in the ops room by the Sqn Comd, operator and dual lead. No time was lost in transferring this all important set and group to the turret of the tank in the lee of the building.

A conference was held that evening—again in the stable—a plan to force the stop-bank was outlined and several more direct hits occurred. The plan was cancelled shortly afterwards and a change of HQ soon followed. Next evening saw a tremendous concentrated barrage, which had been preceded by a day long air attack, and was followed by a mass flamethrower attack. This set the stage for the final removal of the Para Divs from [Gaiana Canal](#) and indeed, from the entire battlefield in [Italy](#).

On the 18th the forward troops of both squadrons shot up enemy-occupied houses and strongpoints over the river, while at [Divisional Headquarters](#) arrangements were being made for a full-scale assault on the Gaiana, with plans to continue over the Scolo Acquarolo and the Fossadone and then exploit to the [Quaderna](#). For this operation 9 Brigade would be on the right and the [Gurkhas](#) on the left. A tremendous barrage (over 150,000 rounds) would be put down and flame-throwers were to be used en masse ahead of the infantry assaulting the Gaiana stopbanks.

The fireworks began at 9.30 p.m. From Tactical Regimental Headquarters an excellent view was obtained of the enemy area. The paratroops' line received the full weight of the heaviest barrage our troops had yet worked behind; the flame-throwers then followed up with a sheet of fire which seemed to envelop the whole of the far stopbank. It appeared impossible for any living thing to have survived the terrifying preliminaries to this attack. But the paratroops were tough and were still able to put up a fight. As the barrage opened they were busy engaging our forward positions with nebelwerfers and mortars. Expecting an attack, they had sent patrols towards the near stopbank under cover of this fire. These men, caught in the open, were incinerated by the flame-throwers, and their charred corpses bore horrible testimony to the terrifying efficiency of this new weapon.

The infantry had successfully taken the first objective by 2.30 a.m., but the

enemy quickly filtered back on the right flank and engaged the engineers working on the tank crossing over the Gaiana. Operations had to be suspended while this opposition was dealt with. Meanwhile fresh crossing places on the left of the sector were reconnoitred. The 27th and A Squadron were now sent forward in a flank-protection role, but the tanks supporting the attacking battalions did not get across the Gaiana until 6.15 a.m., and were held up again at the next barrier while crossings were constructed under fire.

The sappers did a splendid job and the bulldozer drivers in particular came in for high praise, as this extract from a B Squadron troop report shows: 'Excellent work performed by the two open bulldozer drivers (from [6 Fd Coy](#)) operating with this Sqn on the morning of 19 Apr, at point 154. After completing a crossing ... they moved on to the next demolition where they continued to work under heavy and accurate mortar fire until wounded and unable to carry on. Even though wounded they did not leave their machines where they were but drove one out to safety and placed the other on the side of the demolition where it would not impede any future efforts by the tanks to get across. It was largely due to the efforts of these men that the tanks were enabled to eventually cross and link up with the infantry.'

By late morning the forward squadrons had tanks with their battalions ready to support the attack to the next bound. This attack was made with air support and the enemy positions were bombed and strafed as our troops moved forward. A succession of canals intersecting open country had to be crossed during the first 1000 yards, and the initial progress was somewhat slow. Fortunately, however, the withdrawal of the paratroops had been too hurried to permit them to carry out their usual thorough demolitions, and the bridge over the largest canal—the [Quaderna](#) — was taken intact.

At 5 p.m. Divisional Cavalry Battalion, with two troops of B Squadron, was on the next bound. The 22nd Battalion, on the left, had been held up by heavy mortar fire, and the supporting C Squadron tanks had to move round to the right flank because self-propelled guns had the open ground to the front well covered. By sunset the left flank had moved up and 9 Brigade was on the Canalazzo and already moving forward again. The reserve battalion (the 27th), with C Squadron in support, had also come up and was guarding the right flank.

It was here that a tank commander (Sergeant [Perry](#) <sup>19</sup>) in C Squadron had a tense moment when a fanatical SS man popped out of a canal and at point-blank range fired at his turret with a bazooka. [Perry](#) bowled this daring German with a grenade—without even pausing to pull the pin! The throw was a good one, for its force knocked the bazooka man flat on his back, and the following tank delivered the coup de grâce before he could recover his balance. [Perry](#) later became RSM, and grenade training in the regiment was always the opportunity for someone to ask with an innocent air, 'Do you throw them before you pull the pin or after, Sar' Major?'

The advance was still proceeding, when at 8 p.m. orders were received that 9 Brigade would be relieved by 5 Brigade and [19 Regiment](#) by the 18th. During the evening the advance had been so rapid that the forward tanks were well past the advised bomb line, and the point troop of C Squadron was bombed by Spitfires in mistake for German tanks. Fortunately there were no casualties.

The relief by 18 Regiment took place during the night without a hitch, and [19 Regiment's](#) tanks moved back to a rest area close to [Medicina](#). At 1.30 a.m. all squadrons reported safely in, except for one tank from B Squadron which was bogged.

The 20th and 21st were spent in maintenance and replenishment. A sugar factory in [Budrio](#) yielded a good supply of that most useful commodity of trade. Some of the tanks were able to carry enough to ensure that their crews would not lack for anything for the rest of the campaign. The crews were also able to have a much needed and much appreciated clean-up. At conferences at 9 Brigade Headquarters plans for the next phase of the operations were outlined. The Brigade Commander visited the regiment in the rest area and congratulated all ranks on the co-operation and gallantry shown in the recent operations. He also indicated that in the event of a successful breakthrough the 19th would have an important job out in front, for the brigade would then become mobile and the regiment, in the lead, would have a battalion in Kangaroos under command. The rest of the infantry would follow in lorries.

The unit was now on one hour's notice to move, and there were high hopes that the mobile role would soon materialise. There was a distinct air of impatience abroad, for the news from the two forward brigades was good, and 9 Brigade and [19](#)

Regiment were anxious to get cracking. Next morning (the 22nd) a warning order to be ready to move at 10.30 a.m. was received with much satisfaction, and approximately at that hour engines were turning over and the head of the column began to start up. The order of march was Reconnaissance Troop, A Squadron, B Squadron, [31 Anti-Tank Battery](#) (now under command), Regimental Headquarters, C Squadron and AI Echelon. The B Echelons were to follow later. The destination was north-westwards of the Idice River.

The trip was a long and dirty one along back roads and across fields, and twenty-seven miles were covered before the concentration area was reached. Here orders were received for an attack along the brigade axis to the River Reno, and dispositions for battalions and squadrons were arranged. A Squadron moved out immediately to the forward left flank, but before further positioning moves were made the attack was called off because of darkness.

At the Fossa Quadria, however, A Squadron, still without infantry support, had made contact with the German rearguard, which was in strength along its banks. The squadron attacked and the enemy returned the fire with heavy mortars and small arms. The squadron had three casualties: Sergeant Gordon Riggir, a popular NCO, died of wounds and two men were wounded.

After A Squadron had been withdrawn an enemy plane hovered over the area dropping anti-personnel bombs, but otherwise a quiet night was spent, and at dawn the interrupted advance was resumed. On the left A Squadron, with two companies of [22 Battalion](#), and on the right B Squadron, with a further two companies of the same unit, moved forward with little opposition. C Squadron was in reserve and was followed by Divisional Cavalry Battalion and 27 Battalion in motor transport. The Reno was reached soon after midday and a reconnaissance revealed no sign of the enemy.

While the regiment stood easy awaiting orders, the engineers were busy repairing a ford over the river in the vicinity of Barca di Dosso. By 4 p.m. they had the road ready for traffic, but two hours later Brigade advised that there would be no move before next morning. Out in front 5 and 6 Brigades had lost contact with the enemy and were continuing to advance unopposed. Now began a frustrating period. The whole of [Eighth Army](#) was surging forward, and the regiment, eager to be in at

the kill, was destined to be kept fretting at the bit for several days.

There were numerous conferences during the night of the 23rd–24th and various plans were discussed, but by morning, as there had been no contact on the Division's front, a non-tactical move was ordered.

Traffic on the brigade axis was packed nose-to-tail, and [19 Regiment](#) joined the stream of vehicles, crossing the [Reno](#) at 10.30 a.m. and moving slowly until 3.15 p.m., when a halt was called and a concentration area occupied. Brigade advised that there would be no further move that day, and news was received that 5 Brigade had reached the Po without making contact with the German forces. It was a peaceful evening, and around the vehicles—each festooned with greenery and flowers by the Italians who had lined the road as the regiment moved into the rich valley of the Po—groups gathered to discuss the news. Jerry had 'had it'. The enemy had not stopped at the Po—that fact seemed incredible. The paratroops taken during the advance had been as full of fight as ever. Bitter opposition between them and the New Zealanders since [Crete](#) had provided endless incidents for discussion. Their prowess had long been acknowledged, and while they were not regarded as invincible, they were reckoned as easily the best troops in the German Army. Now they had folded up. Many flagons of the local wines were emptied that night. Confusion to the enemy and the chance to give him one more kick in the pants was the spirit of the drinking.

Though not manned by the enemy, the great River Po was still a formidable barrier. It was over 300 yards wide, deep and swift, and it had the usual high stopbanks; no bridges were left of course. On the 24th and 25th, while the regiment cooled its heels in the concentration area, the forward formations of the New Zealand Division were making the crossing in assault boats. Fantails and a ferry were employed, and as Anzac Day wore on the New Zealand Engineers completed [Eighth Army's](#) first pontoon bridge. An unbroken stream of traffic pushed on over the Po.

But many bridges were needed to cope with the vast northern movement of a whole army, and every hour saw [19 Regiment](#) losing its place in the list of priorities for crossing. But the regiment was not idle. Reputed fords were reconnoitred and found fictitious. Headquarters of varying importance were importuned unsuccessfully.

Guile was attempted, but tanks were too solid to escape detection and moved too slowly to manoeuvre into momentary gaps; besides, the only structure capable of taking a tank was the pontoon ferry. A class 40 bridge was being erected, and on this the unit built its hopes.

The 25th passed, then the 26th, and the only vehicle of [19 Regiment](#) across the Po was the reconnaissance officer's scout car. At 1.30 p.m. he reported being at [Badia](#), just short of the [Adige](#), so it was obvious that the gap to the forward troops was now a wide one, and impatience grew hourly. It should have been a pleasant rest, for the surroundings were ideal. The war had not touched this part of the country, and it was a change to see farmhouses which were not in ruins, and growing crops ungapged by shell holes. The people, too, were most friendly, and wine and produce were freely obtainable. But the wait at the Po was not regarded with any satisfaction; everyone was too much infected with the urge to push ahead to derive much benefit from it.

On the 27th the Brigade Major from Headquarters 9 Brigade—now over the river—got permission for one 17-pounder of 31 Anti-Tank Regiment to cross, and just after lunch the reconnaissance officer called up with the information that [19 Regiment](#) had priority for one squadron and Headquarters to cross on the ferry. C Squadron, moving speedily across country, was soon waiting at the ferry point, but by 7 p.m. had been able to get only five tanks over. At that hour all work ceased on the ferry, and the CO tried to get permission to use the class 40 bridge which had just been opened for traffic. His endeavours were foiled by a Corps' order that until additional decking was available the bridge was to be used by wheels only. As a final blow, just at dusk an explosion caused by a floating mine wrecked two pontoons and some girders in the centre of the bridge. The ferry was requisitioned to repair the gap. There was nothing for it now but to wait in patience.

Late that night news came through that tanks of 18 and 20 Regiments were in support of [27 Battalion](#) across the Adige. Ninth Brigade had taken over from 6 Brigade, and next morning (the 28th), after a bad start in heavy rain, the advance was racing on again, with [Venice](#) as the objective.

The 19th was not the only armoured unit biting its nails on the south bank of the Po. Part of the 18th and 20th were also still waiting, as were some British tanks.

Some of the latter tried to make the crossing in an amazing contraption, a rubberised fabric boat which fitted over the tank like a huge shoe. Twin propellers driven by the tank engine provided the power. Launching was a tricky business, however, and did not seem to be attended by much success. One Sherman which was safely floated was ignominiously sunk by an accidental burst of Browning fire from the following tank. The fabric hull was not proof against small-arms fire, and the resultant 'scone-doing' was spectacular. The taking of a photograph by a New Zealander during recovery operations was not appreciated by the Tommies, who were also resentful about the mirth and pleasantries the incident evoked.

On the 29th the brigadier in charge of the class 40 bridge let slip to the CO that some tanks could now cross, and quick action resulted in the rest of C Squadron and Regimental Headquarters getting over. C Squadron was away like the wind, and by evening had succeeded in getting its tanks ferried over the [Adige](#) also. Meanwhile permission for the rest of the regiment to cross was obtained from Rear Headquarters 4 Brigade, the only higher authority still within reach. By persistent pestering and swift action by the drivers—who watched for breaks in the traffic and nipped in speedily—the whole of the regiment, including B1 and B2 Echelons, was over the river by 6 a.m. on the 30th. The chase was on.

Meanwhile Regimental Headquarters and C Squadron, which had got their tanks one by one across the [Adige](#), started out on a point-to-point. Their first halt was just short of [Padua](#), where they refuelled and received the bad news that the only bridge over the Brenta Canal had been closed to tank traffic. A possible ford was reconnoitred, but engineer assistance was required to make it usable. Frantic inquiries elicited the vague statement that in [13 Corps'](#) area, some 10 miles away, a class 40 bridge might be available. A detour was made and by 9 p.m. the crossing was accomplished, but a dark wet night, bad roads, and an impassable traffic jam caused a midnight decision to halt, bed down and get away again at daylight.

By noon on 1 May, after a flat-out chase, this group had made contact with 4 Brigade and the regiment's A1 Echelon in an area north of [Venice](#). Orders were received that as from 1 p.m. they would come under the command of 9 Brigade and were to push ahead as soon as possible. A and B Squadrons were to remain under the command of 4 Brigade until contact had been made with 9 Brigade, when they would also be sent forward.

But the hunt was almost over. The German Army was already routed, and the only resistance being offered came from small do-or-die skirmishing groups or from startled outposts which were unaware of the disaster which had overtaken their forces.

With the first signs of enemy disorganisation the partisans had struck; they came as a valuable ally to the pursuing units. They did not flinch at a pitched battle, and before our forward troops reached them they had already captured several towns. Perhaps their greatest contribution, however, was the accurate information they had gathered about routes, enemy locations and movements. With their aid the advance forward of the [Adige](#) had been swift and certain.

The 19th Regiment, now in two groups, again pressed on. C Squadron and Regimental Headquarters, after an all-out drive at their best speed, reached [Sistiana](#), at the extreme north of the Adriatic, on 2 May and, contacting Headquarters 9 Brigade, were ordered immediately to [Trieste](#).

News had already been received that [Trieste](#) had fallen to Tito's troops advancing from the north, but this proved to be somewhat premature, for the Germans still had strong forces on the coast outside the city. They were also manning road blocks near [Miramare](#), and though a few Yugoslav troops had entered the city on the 1st, they had not been able to take several strongpoints. It was a somewhat explosive situation, and this was explained to the troops before movement began. The role of the regiment was mainly to impress the occupants of [Trieste](#)—civilians, partisans and Yugoslav troops alike—with a show of force. No fighting was expected at that time.

After a reconnaissance C Squadron, under the command of [22 Battalion](#), entered the outskirts of the city. Here they were greeted with tremendous enthusiasm by crowds which lined the streets and pressed in on the tanks until a lane barely wide enough to drive through was left. Towards the city centre the spectators thinned out, and the leading tanks ran into some sniping shots from a needle gun, a light anti-tank weapon, whose crew was obviously ducking from intersection to intersection. One tank pulled out of the column and ran round the block to stalk this daring opponent, and had just got into a firing position when a woman wheeling a pram



walked into the line of fire. The tank's aim was spoiled, and by the time the shot could be got away with safety the needle gun and crew were disappearing. They were not seen again.

A large force of Germans was found to be in possession of the Palazzo di Justizo. They were keeping at bay a party of partisans to whom they were unwilling to surrender. They were quite prepared to surrender to our troops, but the partisans were naturally unwilling that we should steal their plums. After much unavailing talk the contretemps was resolved by the tanks firing several rounds of armour-piercing high-explosive in the windows and doors, after which the partisans had no difficulty in entering the building and taking over. Another German party, found in the Museum, fled on the approach of the tanks. One man was wearing part of an ancient suit of armour, which not only impeded his progress but left his rear unprotected; his predicament caused much merriment among the tank machine-gunners, who kept him skipping for some time.

Both infantry and tanks worked round the streets, but the Yugoslavs were uncooperative, the civilians as usual were too voluble and contradictory, and there was little daylight left. With the position not at all clear in the rest of the town, at dusk the tanks were sited at strategic spots for the night.

The campaign in [Italy](#) was virtually over. At noon that day Colonel-General von Vietinghoff-Scheel had formally surrendered all land, sea and air forces under his command. Cables of congratulation on the New Zealand Division's part in the victory were received by [General Freyberg](#) from many sources. The New Zealand Government's message read: 'The heart of every New Zealander is overflowing with today's news, with relief that a stubborn campaign through rough country and in bitter weather is ended, and with pride that New Zealanders, who have always shared in the hard going, should have been triumphantly at the spearhead of victory.' But in [Trieste](#) it was an uneasy peace; tension robbed the moment of the joy it should have brought.

That night A and B Squadrons laagered outside the town in the [Barcola](#) area. Evidence that scattered enemy resistance was still likely to be encountered was confirmed by a report that early that morning, while on a reconnaissance ahead of the advanced group, the RSM (WO I [Massey](#) <sup>20</sup>) and his driver (Trooper [Davey](#) <sup>21</sup>),

together with a despatch rider (Trooper [Rohloff](#) <sup>22</sup>), had been ambushed by some Germans with an anti-tank gun and taken prisoner.

The incident occurred in front of the divisional forward positions one mile below the [Trieste](#)-Villa Opicina road fork. The party headed north at 4 a.m. to contact our tanks, wrongly reported as being two miles north and on the move. Ten minutes later a German marine section hit the scout car dead centre at 50 yards with a captured two-pounder and opened up with small-arms fire, wounding all three men. The driver, Vic Davey, was hit in the shoulder, and the car went over the edge of the autostrada, landing upside down 30 feet below.

About twenty Germans surrounded the wounded men, gave first aid, and sent them back to their company headquarters for brief interrogation. Davey, who was badly hurt, was put in a truck, but the RSM and Rohloff were put with some other prisoners (five men from Divisional Cavalry Battalion, the original crew of the two-pounder gun). The whole group, which comprised about 500 German troops, seven diesel trucks and four light anti-aircraft guns, moved off towards [Opicina](#).

The Germans and prisoners spent the day shuttling up and down roads while the [RAF](#) bombed and strafed. About 2 p.m. the enemy deployed and formed a defensive arc in front of the village, into which he moved his transport. Soon afterwards continuous strafing and small-arms fire from Divisional Cavalry Battalion and [22 Battalion](#), which were working down the road, broke up the enemy party into small groups. The RSM managed to persuade the group he was with to let him go out towards the Divisional Cavalry with a white flag. As he moved other German posts opened fire, so he threw the flag away and ducked down into a gully. He eventually made his way to a self-propelled gun of 16 Lancers and then to the CO of Divisional Cavalry Battalion, to whom he reported the German dispositions and strength. The Divisional Cavalry pushed ahead, with the RSM acting as guide to the leading platoon. Some 20 Regiment tanks came up, and he was able to guide them round the mines which he had watched the Germans lay earlier in the day.

The enemy offered little resistance beyond desultory fire. Many surrendered, and others withdrew down the left-hand fork from [Opicina](#), blowing the road behind them. The Divisional Cavalry Battalion and the tanks turned right and passed down the hill road to [Trieste](#). There the partisans lifted the minefield, and the New

Zealand infantry and tanks arrived in the city just after dusk. Rohloff's group surrendered immediately our troops made contact, and Vic Davey was handed over when the remaining Germans surrendered to Lieutenant-Colonel Donald two days later.

On the 3rd, while the infantry ( 22 Battalion, with half of C Squadron, and 27 Battalion, with the other half) were engaged in the final clearing of Trieste, the rest of the 19th spent a busy day on maintenance. The performance of the unit fitters and the tank crews was outstanding. Between the River Po and Trieste, 244 miles had been covered, mostly flat out and with only very brief halts. Extensive adjustments or major repairs had been impossible. Nevertheless, only two tanks (both radial-engine Shermans) had failed to arrive at the destination in first-class mechanical and fighting condition. The crews now made the most of the opportunity for a good clean-up. Looking spic and span once more, squadrons split up the following day, rejoined the original infantry units they had been supporting, and with them moved into and quietly occupied Trieste.

The number of Yugoslav troops in the city increased hourly, and the tension mounted proportionately. As a precautionary measure all unnecessary men and vehicles were evacuated to unit B echelons outside Trieste, but despite constant patrolling in the streets by bands of heavily armed partisans, male and female, there were no incidents. Plans had been made, however, for the withdrawal of our troops if the attitude of the Yugoslavs forced hostilities.

Though it was an uncomfortable experience, for the situation was electric and dangerous, the first few days of the occupation of Trieste were interesting. The easy manner and commonsense attitude of our men were in direct contrast to the truculent and emotional air of the Yugoslav and partisan troops sharing the occupation. Tactful handling of awkward incidents and firmness where necessary prevented clashes and ensured that the status quo was maintained.

Notices posted around the city by the 'Supreme Command of the Yugoslav Army of Slovenia' were studied with interest by our troops. Each notice was signed by the military commander and a political commissar, and each concluded with the slogans 'Death to Fascism—Liberty for the People'. Yugoslav foraging parties, with horse and donkey-drawn transport, systematically searched whole streets and carted off—

ostensibly for military use—loads of the most unlikely looking gear. The areas occupied by our units were spared this searching, and the inhabitants were grateful. For some time there was no fraternising between the two armies, but neither was there any serious attempt to interfere with each other's activities. This situation in [Trieste](#) still obtained on 9 May when the end of the war in [Europe](#) was announced.

The news, tremendous though it was, was received calmly. The tense atmosphere made any form of celebration seem out of place, and the British and American units which for the time had replaced the 9 Brigade battalions the regiment had been supporting also let the occasion pass without noticeable joy. While most of the war-weary world went crazy with delight, the troops who had played so great a part in bringing about the victory felt capitulation to be something of an anti-climax. In [Trieste](#) they were experiencing a new development, later to become better known as the 'cold war'.

A thanksgiving service conducted the following Sunday by the Padre was the only official, and in any case perhaps the most appropriate, function held by the regiment to mark the end of the fighting in [Italy](#) and in [Europe](#).

The Yugoslavs, partisans, and the [Guardia del Popolo](#) maintained their grim demeanour and kept up their own one-sided assault on fascists, ex-fascists, suspected fascists and other real or imagined political opponents. The plight of the population of [Trieste](#) was unenviable, for many were arrested, no doubt on the flimsiest of pretexts. It was, so the story went, a bad thing to have a fascist background, but it was even more unfortunate to be a creditor of a member of the [Guardia del Popolo](#).

As they went about their politically imposed task of dealing out 'Death to Fascism' and presumably arranging 'Liberty for the People', members of the [Guardia del Popolo](#) made no secret of their resentment against our forces in the city. The continued restraint and good discipline of the troops, however, gave them no excuse for incidents which might quickly have turned ugly. The Yugoslav command, too, was wise enough to recognise that the few men we had in [Trieste](#) were backed by powerful forces. Daily flights of Allied aircraft massed in large formations over the city were another potent argument for peace. Nevertheless, despite the odds against them, the Yugoslavs maintained a bold show; they covered all our positions, pointed

their two-pounders at [19 Regiment's](#) tanks, trained machine guns on cricket match crowds, and did not permit their troops to reduce their heavy load of weapons by so much as one grenade.

The weather was now warm and sunny, and on the 11th summer kit was issued. Clad in drill, our men looked cool, smart, and efficient by comparison with the heavily clad, bandoliered, and bewhiskered people facing them. Certain of the Triestini were quick to notice this, and with only a phoney war to attend to it was natural that there should be some spare-time skirmishing in a more romantic field. Swimming was popular with the New Zealanders, and on many of the beautiful beaches mixed bathing with the local lovelies allowed excellent opportunities for opening moves by both sides. Until supplies were obtained from [Venice](#), swimming trunks were at a premium. With only 25 per cent permitted leave, the few fortunates who possessed a pair were able to lend them at a profitable rate.

[Trieste](#), though cosmopolitan, had an essentially Italian core, and most of the Italian folk were friendly, especially so towards the New Zealanders. Indeed, during those uneasy days of May and June 1945 there were many residents of that strategically important seaport who regarded the New Zealanders as the saviours of their city. Throughout their unhappy history the people of [Trieste](#) had been pushed around by various nations and factions, and now Regimental Headquarters and all other New Zealand headquarters were constantly embarrassed by tearful, terror-stricken Triestini begging for protection or asking for intervention on behalf of relatives who had fallen into the hands of the [Guardia del Popolo](#). Protective duties were undertaken quite unofficially by many of our men, and some homes were provided with relays of callers, for it was soon found that the presence of a New Zealand soldier in the house kept away unwelcome visitors.

By the middle of the month diplomacy had so far progressed as to allow formal official visits between senior officers of the two armies, and for a few carefully staged sporting events to take place between the Yugoslav and New Zealand troops. All functions were attended by much ceremony. The Yugoslav tank brigade, which now had twenty-seven Russian tanks in the town, was [19 Regiment's](#) main contact. Its officers entertained the second-in-command and adjutant to dinner, and this compliment was returned a few days later. A soccer match between the two armoured units resulted in the 19th team being beaten, but it was an excellent

game and the losers were presented with a pennant. A brass band was in attendance, and Lieutenant-Colonel Everist's arrival on the sideline was marked by the playing of the National Anthem and a vast amount of well-mannered saluting and bowing by the Yugoslav officers.

Sporting fixtures between the New Zealand units and [Royal Navy](#) and British Army units put much less emphasis on impeccable behaviour and were both popular and frequent. Each day the [Trieste](#) harbour became more and more crowded with small craft as units put into commission almost every type of boat which could be floated, enemy midget submarines included. The regiment re-engined two German launches which had been put out of commission and also acquired several yachts. Rowing and sailing races were daily events, and with swimming and water polo already popular, aquatic sports had almost as many adherents as the more usual land games. Sightseeing was also a regular feature, and the 19th fleet did daily runs to the cove where the liner Rex and several other large ships lay scuttled.

On 1 June 20 Regiment relieved the 19th in [Trieste](#), and the unit moved to an open-air camp on the pine-covered hills above the city. From vantage points about the camp site the view so resembled [Wellington](#) that it seemed hard to realise that home was 10,000 miles away. The area was an attractive one, and for the first time since [Cesenatico](#) the unit was concentrated. Regimental messes and a co-ordinated programme of sporting and social events was now possible. With the easy conditions prevailing the change was welcome.

Many Italian families living nearby opened their homes to our men, and the unit did its best to return their hospitality. Squadrons organised dances, garden parties and picnics, and had as their guests many of the fair sex. This was a most enjoyable period; relieved of an operational role, the whole unit could relax and take full advantage of the attractive surroundings. The sea was close, and below the camp, at Villa Sistiana, the 19th's fleet of small craft were moored for the few hours in each day when they were not at sea crowded with sun-tanned troops and their friends.

Leave was generous, and the Division's leave centres at [Venice](#), Rome and [Florence](#) were well patronised. 'Swanning'—unofficial extensions of official trips in transport—enabled many men to see something of the Dolomites, southern [Austria](#) and [Switzerland](#). Meanwhile the tension in [Trieste](#) had gradually died down. A

demonstration on 8 June and a strike on the 25th provided the only incidents of note, but did not unduly disturb the pleasant days.

At this time there was much coming and going. Those with long service were marched out at intervals to the New Zealand roll and departure home, others took up appointments elsewhere, and there was necessarily a general post in regimental appointments. Among the old hands who left the unit at [Trieste](#) were Padre John Somerville, the second-in-command (Major Wakelin), OC C Squadron (Major Swinburn), and Captains Ron Griggs, Strat Morrin and Bill Jordan. Several newly commissioned officers—former 19 Regiment NCOs—marched in from the New Zealand Officer Cadet Training Unit, which had put through its first intake after being set up at [San Basilio](#) in January.

June drifted pleasantly into July. The Yugoslavs had pulled out of [Trieste](#) and the only ripples in the calm of the New Zealand summer holiday atmosphere—and even these added to the homely touch—were when working parties were called upon to take the place of the striking watersiders at the docks. The 7th Reinforcements had already left for New Zealand, the 8th were getting ready, and there was much conjecture among those who remained as to the future of the Division. It was expected that it would soon move to the Japanese theatre, but no official announcement was forthcoming. The 9th and 10th Reinforcements were hopeful of getting home, but the remainder were popularly given no chance at all.

Training had recommenced but was not too strenuous and was confined mainly to smartening-up drill, small-arms practice and physical training. Leave was still extensive, and some special courses were being run at various spots in [Italy](#) and even as far away as [England](#). Those eligible by reason of service and previous study were able to arrange through the Education and Rehabilitation Service, which was now functioning throughout all divisional units and establishments, for opportunities to continue their interrupted vocational studies. Towards the end of the month preparations were made for a move, and the regiment began to pack up.

The tank crews and scout-car drivers got ready to hand in the vehicles which for so long had been the focal point of their whole existence. Only then did the impact of the changing times really begin to be seriously felt. Moving to [Lake Trasimene](#), was the announcement. Well, the unit had been there before. Not such a bad spot,

but not to be compared with [Trieste](#) of course. No tanks this time; no war either. Wonder what the next move will be, and when? These were the sentiments and questions which found a place in almost every letter home, for censorship now was a thing of the past. It was a paradox, too, now that a man could write almost anything, that the news should dry up. There was still a steady official silence about the future, but as usual there were lots of rumours.

On the 26th [19 Regiment's](#) drivers took their tanks on their last trip and handed in thirty-five Shermans at the [Udine](#) depot. Four days later the balance, plus all the scout cars, were handed over to 20 Regiment. Then, on the 31st, after many farewell functions, some of which had lasted long into the night, the regiment left [Trieste](#) in the early morning for the staging area at [Mestre](#).

The journey was made in easy stages, four days being spent on the road, passing through [Mestre](#), [Bologna](#) and [Fabriano](#), with time to look around in each centre. At noon on 3 August, just over a year since it was in this part of [Italy](#), the 19th set up a camp in an area midway between [Perugia](#) and [Assisi](#). A few days later the 8th Reinforcements departed, and once administration and camp construction had been completed, leave parties set out for the official centres in Rome, [Florence](#), [Venice](#), the Alps and [Senigallia](#), and unofficial centres not listed in the New Zealand Division's excellent selection. [Trieste](#) was among these unofficial centres, for a tenderly whispered 'Ciaou' was capable of several translations; to most it meant 'Goodbye and thanks' but to others it called 'Come back, come back', and without stern duty to forbid, it was hardly surprising that there were some who fretted to return.

August was hot, so was September, and for those who stayed in camp these two months were frustrating and uncomfortable. The war with [Japan](#) had ended with dramatic suddenness on 15 August, and now, except for occupation duties, there was no further need for soldiers. It was natural that the troops of a citizen army should become restive; nevertheless, the habits acquired as soldiers died hard, and despite constant goings and comings, full regimental organisation was maintained and discipline did not deteriorate noticeably.

Organised sport had replaced to a great extent the many duties which had filled the days while on active service. The rigid standards of physical fitness imposed and



inspired by the team spirit paid high dividends. Never was esprit de corps more necessary than now. Standards of conduct and discipline were maintained without undue policing or resorting to long periods of 'square-bashing'. Groups with similar interests were able to get together and devise programmes to pass the time pleasantly and to some profit. Rugby trials began, and competition was keen. Hockey, soccer, and basketball teams began training as summer gave way to autumn.

On 27 September the 9th Reinforcements left the unit on their way home, and now many letters from New Zealand began: 'We had first-hand news of you today when ... paid us a visit.' Almost every man who had left the unit had taken a visiting list from comrades still in [Italy](#). Those who were travelling around New Zealand on discharge leave were honouring the promises made, and so friendships formed on service were extended, and the name of the 19th and the men who served in it became better known to those whose husbands, sons, brothers or sweethearts still waited until shipping could be found to bring their men home.

At the end of the month the announcement of a further move was joyfully received. This time the destination was to be [Florence](#). To go back to a city would be a welcome change, and when the wet weather set in, billets instead of tents meant comfort. The poverty-stricken little village of Petrignano d' [Assisi](#) nearby had little to offer as a wintering place. Packing up began at once and reconnaissance parties left to arrange accommodation in 'the City of Flowers'.

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<sup>1</sup> WO II D. S. H. Brown, m.i.d.; [Dannevirke](#); born [Dannevirke](#), 19 Oct 1917; clerk.

<sup>2</sup> S-Sgt A. A. G. Mainwaring; [Wellington](#); born [Wanganui](#), 8 Mar 1913; civil servant; twice wounded.

<sup>3</sup> S-Sgt J. Neilson; [Rarotonga, Cook Islands](#); born [Scotland](#), 2 Feb 1911; transport driver; wounded May 1941.

<sup>4</sup> S-Sgt A. E. McKinlay; [Halcombe](#); born NZ, 2 Jun 1917; concrete worker.

<sup>5</sup> Sgt H. K. Bush; Waiuimata; born NZ, 27 Sep 1917; carpenter.

<sup>6</sup> Sgt P. F. Booth; Opiki, Palmerston North; born Kakaramea, 10 Apr 1917; cheese-factory hand; wounded 12 Jan 1945.

<sup>7</sup> Cpl W. T. G. Johnston; Tamumu, Waipawa; born Palmerston North, 2 May 1916; university student; wounded 9 Jul 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Cpl R. B. Muschamp; Okaiawa; born Christchurch, 5 Oct 1916; farmhand.

<sup>9</sup> L-Sgt P. A. Padbury; Kerikeri Central; born Axminster, England, 31 Oct 1903; tractor driver; wounded May 1941.

<sup>10</sup> L-Sgt W. J. Cottingham; Levin; born Gisborne, 10 Oct 1914; barman; twice wounded.

<sup>11</sup> L-Cpl W. A. Le Lievre; Akaroa; born Christchurch, 28 Apr 1917; labourer; wounded Apr 1941; p.w. 28 Apr 1941; escaped 16 Jun 1941.

<sup>12</sup> Cpl R. Ross, MM; Wanganui; born Feilding, 3 Jul 1920; plumber.

<sup>13</sup> Tpr J. Ferguson; Gisborne; born NZ, 13 Jun 1919; lorry driver; wounded 13 Aug 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Lt B. N. Vickerman, ED; Wellington; born Nelson, 17 Jul 1910; barrister and solicitor; wounded 25 Sep 1944.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Lt F. B. Ryan, MC; Paraparaumu; born Wellington, 9 Oct 1920; salesman.

<sup>16</sup> Lt C. G. MacDiarmid; Kerikeri Central; born NZ, 1 Aug 1912; orchardist; wounded 9 Jan 1944.

<sup>17</sup> Lt R. A. Vazey, MC; Awanui; born Awanui, 15 Oct 1917; driver; wounded

17 Apr 1945.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Lt H. T. Stribling; Dunedin; born [Christchurch](#), 6 Oct 1919; insurance clerk; wounded 25 Sep 1944.

<sup>19</sup> WO I K. E. Perry; [Wellington](#); born NZ, 4 Sep 1906; transport driver.

<sup>20</sup> WO I C. W. Massey, m.i.d.; Tawa Flat; born [Wellington](#), 27 Jul 1917; Regular soldier; twice wounded.

<sup>21</sup> Tpr V. A. Davey; Waitohi Flat, [Temuka](#); born [Temuka](#), 28 Sep 1913; farmhand; wounded 2 May 1945.

<sup>22</sup> Tpr C. Rohloff; [Wellington](#); born [Wanganui](#), 12 Jul 1918; factory worker; wounded 2 May 1945.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

# CHAPTER 24 – REPATRIATION AND REHABILITATION

## CHAPTER 24

### *Repatriation and Rehabilitation*

He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,  
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is named,

—Shakespeare

By 3 October 1945, the sixth anniversary of the formation of the 19th, many of its members were already back home. The rest were on their way to [Florence](#), where within two months final repatriation arrangements would be completed. As a regiment the 19th, like the other units of the New Zealand Division, would drop its separate identity to complete homeward-bound drafts assembling at Advanced Base.

Repatriation was proceeding rapidly and smoothly. There was no doubt now about the future. For the majority it was a quick return to New Zealand. A few would do a further period of service with J Force, the New Zealand contingent with the occupation army in [Japan](#). These men were singled out for special training even before they left the regiment.

The remainder made the most of their time in [Italy](#), or took advantage of the leave scheme which allowed a small number of lucky ballottees to have a short stay in [England](#). The trip was made in trucks across [Europe](#) to the channel ports of [France](#), and then by boat to Southampton. For everyone there was the possibility of being home by Christmas, or at least an assurance of leaving [Italy](#) before the worst of the winter weather set in.

Meanwhile Florence was an excellent place to see out the waiting time. With visions of wives, sisters, and sweethearts waiting on the wharves in [Wellington](#), men spent at well stocked Florentine shops most of the lire they had accumulated as pay or acquired in ways not provided for between the covers of that little red book which the battle-dress pocket was designed to accommodate.

Football was now in full swing, and there was plenty of competition, for there were many Allied units in the city area. The 19th had two representatives in the 2 [NZEFC](#) team now touring the [United Kingdom](#)—Charlie Saxton and 'Tubby' Cook <sup>1</sup>—but

none made the grade in the divisional teams selected to play the Springboks and the Tommies in the tremendous Berta stadium at [Florence](#). The RSM (WO I Ken Perry), however, was the referee for most of these international fixtures. The whole regiment turned out to see some excellent Rugby.

Before the end of November the unit had split up. Each man on his way home had considered the carefully worded set of questions put to him by the Education and Rehabilitation Service officers working with returning drafts, and was aware that rehabilitation had a very pressing and personal application. Most men had their main problems sorted out before they arrived in New Zealand, and this preliminary mental exercise proved to be well worth while. Settling down could be expected to take some time, but to see so many 'old digs'—men whom it had been hard to visualise in any role other than the one they had played while with the unit—already established in 'civvy street' gave a sense of urgency to the matter. Few men needed any longer than the discharge leave allowance before getting down to the job again, either the old one or something new.

It was not long before they began to hold reunions in various places throughout the country. These gave the opportunity to renew wartime friendships and to learn of the whereabouts of those whose names were well remembered. Was it strange that at these reunions the talk should seldom turn to war? The unit historian, moving from group to group in search of material, seldom heard mention of such historic names as [Servia Pass](#), [Karatsos](#), [Ed Duda](#), [Ruweisat](#), [Perano](#), [Cassino](#), [Liri Valley](#), [Florence](#), [Rimini](#), or the Senio. Instead he would be more likely to hear such snatches of conversation as: 'Two boys and a girl.'—'Yes, Harry's back in his old job.'—'Got a rehab farm at Marton.'—'I was Joe's best man. Married a nice girl too.'—'Fred's in Auckland now, doing well too.'

To these men the war was an interlude; yet they still take a great pride in their old unit, still keep in touch with the friends who served beside them. Realists, like the rest of the Division, they had cast away in time of emergency all they had cared for in the hope that they could preserve it, if not for themselves, then for their kin. These are the men who during the years from 1939 to 1945 had worked and trained as soldiers until they were able to do their duty, 'holding three-fifths of the brain in reserve'. Instinctive fighters, they took a place equal with the best troops that either side could produce.

The battle honours of [19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment](#) are to be granted to units of the Territorial Army. Not a few of the ex-members of the 19th still serve in the Territorial Force and do their part in passing down the high traditions of a unit that no longer exists. That something has been done officially to preserve the few relics of those days is shown by these two letters:

The 19th Battalion and Armoured Regiment Association, Wellington Branch.

13th November, 1950.

Sir,

At the last Annual General Meeting of the Wellington Branch of the 19th Battalion and Armoured Regiment Association it was decided to return the enclosed flag to your unit for safe keeping.

This flag was presented by the Wellington Regiment (City of [Wellington's Own](#)) to Wellington Company of the [19 NZ Battalion](#) before its departure for the [Middle East](#) on the 6th January, 1940. The flag remained with the Wellington Company during the [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) campaigns and the Libyan campaign of 1941. The Battalion was converted into an armoured regiment in 1942 and the flag continued to be held at Regimental Headquarters until the Regiment was disbanded after the Italian campaign in 1945.

The flag has therefore seen nearly six years of active service and we trust it has not unworthily represented the [Wellington](#) Regiment during those years of war.

On behalf of the Wellington Branch of 19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment Association, I have the honour to ask you to accept this flag as a token of the close bonds which existed, and still exist, between members of the Wellington Regiment and members of the [19 NZ Battalion](#).

I have the honour to be, Sir,  
Your obedient servant,  
[Signed] D. A. Caughley,  
Major



President,  
The 19th Battalion and Armoured  
Regiment Association,  
Wellington Branch.

The Commanding Officer,  
I Battalion,  
The Wellington Regiment (City of Wellington's Own), Wellington.

Headquarters,  
1 Bn The Wellington Regt (CWO),  
Wellington.

29 Nov 50.

Dear Sir,

I wish to acknowledge your letter of the 13th November, 1950, and would be grateful also if you could convey to your Wellington Branch Association that I have received from you for safe keeping the flag which was originally presented by the Wellington Regiment (CWO) to the Wellington Company of the 19th NZ Battalion prior to your Battalion's departure for Active Service in January, 1940.

In accepting the flag on behalf of the Wellington Regiment (CWO), I should like to say that it is a great honour for me to do so. The war history and achievements of the 19 NZ Battalion and then the 19 NZ Armoured Regiment are of course not unknown to The Wellington Regiment, and it is with great pride that we are now entrusted with a flag which had accompanied your Regiments in all their theatres of actions.

Your good wishes have been passed to present members of The Wellington Regiment and again on their behalf may I thank you and also assure you, that this flag has the Regiment's blessing as a "traditional" treasure in its future safe-keeping.

[Signed] R. B. Dawson,  
Lt.-Colonel,  
Commanding

The President,  
The 19th Battalion and Armoured  
Regiment Association,  
Wellington Branch,  
Wellington.

Nor are the men who did not come back forgotten by those who returned home safely. During the years which have passed since the end of the war, regimental associations and sub-associations have been active throughout the country. On 5 September 1952 the [Christchurch Star-Sun](#) printed an article, written by an ex-officer of the unit, which describes a memorial in Victoria Park, Cashmere Hills, to the 227 dead of [19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment](#). Four symbolic plantations, [Atlantic cedars](#) from the Atlas mountains of North Africa, [Italian cypresses](#), [Corsican pines](#) (to represent [Greece](#) and [Crete](#)), and the [Aleppo pine](#) of [Syria](#), are grouped around a large rock monument. The inscription on a plaque reads: 'These trees were planted in memory of the men of the 19th Infantry Battalion and 19th Armoured Regiment who fell during the 1939–45 war.'

On 7 June 1953 an impressive dedication service conducted by Padre Somerville and widely attended by 19th men from all parts of the country was held at this unit memorial.

To these men, and to those of other units who died with them, we owe a debt which we can never repay. Those who served beside them are proud to have been their comrades in arms.

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<sup>1</sup> [Tpr H. E. Cook; England](#); born Wairoa, 24 Dec 1923; clerk.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## APPENDIX I

### *Appendix I*

#### Regimental History of [Major 'Major'](#), No. 1 Dog of 2 New Zealand Division and Official Mascot of [19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment](#)

How many gallant, distinguished, and well-loved soldiers who saw service in the 19th are worthy of a separate and personal appendix in the history of their unit? The answer is, of course, too many to be contained in a single volume. Each and all of us would have our own ideas about who was the most worthy.

The distinction is reserved for a dog, but those who served with him will not begrudge him this favoured treatment, for he epitomised those fine qualities which men admire. He was a personality, and a distinctive and well-known one; the proud name of the 19th will always be associated with any mention of him.

' [Major](#)' had a unique place in the [2 NZEF](#). He was accorded rank and title which placed him far above the humble place of a military mascot. He was 'top dog' from the day he sailed from New Zealand, and his position was one in which his unit took some pride, for on parade or in action he proved himself well worthy of the official title, No. 1 Dog 2 NZ Division. Conspicuous in all the activities of the 19th from 3 October 1939 until his death on active service on 17 December 1944, '[Major's](#)' service covered nearly the whole of the history of the unit to which he belonged.

In 1943 Sergeant Ron Jones wrote a history of the dog, and his account gives many details which will interest the thousands of men who hold the memory of '[Major](#)' in great affection. The reason for its preparation at that time shows, too, the responsibility the 19th felt towards their fellow soldier—it was enclosed with an official request to the New Zealand Government to pass special legislation to permit the dog to re-enter New Zealand on his return from the wars, should he survive. Sergeant Jones's account is reprinted hereunder.

With more than five of his slender six years spent in martial atmosphere and over three years on active service, [Major "Major"](#), the white bull-terrier mascot of [19](#)

[NZ Armd Regt](#), has a title to the style of No. 1 NZ Dog based on something more secure than the mere accident of priority of registration in the NZ Forces. He has known the smug repose of military academies in a peace-time army and the rigours of active service in the foul reek of a country whose desert floor was never more than six inches from his fastidious, aristocratic nose. He has been a familiar figure on parade grounds in three or four countries and he has travelled thousands of miles by every description and mode of conveyance that the mind of man could devise in this age of mobile warfare. By steamer and train, by truck and Bren Carrier and tank, and on occasions even by aeroplane he has accompanied his Unit everywhere it has wandered, and when such artificial aids to movement have failed, he has followed the example of the Regiment and resorted to the use of his four padded feet.

[Major](#) is by birth an Australian and pedigreed, and began his career as a public figure when as a pup he was presented as a gift by a young lady to a New Zealand cadet at the Royal Military College at Duntroon. He went back to New Zealand with his master in 1938 and became an inconspicuous part of the then far from conspicuous New Zealand Army, of the Staff Corps of which his master became a member.

After less than a year of the purely ornamental soldiering of the brave days of peace, the dog found himself whirled into the merry-go-round of late 1939 in [Trentham](#) at the heels of Capt E. W. S. Williams, who had been appointed to the Special Force then in the process of formation, and eventually became adjutant of 19 NZ Inf Bn, one of the senior units of [2 NZEF](#).

[Major](#) at this stage was still without rank or distinction, but he was too familiar with the military scene to be put out of countenance by any of the innumerable discomfitures that worried the civilians-turned-soldiers with whom he paraded day after day. He endured the endless ritual of inspections with a nice admixture of boredom and respect which was to stand in fine stead when he came to face the visitations of foreign royalty, ambassadorial seigneurs and military pundits that were to follow each other in steady succession in Egypt.

When he joined the Special Force he was registered as No. 1 NZ Dog and his future in the Army was assured. He paraded through the streets of [Wellington](#) with his Unit on their final public appearance and cocked a knowing ear at the political

valedictions that resounded through Parliament grounds when the Prime Minister extended his good wishes to the first representatives of New Zealand to go overseas. He experienced his first march past when the GOC, [General Sir Bernard Freyberg](#), made his first inspection of the Battalion, and with the New Year of 1940 hardly more than a few days old he found himself on board H.M.T. Strathaird en route to war. And on the final leave that preceded that departure he saw his master married to the lady whose gift he had been.

On arrival in Egypt in 1940 (February) [Major](#) and the 19 NZ Inf Bn struggled manfully with the lack of ordinary amenities which was [Maadi Camp](#) at that time and survived a wide variety of ceremonial occasions. Then came the Desert and the long business of digging the Bagush Box. In his youth and innocence, [Major](#) thought it was all a great joke at first, and expended both energy and enthusiasm on the job in hand in a fashion completely foreign to his present-day old soldier's attitude of "as little as possible as seldom as you like." The end of 1940 found the Battalion still in the Desert but in the New Year a return was made to [Cairo](#).

The spectacular days of [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) were close at hand but fate had other plans for [Major](#). When his master was posted to ME OCTU as O.C. NZ Coy, [Major](#) found himself translated to the seats of the mighty also. The Battalion had disposed of the Grecian interlude and had made its way out of [Crete](#) and back to Egypt before, at the end of June, [Major](#) and his master were released from the regimental atmosphere of Kasr-el-Nil Barracks to rejoin the Bn at [Helwan](#). In the meantime he had found it necessary to instil some discipline into the hybrid hides of some of the local dogs who seemed to have less than a proper appreciation of quality. He did it, but did not emerge unscathed. When he followed Capt. Williams into the orderly room of Wellington West Coast Coy one day late in June 1941 his left ear displayed a chronic flop which persists even after a couple of years.

But to a broken left ear he had added a "pip" and when he was marched onto the ration strength of WWC Coy, of which Capt Williams was now O.C., he did so as [2/Lieut "Major"](#). Followed the usual sequence of special occasions. He said farewell to Brigadier Puttick when the commander of 4 NZ Inf Bde took the salute prior to his return to NZ on a tour of duty and renewed his acquaintance on the parade ground with [General Freyberg](#) who inspected the Bde a short time later. Also, in spite of his

rank and dignity he went AWL and gave only an imperfect explanation of his dereliction when he returned.

In August 1941 he went with the Bn on combined operations exercises in the Canal Zone and managed to relieve the colourless monotony of a celibate military existence with a carelessly rapturous liaison with a naval wench on a Glen ship in the Canal. The affair, however, was short-lived. Within a week or so he was back in the Bagush Box, sniffing at desert dust again and sneezing the deposits of innumerable sandstorms out of his patrician nose.

When the NZ Div went through the Italian wire into [Cyrenaica](#) to commence the Libyan Campaign of 1941, [Major](#) travelled in the pickup of Major Williams at the head of Wellington West Coast Coy and saw several days of confused fighting and manoeuvring before he was cavalierly despatched to B Echelon while his Company went on its 10,000 yards march to Ed Duda. The following day his master was killed in action while leading his company and dark days came for the dog, who mourned for a long time and refused to be comforted. While the Coy pushed on towards [Tobruk](#), [Major](#) was brought back to the Box and spent the next fortnight wandering around the semi-deserted company lines like a lost soul.

About mid-December WWC Coy returned from [Libya](#) to its old area in the Box for a bleak and blustery Christmas and New Year. At this stage [Major](#) passed into the care of Capt W. E. Aitken. In the first week of the New Year, the Bn returned for a brief spell at [Maadi Camp](#), but [Major](#), even with his second "pip" up was still listless and distraught. A month or six weeks in the Canal Area again with more combined exercises was followed by a complete change to the mountains of [Lebanon](#), where the Syrian climate and the fresh mountain air made a new man out of the dog and most of those with him too. Two days before he left Egypt, [Major's](#) promotion to the rank of captain was recorded in Bn orders.

A little over three months after settling in the mountains a hasty return was made to Egypt. Rommel was at the gates of the Delta and after a wild scamper across three countries and into a fourth the Division moved into action on 25th June, playing a holding game while the [Alamein](#) line was being manned and then falling back onto the line itself. In July, after about ten days of fighting [Major](#) was found wounded by a piece of stray shrapnel, and found himself queueing up at the RAP to

have his thigh dressed. After first aid at the RAP truck, he was presented with a field medical card and evacuated to the ADS. While he took his place in the line of wounded he cast a limpid eye at the [DDMS](#) as he went by, and had the good fortune to be taken straight back to [Maadi](#) for a proper convalescence.

In the meantime pressure on the [Alamein](#) line increased, and the 19 NZ Inf Bn struck a "sticky patch", as a result of which a great many officers and men found their way into "the bag". Among these was Capt Aitken, the keeper of the dog. Not long afterwards the residue of the Bn was withdrawn to Base at [Maadi](#) to re-organise, and [Major](#), who in the meantime had been convalescing under the personal care of Lt-Col Anson, returned to his Unit and was attached to Major A. M. Everist for discipline and rations.

In September 1942 [Major](#) received his crown "to complete establishment" and it was noticed that a critical gleam often came into his eyes as he contemplated the many new subalterns with whom the gaps in the ranks had been closed. At the Bn swimming sports in September, [Major](#) entered in the 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  yards dog paddle (open) and secured a not very glorious second amid loud applause.

Christmas came around again with the Regt—which by now had been training for three months as an armoured unit—still in Base Camp, and [Major](#), like everyone else, deploring the Dantean repose of routine and obedience and casting a wistful eye towards the Tunisian scene where the rest of the Division was at least getting some action and movement.

Two months later the position was still the same. The Regt stays put and turns out in February for an inspection by the GOC. On this occasion [Major](#) came very near to developing a swelled head. [General Freyberg](#) gave him special attention and greeted him with the remark, "Ah, the old dog. You've been on every parade yet." Perhaps it consorts ill with the dignity of a field officer to be patted on the head but in the circumstances [Major](#) could be excused for condoning such a familiarity.

In the following month the Minister of Defence inspected the Armoured Brigade and as he marched past with the [19 Armd Regt](#), [Major](#) caught the Ministerial eye and in spite of King's Regulations conceived some bare-faced lobbying right on the parade ground itself. Statutory obstacles on his return to New Zealand with his Unit



must be removed somehow so he made the best impression he could. The degree to which he succeeded is illustrated by the fact that before he left the parade ground the Minister suggested that a formal application for a special authority should be made through the usual channel.

\* \* \*

There is little to add to the above. `Major', after a period in the Armoured Depot in Maadi, sailed for Italy with Lieutenant Steve Whitton \* and served with the regiment until, in the severe winter of 1944, he sickened and died. He was buried with full military honours, and of this moving ceremony the then RSM of the unit, WO I Dave Rench, has written: 'When we laid Major to rest at Rimini, I think perhaps some of the later members of the unit found it hard to appreciate the deep sentiment shown by the old hands for the old Dog. However, it was not only as unit mascot that Major was so affectionately remembered, but as a link with his first fine soldier master, Capt E. W. S. Williams, killed in action 28 November 1941—a man to whom the 19th owed much, and who we buried on the rocky slopes of Ed Duda in November 1941—and indeed to many other good men who had followed him as Keeper of the Dog who now shares with two of them a place on the 19th's Roll of Honour.'

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\* Died of wounds, 24 Sep 1944.

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# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## APPENDIX II — TALE OF A TANK

### *Appendix II*

### *TALE OF A TANK*

The History of No. 13, the 'Lame Duck' of No. 11 Troop C Squadron

Members of the 19th whose service did not extend to armoured days will find this account instructive. Those who, like the narrator, R. W. ('Rusty') Laird, did serve in tanks, will find it nostalgic.

The name 'Lame Duck' was awarded her not just for something to call this thirty tons of travelling armour-plate, but because of a series of events which seemed to happen regularly when we were on our way up to take action stations prior to the move in. Always she seemed to come to grief before the start or during the approach, but when things really got cracking, well then the powers that were could always depend on hearing our call-sign coming over the air right in the thick of things.

We referred to our tank in the feminine sense, because like many of that sex she was temperamental. But, as she was a machine of war, we as her crew treated her rough and she responded as a duck takes to water. Many times members of the crew serving in her were wounded but until the end of her career none were killed—and this was something to be proud of; her reputation went up higher with each succeeding action.

Hot as an oven in summer; we blistered our bare arms on her every time we scrambled out in a hurry. Cold as an ice-box in winter; she leaked rain-water and let in chilly draughts at every joint. As cramped as a sardine-tin; I as driver had to squeeze through the hatch then wriggle into my great-coat afterwards, but still the full crew of five, battened down and cramped together in her stomach, managed to live and fight for almost a year in her narrow confines.

She was powered with twin diesel engines, ran on metal tracks, and as

armament had two fixed machine guns, one ack-ack gun and a 75-mm. Ammunition for the big gun was stored in all sorts of places, behind the spare driver, around the turret rim, outside the turret cage against the wall of the tank, round the turret inner rim and under the gun breech itself. A home-light unit for charging batteries, a No. 19 wireless set for communication, two water tins, several tin boxes for storing belts of M/G ammunition and a covered port about 6in × 6in—mostly used for emptying out spent shell cases, completed her inside furnishings. Strapped on to her outside were axe, spade, crowbar, spare track links and tow rope and above a miscellaneous collection of personal equipment belonging to her crew, waved the wireless masts.

Briefly her career can be highlighted as follows:

OCTOBER 1943: The gunner—Harold Lord—and I picked her up from 7 British Workshops on the outskirts of [Alexandria](#) and drove her to Burg-el-Arab on her metal tracks. We took a dim view of this for the rest of the squadron tanks were running on rubber filled tracks and steel made it twice as noisy inside, made steering more difficult on solid ground, kept her speed down, raised a dust-storm whenever she moved and called for more maintenance because the wear and tear was faster. We were assured that rubber would be fitted before we moved out—it wasn't of course.

The sign-writers came round and painted a large yellow circle on the side of the turret and in the circle the number 11 (this was the Troop number). On the flank just above the track line they painted 13 (her number in the Troop). We wanted to add a name but permission was refused, the official explanation being that it would only be a good mark for the enemy to aim at. After all the other aiming marks which had been painted on officially, we felt that this was a poor sort of explanation and bitched a bit but soon forgot it. She EARNED her name later.

At Port Tewfick during embarkation one of her tracks went through the wharf decking and the recovery wagon had to be called. Then she was slung into the hold of a ship and chained down; next day she was unchained and unloaded again. Later she was loaded into another ship; this time a ship with its own winches and suitable gear for unloading at a port where all the harbour installations had been destroyed. On then in convoy across the Med, where a storm tossed the Fort Erie around until she broke her holding chains and began charging about with every roll of the ship. Before she was anchored down again she had destroyed the de-gaussing cables and

we were without protection against magnetic mines.

NOVEMBER 1943: We landed at [Bari](#) and were coralled in the stadium. Here one of the drivers from another crew took ill. No vehicles were allowed out, but we forgot that and putting him in to the spare driver's seat used her as an ambulance and after a hair-raising drive over cobbled-stoned roads, found a hospital. She behaved badly on the cobbles and almost collected a jeep load of irate Red-caps before we got her back.

Then we loaded on to transporters—an easy job with rubber tracks—but a tricky operation with steel tracks climbing up those metal ramps. After several tries we ran back a chain or so and charged on in third gear. She went up OK, landed on the top with a thump, then with brakes hard on skidded her metal tracks along the steel top until stopped by the cab of the transporter. We winched her back into position.

From Foggia we moved under our own steam and here, as the going was wet, those steel tracks came into their own and she acted as towing vehicle for the other rubber-tracked tanks when they stuck in sticky places. The convoy came under enemy fire on the hill leading up to Castel Endigo and had to space out, for the hill climb was slow. We had a half hour wait at the bottom so I crawled out and went to sleep on the engine cowling. Harold ('Swaia') Piggins, the spare driver, decided not to wake me and started off on his own but was too short to reach the controls and got into difficulties on a tight turn halfway up. The tank comd woke me up but by this time there was a big gap in the convoy and the tank in front was just disappearing over the crest.

When we got up the hill I slammed her straight into overdrive for it was a gradual slope down with only a slow right-hand curve. We were doing thirty-two when we came to the bend and as I eased her gently round pulling on the right track, the left hand track broke! She dived over a ten foot bank poised on her nose and gun tip, then rolled gently on to her side. The commander blacked his eye on the ack-ack gun but otherwise we were OK. It took three days to get us out and we were under fire most of the time for Jerry was after the bridge just below us. While we were there the [Perano](#) show went in. It was the first and only time she missed out.

The next show was the [Sangro](#) crossing and she was point tank for the Sqn. We made our way down between the white lines the engineers had marked out, then while the rest waited we tried to find a way out of the riverbed. Four attempts made in different places all failed because of the soft ground and finally she bogged down. We then tried on foot, found a track and the rest of the mob roared by but could not spare the time to pull us out. While we dug we were dive-bombed and strafed for Tiki Bridge was close by, but we got her clear at last and caught up with the rest during the afternoon.

DECEMBER 1943: We were in a holding role on [Guardiagrele](#) ridge supporting British air-borne troops. At a party during the second night of their stay one of them sang that grand song 'Old Supurb'. The chorus 'with a lame duck lagging all the way' struck us as singularly appropriate, and from that night on our tank had a name. But we weren't allowed to paint it on—yet.

JANUARY 1944: A midnight move along the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) Road and then down into the village of [Poggiofiorito](#). There was a foot of snow covering everything and we moved off in pitch darkness through the olive groves towards the road. Before we got there we drove slap into a well and while we tried to get her out the rest passed us by. A recovery wagon arrived about 4 am—by that time we had given the job up—she was hauled out and we made our way along that hostile stretch of road all alone. Jerry threw everything but the kitchen stove at her but we found the turn-off and rolled into the village as day was breaking. Except for the picquets the whole mob were cosily asleep!

On the way back to [Vasto](#) she got water in her injectors and we had to halt on the roadside. When she was ready to move again a truck convoy had the road and she was ordered off to wait the pleasure of the traffic control artists. Twelve hours later we got to [Vasto](#) and by that time the rest of the crowd were all fairly well plonked and the party was over.

MARCH 1944: She moved up the [Pasquale Road](#) while the bombing was still in progress; had the road blown up about one hundred yards in front of her and we backed smartly to a safer distance. When the heavies had dropped their loads along came the fighter-bombers, they bombed and strafed her like a sitting bird then blew up the embanked road behind her. There was no going back now and we did get into

[Cassino](#) eventually and stayed there for many hectic days. At the Railway Station the 'Lame Duck' had her radiators holed and I took her out onto Route 6 on one motor and headed for Trocchio. The spare driver managed to get her back to the workshops but not before Jerry had scored another hit and flattened the box on the back of the turret. Bringing her back from the workshops to the rest area at [Pietramelara](#) she dropped a track and we had to take time we could have well used otherwise to mend it.

MAY 1944: We pulled out in a hell of a hurry and were moving in convoy with the rest of the unit on the way for another crack at [Cassino](#). It was about four in the morning and we couldn't see much in the dust and darkness. The track we were travelling along was shaky and suddenly gave way. Down she crashed, doing two and half complete turns and landing at last on Route 6 twenty-five feet below. Half a ton of dirt and potatoes had been scooped into her turret, everyone was bruised and cut, most of the ammunition had the projectile broken away from the case, and the bottle of vino the spare driver had been swigging at the time was smashed to smithereens. A Yank recovery wagon came to our aid and she was soon with the rest of the Squadron taking part in the [Liri Valley](#) show which ended with the capture of [Cassino](#).

JULY 1944: Into the attack on [Cerbaia](#). Our Sgt's tank was hit and turned over. We fired all our rounds away, collected the rounds out of two other tanks that were out of commission and fired all that off too. That night we hooked on an anti-tank gun and moved up to start the attack on the line above. By nine in the morning we were in sight of the hill top of San Michele but the anti-tank gun had been shot off her tail. It was a bad spot and she stood a pounding from the Jerry artillery for about an hour before she got a smack in the engines. The operator, Jack Simpson, went across to the Sqn Comd's tank on foot with a message. He was killed there while in the turret, as was Sid Herbert, and the Major lost a leg and died later.

The 'Lame Duck' was then hit again in almost the same spot as before and our Troop Comd, Chris Cross, ordered us to bail out. As we did so he got a smack on the top of the helmet and the gunner, Harold Lord, stopped a homer at the same time; the spare driver, Jim Marshall, was also wounded though not badly. We got out on foot—no small effort—and left the old girl there shot up and abandoned.

To her guns in the course of her career had fallen numerous houses and strong points, Jerry M/Gs, a built-in turret, a Mark III tank, a mule, a pig, a safe that could not otherwise be got open, and a score or so of fowls. Her 75-mm had been christened with a litre of 'Purple Death' and carried the bluish stain at the end of the barrel even after several hundreds of rounds had been fired through it.

So died the 'Lame Duck'—a gallant, perverse, and lovable mechanical personality who had earned both curses and affection from the crew to whom she had given a home, and a full-time occupation. 'Discord', her daughter and successor, soon proved to have a strong family resemblance.

# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## ROLL OF HONOUR

### *ROLL OF HONOUR*

These laid the world away; poured out the red  
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be  
Of work and joy, and that unhopéd serene,  
That men call age; and those who would have been,  
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

—Rupert Brooke

killed in action

Capt J. H. Danderson	26 May 1941
Capt C. E. Webster	20 May 1941
Capt E. W. S. Williams, m.i.d.	28 November 1941
Lt K. A. V. Cross	28 June 1942
Lt H. R. Dix	28 June 1942
Lt R. H. Glendining	15 May 1944
2 Lt N. W. Bramwell	16 May 1944
2 Lt R. J. O'Callaghan	16 May 1944
2 Lt R. K. Whyte	22 September 1944
WO I R. A. H. Wilson	28 June 1942
Sgt A. W. Buchan	14 May 1944
Sgt E. D. Gibson	28 June 1942
Sgt M. E. Hardgrave	April 1941
Sgt I. H. Hercus	16 March 1944
Sgt K. J. E. Hirtzell	20 May 1941
Sgt R. C. Miles	27 November 1941
Sgt R. E. Moody	18 November 1943
L-Sgt R. D. Hunter	26 April 1941
L-Sgt G. H. Wells	28 June 1942
Cpl M. K. Brenton	29 July 1944
Cpl C. E. Goodhue	26 May 1941
Cpl G. R. Hubbard	17 March 1944



Cpl H. B. Lepper	18 November 1943
Cpl D. E. Macartney	17 October 1944
Cpl K. MacKenzie, MM	18 April 1941
Cpl A. H. E. Midgley, m.i.d.	16 April 1945
Cpl W. H. Siddall	20 May 1941
Cpl L. G. Watson	24 February 1944
L-Cpl L. A. Allen	28 May 1941
L-Cpl L. K. Arnold	20 May 1941
L-Cpl G. A. Arthur	15 July 1942
L-Cpl J. P. Frost	28 July 1944
L-Cpl W. E. G. Hayden	20 May 1941
L-Cpl J. I. Henderson	26 May 1941
L-Cpl S. J. Herbert	28 July 1944
L-Cpl V. E. R. Horne	28 June 1942
L-Cpl R. Kirkman	20 May 1941
L-Cpl A. McRae	16 April 1941
L-Cpl B. G. H. Nathan	21 May 1941
L-Cpl D. L. Purnell	25 April 1941
L-Cpl J. A. Simpson	28 July 1944
L-Cpl M. Wilson	18 November 1943
Pte P. V. Beach	28 June 1942
Pte R. T. Beech	28 June 1942
Pte V. H. Birchall	20 May 1941
Pte C. C. Bond, m.i.d.	28 May 1941
Tpr L. Boyer	20 March 1944
Pte R. G. Boyle	20 May 1941
Pte H. R. Brien	15 July 1942
Pte H. H. Butler	1 December 1941
Pte P. Byrne	26 May 1941
Pte H. G. A. Cameron	26 April 1941
Pte E. Campbell	2 June 1941
Pte W. A. M. Campbell	15 April 1941
Pte G. E. M. Chisnall	26 May 1941
Pte J. W. G. Clarke	20 May 1941
Pte W. Clarke	16 April 1941
Pte P. J. Close	16 July 1942
Pte R. T. Connal	20 May 1941

Pte E. C. Cosford	28 June 1942
Pte M. J. Cusack	26 April 1941
Tpr A. C. P. Dale	17 April 1945
Pte J. H. Davey	April 1941
Pte D. A. Davis, m.i.d.	23 May 1941
Pte L. J. Dawes	30 November 1941
Pte D. Dawson	20 May 1941
Pte J. B. Douglas	April 1941
Pte G. E. Drake	April 1941
Pte N. A. Flavell	26 May 1941
Pte J. L. Fletcher	20 May 1941
Pte P. J. R. Frain	20 May 1941
Pte C. J. Franklin	15 July 1942
Pte F. E. Gamlin	24 May 1941
Tpr W. G. Gasson	17 March 1944
Pte A. H. Gillespie	28 June 1942
Tpr G. A. Glossop	18 November 1943
Pte A. C. Golder	18 April 1941
Pte W. K. Gordon	20 May 1941
Pte J. A. Gray	20 May 1941
Pte N. J. Gray	28 June 1942
Tpr H. R. Hambly	17 March 1944
Pte D. R. Hardgrave	20 May 1941
Tpr V. H. Harrison	2 October 1944
Pte J. L. Hislop	23 October 1942
Pte G. K. N. Hood	28 June 1942
Pte W. B. S. Hossack	26 May 1941
Pte N. J. Hunter	27 June 1942
Tpr P. Hyndman	18 November 1943
Tpr W. E. A. Isherwood	14 April 1945
Pte N. E. Jackson	April 1941
Pte E. J. Keeble	26 May 1941
Pte S. C. Kennedy	21 May 1941
Pte H. A. Knight	20 May 1941
Pte S. Knocks	20 May 1941
Pte W. W. Krebs	28 June 1942

Pte R. Lamond	20 May 1941
Pte J. B. McCalman	19 April 1941
Pte T. McCone	25 November 1941
Pte S. J. R. Mace	28 June 1942
Pte J. H. McGill	May 1941
Pte R. McKay, m.i.d.	27 May 1941
Pte A. McKinnon	15 July 1942
Pte N. J. McLeod	20 May 1941
Pte J. D. McMillan	25 May 1941
Tpr F. R. Madden	19 April 1945
Pte L. D. Martin	11 July 1942
Tpr J. J. Monaghan	17 March 1944
Pte G. R. Murray	20 May 1941
Pte D. V. Oakley	April 1941
Pte J. P. O'Dea	27 May 1941
Pte H. M. Ogilvie	1 December 1941
Pte E. F. Orr	28 June 1942
Pte A. J. Paterson	28 June 1942
Pte A. W. Peachey	April 1941
Pte B. G. Phillips	9 July 1942
Tpr L. L. Phillips	17 March 1944
Pte S. A. Plant	3 July 1942
Pte P. G. Rayner	26 April 1941
Pte B. F. Rea	28 June 1942
Pte J. C. Revell	15 July 1942
Pte L. Richards	2 June 1941
Pte G. F. Roberts	20 May 1941
Pte L. E. Ryder	3 July 1942
Pte L. D. Shand	20 May 1941
Pte J. B. Simpson	22 May 1941
Pte V. Sisarich	20 May 1941
Pte T. V. Smith	20 May 1941
Pte C. F. Sparksman	17 July 1942
Pte P. Sullivan	25 May 1941
Tpr H. S. Tod	18 November 1943
Pte J. G. Toms	26 April 1941
Pte R. C Trass	1 December 1941
Pte G. W. Trillo	27 May 1941

Pte O. L. Udy	28 June 1942
Pte R. S. Urquhart	25 May 1941
Pte R. L. Vesty	27 May 1941
Pte N. Walker	15 July 1942
Pte V. H. W. Wasley	21 May 1941
Pte D. L. C. Watkin, m.i.d.	20 May 1941
Pte V. Watt	28 June 1942
Pte J. R. A. Webby	20 May 1941
Tpr G. E. White	18 November 1943
Pte J. A. Wilks	15 July 1942
Pte C. Wilson	28 June 1942
Pte B. Wrigley	20 May 1941
Pte T. J. Wrigley	28 June 1942
Pte H. N. Young	15 July 1942

died of wounds

Capt D. McInnes	31 July 1944
Lt B. A. Strang	3 December 1943
Lt S. H. Whitton	24 September 1944
2 Lt W. H. Adair	3 August 1944
Sgt G. V. Riggir	22 April 1945
Sgt W. L. Yeates	28 June 1942
Cpl H. C. Hulme	26 May 1941
Cpl S. R. Pepperell	15 July 1942
Cpl G. D. Sinclair	22 May 1941
Cpl E. G. Wilson	14 July 1942
L-Cpl R. N. Green	19 December 1941
L-Cpl C. J. Kelly	19 April 1941
L-Cpl J. M. Todd	2 June 1941
Tpr R. K. Barnes	18 February 1944
Pte D. R. Batten	28 June 1942
Pte L. T. Blackley	27 November 1941
Pte A. G. Buck	29 June 1942
Pte F. E. Cooch	30 June 1942
Pte C. G. Firth	29 May 1941
Tpr L. W. Fisher	18 February 1944
Tpr M. R. G. Garlick	29 July 1944
Pte A. R. Gemmell	27 April 1941

Pte G. H. Gibbs	14 May 1941
Pte D. H. Giles	24 May 1941
Pte A. J. F. Guy	28 June 1942
Pte J. R. A. E. Herion	14 July 1942
Pte R. K. Hooper	7 July 1942
Pte R. J. Hopkinson	28 June 1942
Pte F. James	20 May 1941
Pte D. H. Jonas	6 December 1941
Pte O. D. Kinsella	20 May 1941
Tpr W. P. Lake	24 April 1945
Pte J. A. Lindsay	28 May 1941
Pte G. W. MacKenzie	15 July 1942
Tpr H. McNair	15 August 1944
Pte W. Maitland	19 July 1942
Pte J. Rippin	30 November 1941
Pte L. H. Slade	25 November 1941
Pte L. F. Spaulding	13 April 1941
Pte C. Taylor	28 June 1942
Tpr J. W. Thomson	19 March 1944
Pte T. Tinning	30 June 1942
Pte W. F. Wall	8 July 1942
Tpr P. S. T. Walsh	13 January 1944
Tpr P. H. Wills	13 April 1945
died or killed as prisoners of war	
Cpl M. Cocker	21 October 1941
Cpl G. C. Cooke	23 May 1941
L-Cpl W. Burns	17 April 1945
L-Cpl D. C. Lamb	4 June 1941
Pte H. A. Anderson	30 June 1942
Pte E. H. Bagg	19 February 1945
Pte H. J. Boulton	10 November 1942
Pte E. M. Boyton	2 January 1944
Pte D. McK. Buie	7 May 1942
Pte H. A. Colgate	3 March 1945
Pte J. P. Dewar	18 December 1942
Pte L. D. Fordham	28 May 1941
Pte H. D. Franklin	6 January 1943

Pte G. V. Howe	21 October 1941
Pte R. J. McLennan	27 March 1942
Pte L. L. Murray	13 March 1945
Pte E. G. B. Newman	2 June 1941
Pte C. C. Nicholl	7 July 1941
Pte A. Randall	9 February 1945
Pte A. W. Somers	16 April 1945
Pte J. R. Stuart	7 February 1945
Pte R. T. M. Walker	30 July 1942
Pte P. E. A. V. Wardle	17 July 1942
Pte F. G. Wheeler	27 July 1941

died or killed on active service

Cpl A. W. Burge	27 January 1944
L-Cpl E. M. Roiall	27 September 1942
Pte S. R. Bennett	22 December 1941
Pte P. Bird	22 December 1943
Tpr J. D. Burke	22 July 1945
Pte A. G. Fairclough	18 December 1941
Tpr N. R. Jensen	20 July 1944
Pte R. J. Lovejoy	5 December 1941
Pte G. MacDonald	21 July 1940
Tpr J. J. Strawbridge	18 June 1944
Pte W. Taylor	17 November 1941

# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

### *Summary of Casualties*

	Killed in Action or Died of Wounds		Killed or Died while PW		Died on Active Service		Wounded		Wounded and Prisoners of War		Prisoners of War	
	Offrs	ORs	ORs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs total
Greece	—	22	—	—	2	18	3	14	5 <sup>*</sup>	124	188	†
Crete	2	61	—	—	4	73	—	40	2 <sup>‡</sup>	78	260	
Libya 1941	1	12	—	—	1	16	—	—	—	—	30	
Egypt 1942	2	50	—	—	9	115	2	22	10	182	392	
Italy	8	35	—	—	28	169	—	3	—	1	244	
General	—	—	23	11	—	—	—	—	—	—	34	
total	13	180	23	11	44	391	5	79	17	385	1148	

\* Includes 4 reinforcement officers who were posted to but had not joined the unit.

† Mainly WWC Coy, [Corinth Canal](#) action.

‡ Both detached from unit on duty elsewhere.

# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## HONOURS AND AWARDS

### *HONOURS AND AWARDS*

distinguished service order

Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell

Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin

Maj A. M. Everist

Maj J. I. Thodey

member of the order of the british empire

Mr J. H. Ledgerwood ( [YMCA](#) attached)

military cross

Capt J. G. Furness

Capt C. L. Pleasants

Capt F. McB. Stewart

Capt D. S. Thomson

Lt C. C. Beswick

Lt D. Kerr

Lt R. C. McCown

Lt T. G. S. Morrin

Lt R. A. Vazey

2 Lt F. B. Ryan



Capt W. R. Carswell ( [NZMC](#) attached)

Rev J. S. Somerville (Chaplain attached)

distinguished conduct medal

Tpr S. E. Lawson

military medal and bar

Sgt J. W. Churton

military medal

[WO II N. S. McGregor](#)

Sgt N. W. Hunter

Sgt F. M. Milne

Sgt T. G. Sargent

Cpl W. N. Forbes

Cpl G. Ryder

L-Cpl W. J. Clark

Tpr S. R. Anderson

Tpr W. C. Farquharson

Tpr D. T. Hislop

Tpr W. McCulloch

Tpr G. N. Perkins

Pte W. Porter

Pte K. R. Rieper

Tpr R. Ross

Pte L. G. Shultz

Pte J. S. Trye

Pte R. C. Wellman

Pte A. V. Lee

bronze star medal ( [United States](#) )

Lt G. W. Stewart

greek military cross (Class C)

Capt T. G. Bedding

mentioned in despatches

Tpr R. R. Absolum

Pte L. Anyan

Sgt K. Agent

Capt T. G. Bedding (2)

Maj C. A. D'A. Blackburn

Pte C. C. Bond

WO II D. S. H. Brown (2)

Sgt A. D. Cameron

Sgt H. P. Campbell

Capt D. Carey

Lt W. R. Carswell, MC

( [NZMC](#) attached)

Maj D. A. Caughley

Sgt M. S. Cole

L-Sgt D. B. Collett (2)

WO II J. B. Coull

2 Lt C. G. E. Cross

Pte N. Crump

Lt E. J. Davidson

Pte D. A. Davis

Sgt A. H. Deller

WO II W. O. M. Dixie

Tpr G. E. Eagle

Cpl H. M. Fair

Lt H. F. Flower

Sgt J. T. Garty

Pte A W. Gibbons (2)

Sgt C. N. H. Gillespie

Sgt J. E. Grennell

Capt R. N. Griggs

Pte D. Harold

Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell, DSO

Sgt L. R. H. Hastings

Sgt A. J. W. Hickey

Pte R. H. Hook

Sgt J. H. A. Hunter

Sgt E. Jones

Tpr R. D. Jones

Capt C. C. Jordan

Capt V. O. Kelly

Cpl F. J. Kember

Sgt R. W. Laird

Pte A. F. V. Large

Sgt T. E. Lawrence

Pte R. C. Lawton

Mr J. H. Ledgerwood

( [YMCA](#) attached)

Sgt N. J. Lindsay

Lt R. C. McCown, MC

Pte R. McKay

WO I C. W. Massey

Tpr A. H. E. Midgley

Tpr C. J. Mortimer

Cpl J. G. Newton

Pte G. E. Park

Cpl E. S. Payton

Tpr G. N. Perkins

Maj C. L. Pleasants, DSO, MC

WO I D. W. Rench (2)

Tpr Clyde Rohloff

Lt K. J. Staunton

Capt F. McB. Stewart, MC

Sgt N. J. C. Stewart

Lt A. N. Suter

Maj H. M. Swinburn

WO II A. C. Tait

Pte C. L. Tayler

Lt J. I. Thodey

Capt D. S. Thomson, MC

[Lt-Col F. S. Varnham](#), MC, ED

Lt-Col B. H. Wakelin

Pte D. L. C. Watkin

2 Lt R. W. Wayne

Capt E. W. S. Williams

Cpl T. J. Williams

L-Cpl C. H. T. Wilson

Maj S. J. Wilson

Maj J. M. Wiseley

Cpl F. I. A. Woollams

Maj H. G. Wooller, MC (Gk)

As some of the official lists of honours and awards did not give the recipient's unit, this table, though checked with all available sources, may not be complete. The ranks are those shown in the notice of award.

# 19 BATTALION AND ARMoured REGIMENT

## COMMANDING OFFICERS

### *Commanding Officers*

Lt-Col F. S. Varnham	3 Oct 1939–15 Apr 1941
Maj C. A. D'A. Blackburn	15 Apr 1941–9 Jun 1941
Lt-Col F. S. Varnham	9 Jun 1941–20 Oct 1941
Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell	20 Oct 1941–10 Apr 1943
Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin	10 Apr 1943–1 Aug 1944
Lt-Col A. M. Everist	1 Aug 1944–6 Nov 1944
Lt-Col H. H. Parata	6 Nov 1944–17 Mar 1945
Lt-Col A. M. Everist	17 Mar 1945–18 Dec 1945

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## [BACKMATTER]

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Associate Editor M. C. Fairbrother, dso, obe, ed

Sub-Editor W. A. Glue

Illustrations Editor J. D. Pascoe

Archives Officer R. L. Kay

the author: Major D. W. Sinclair, ED, m.i.d., was born in Waihi on 23 April 1911 and educated at Worsler Bay School and Wellington College. He served in 19 Battalion from September 1939 until invalided home in July 1941. In New Zealand he held the appointments of Chief Signal Officer, Central Military District, and CO Central District Signals. He went overseas again in January 1944 and was second-in-command of the Education and Rehabilitation Service in the Middle East until the war ended.

Mr Sinclair was on the staff of the Evening Post for over twelve years and is now Photo Editor in the Publicity Division of the Department of Tourist and Publicity in Wellington.

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