

6 S. A. ARMoured DIVISION IN ITALY

INTRODUCTION

On the victorious conclusion of the campaign in North Africa in May 1943, the Allied Command decided to carry the war into Italy with a view to forcing that country out of the Axis.

The campaign in Sicily in July and August 1943 was followed by the invasion of the mainland in September. Although the Badoglio Government signed an armistice with the Allies in that month, the German High Command acted swiftly and ruthlessly, and secured possession of most of Italy, north of Naples. The Allies found themselves committed to a long and stubborn campaign, involving a costly advance over some of the most difficult terrain in Europe.

Whether the campaign was justifiable from the aspect of the Grand Strategy of the war, is a question which need not detain us here. It is sufficient to note that both the Allied and German efforts in Italy were on a very considerable scale. At the time of the arrival of the SA Armoured Division in April 1944, there were 23 German divisions in Italy, which the Allies opposed with somewhat stronger forces.* The Allied Air Force enjoyed an overwhelming superiority.

The successful landings of 1943 were exploited by the Eighth Army in an advance up the Adriatic coast as far as Ortona, while after the capture of Naples the Fifth Army was stopped by the Gustav Line which covered Cassino and the entrance to the Liri valley. In January 1944, the Fifth Army made a bold landing behind the Gustav Line at Anzio, but although a substantial beachhead was won, the operation failed to capture Rome or cut off the German forces in the Cassino area.

A series of desperate battles around Cassino did not dislodge the enemy from his strong

positions until May 1944, when the Eighth Army in a great offensive forced the Germans back into the Liri valley. Simultaneously the Fifth Army broke out from the Anzio beachhead.

Under this combined pressure the Germans were driven out of Rome, and retreated northwards in considerable confusion. Indeed there were good chances of turning the retreat into a rout, and it is possible that with bolder and more flexible generalship on the Allied side, the Italian campaign could have been brought to a rapid conclusion. It is fair to remember, however, that at this stage the Allied armies in Italy were called upon to provide several divisions for a landing in southern France, while the German Command did not hesitate to reinforce the Italian front with some of their best troops. Field Marshall Kesselring was able to halt the Allies on a line running east and west of Lake Trasimeno, and after this had been broken through in costly fighting, he imposed further delays in successive positions South of Florence. Not until 4 August did Allied spearheads reach the old Tuscan capital.

During June and July the great object of the Germans was to gain time for the preparation of the Gothic Line, which had been designed to prevent the Allies breaking out from the Apennines into the Lombard plain. It was of this line that a German commentator had said in 1943:— "There is a line in Italy on which Germany will resist with all her might."

The 6 SA Armoured Division played a prominent part in the advance to Florence.

* Any comparison between Allied and German divisional strengths is misleading, as the Allies had a considerable number of independent Armoured Brigades and Brigade Groups. More-over, many German Divisions were often much below strength and some formations, like 162 Turkoman Division were composed of Russian prisoners of war, of doubtful fighting value.

The Division arrived in Egypt in May 1943 and trained there intensively for a year. In April 1944, the Division disembarked at Taranto. On arrival in Italy 12 SA Motor Brigade under Brig R. J. Palmer, DSO, was detached from the Division and served under the Nieu Zeeland Division in a mountainous sector of the line north-east of Cassino. The Brigade had a holding role during the great attack on Cassino and the Gustav Line for which part of the Divisional artillery was called on for supporting fire.

At the end of May, the Division concentrated and took part in the advance on Rome.

On 20 May, 24 Guards Brigade was put under command of 6 SA Armoured Division, and this was the beginning of a most successful and cordial comradeship. The Brigade commander was Brig A. F. D. Clive DSO MC, who had been Senior General Staff Officer to the British Military Mission in South Africa earlier in the war.

6 SA Armoured Division fought its first action as a Division on 3 June, when 24 Guards Brigade took Piglio and 12 SA Motor Brigade entered Paliano.

On 6 June the Division, now in the British XIII Corps, and on the extreme left of the Eighth Army front, passed through Rome. The Division took part in the pursuit of the enemy up the Tiber Valley, and won its first major action at Celleno on 10 June when the 11 Armoured Brigade broke through an anti-tank screen, and inflicted a severe reverse on the German 356 Infantry Division.

Heavy and confused fighting around Bagno-regio was followed by the occupation of Orvieto on 14 June.

Demolitions had greatly hampered progress despite the indefatigable work of the three engineer squadrons. Now bad weather slowed down the advance to the Trasimeno Line. On the night of 21/22 June the First City/Cape Town Highlanders were heavily repulsed in an attack on Chiusi, but the place was entered on 26 June after a successful attack on the 6 Division's right. The advance continued in the face of stubborn opposition by rearguards and on 5 July was again checked by the

strong positions of the Hilde Line. During this period the Guards Brigade was supported by the Pretoria Regiment — an association which was almost unbroken until the Guards left the Division in February 1945.

On 15 July the enemy fell back from the Hilde Line and the Division entered the Chianti hills covering the Southern approaches to Florence. A bitter struggle followed among the mountains and ridges overlooking the Divisional axis. The enemy's artillery was handled with great skill, and his Tiger tanks took full advantage of their superiority in range and armour. The severity of the fighting in this phase was only surpassed at Stanco and Salvaro.

In the final battles for Florence the Division co-operated closely with 2 Nieu Zeeland Division. Early on the morning of 4 August units of 11 Armoured Brigade entered Florence.

The casualties suffered by the Division up to this date totalled 2 100 killed, wounded and missing, or somewhat more than 40 per cent of the total casualties of 6 Division during the whole of the Italian campaign.

On 6 August the Division began to move to Siena for a period of rest.

THE CROSSING OF THE ARNO AND THE ADVANCE INTO THE APPENINES.

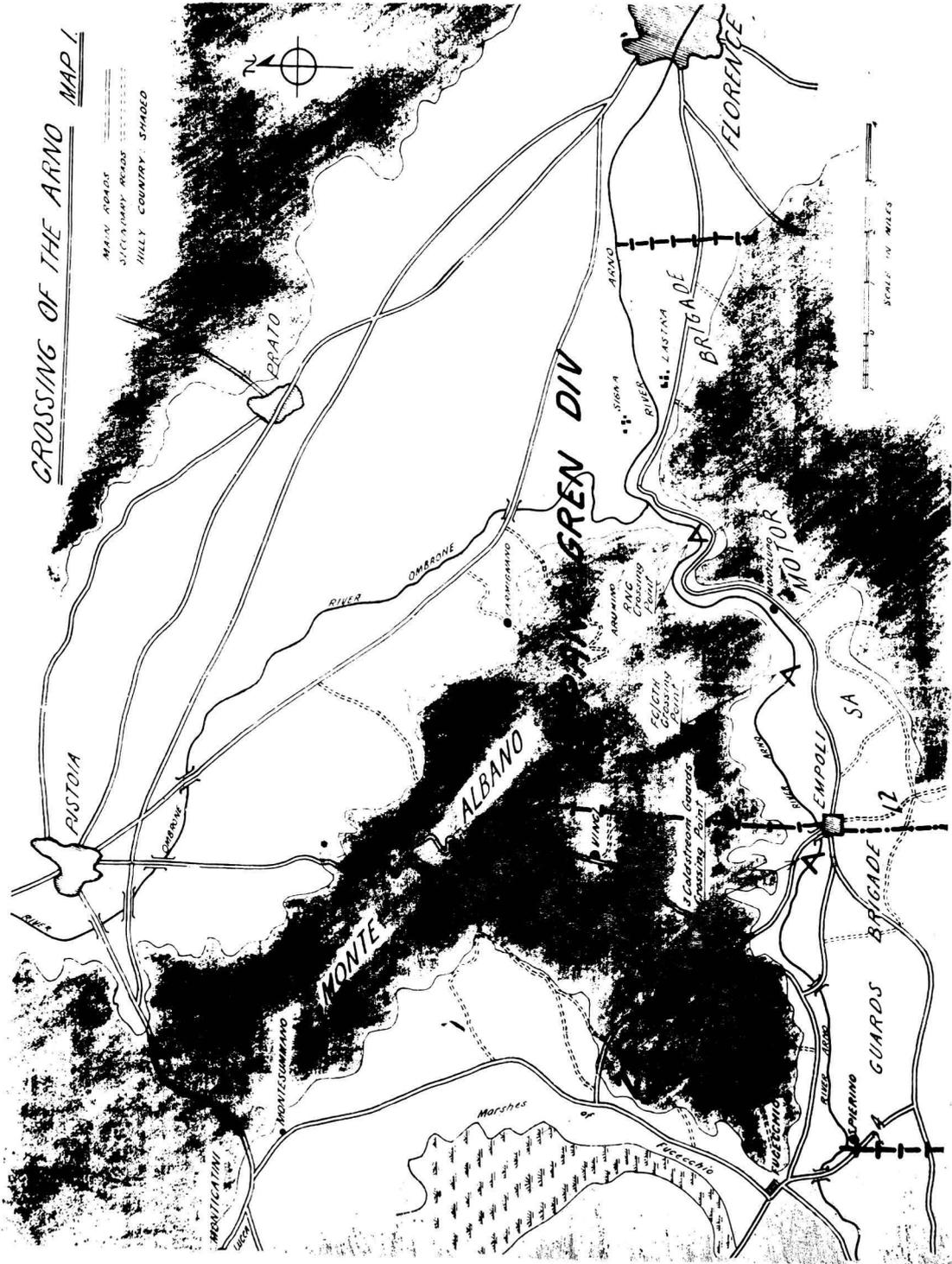
August — September 1944.

During the last days of 6 SA Armoured Division's advance on Florence, the troops could see beyond the Arno a grim and menacing line of mountains on which the enemy was known to have constructed his main defence line. Fortunately the Division was given a short rest before being thrown against the strongest positions which South African troops had to capture during World War II.

While in the Siena area, every effort was made to give the men a chance of leave in Rome. The leave parties soon discovered that the South African troops had the worst accommodation of all the Allied Forces in Rome. Some clubs were started in Siena, and most of the men enjoyed their rest. For the workshops personnel, however, it was a period

CROSSING OF THE ARNO MAP I

MAIN ROADS
 SECONDARY ROADS
 HILLY COUNTRY, SHADED



of intense activity, while they got vehicles and equipment ready for the battle ahead.

By the middle of August, XIII Corps and Fifth Army were up to the line of the Arno along most of its length. Plans were made for a great offensive to sweep the Germans back into the valley of the PO. To quote from an Allied Armies Italy Operation Order of 16 August:— **Eighth Army will prepare to launch an all out offensive against the enemy defences on the Adriatic coast with the object of breaking through the enemy defences into the valley of the PO. The offensive will be the major effort, and where requirements of the two armies conflict, ostentatious preparations to simulate a mounting of a large-scale offensive by both armies . . .**

It has been decided that 6 SA Armoured Division should pass under Fifth Army Command on completion of their rest. Fifth Army consisted of II and IV US Corps, and was commanded by General Mark Clark. The role of Fifth Army was to distract the enemy by intensive patrolling during the days preceding the Eighth Army attack, and then to launch an offensive in the Florence area. The main effort was to be made by II Corps astride Highway 65, in the direction of Bologna. IV Corps was to hold the sector along the Arno to within 5 miles of Florence, and was to protect the left flank of II Corps during its advance into the Apennines.

On 21 August a 6 SA Armoured Division Operation Order announced that the Division would pass under command of IV US Corps with effect from the following day, and would relieve 85 US Division west of Florence.

The relief of the Americans commenced on the night of 24 August and was completed on the 26th. The relief went smoothly although 59 SA Q Company was bombed by eight enemy aircraft on the afternoon of the 24th, and twenty-one Pretoria Regiment tanks broke down on the road, because the rest period was too short to allow overhaul to be completed.

The Division took over a front of over 20 miles along the south bank of the Arno. 12 Motor Brigade, with the Prince Alfred's Guard under command, held the eastern sector, and 24 Guards Brigade, with the Pretoria Regiment under command, the western. 11 Armoured Brigade was in reserve. 74 British

Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment (now converted into an infantry battalion) was under command of 12 Brigade, while 166 Newfoundland Field Regiment, which had just joined the Division, supported the Guards Brigade.

The Division was rather thin on the ground, but the Artillery and the Royal Durban Light Infantry did their best to cover the wide front. The Division Signal Squadrons had to lay some 1 500 miles of cable.

The Arno is a wide river, but not a serious military obstacle. The bed averages 100 yards in width, and although the water sometimes attains a depth of six feet, fords can be found where the river is only a foot in depth. The southern bank is very flat, but to the north the slopes of Malbano come down to the river. The country on either side of the Arno is thickly populated and under intense cultivation.

3 Panzer Grenadier Division was on the eastern sector as far as Empoli, and thereafter 26 Panzer Division continued the front. Partisans frequently crossed the river and gave valuable information.

It was impossible on such an extended front to watch the entire watercourse, and German patrols often infiltrated into the lines. The ration jeep and Company Quartermaster-sergeant of the Royal Natal Carbineers were shot up, and the same night a strange voice rang through on the telephone and with unrewarded optimism asked the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment for the password for the night. The vigorous patrolling of the Division soon curtailed the enemy's activities south of the river. The Arno was first crossed on the night of 26/27 August by a First City/Cape Town Highlanders patrol. Thereafter patrols carefully reconnoitered infantry and tank crossings, so that the Division should be able to follow up any withdrawal.

The enemy's artillery and mortars were active, and his observers took full advantage of the commanding ground on the southern spurs of Mt Albano. He used a new rocket gun whose projectiles had considerable blast effect, and which announced their coming with an unpleasant screaming noise.

By 30 August reports from prisoners and partisans, and the sound of demolitions on the northern bank indicated that the enemy

was pulling out. His reaction to troop movements was now slight, and his artillery fire was on a reduced scale.

Maj Genl Poole held an Order Group on the afternoon of 31 August, and 12 Brigade and 24 Guards Brigade were instructed to send patrols across the river to determine the extent of the German withdrawal.

On the night of 31 August/1 September both the Royal Natal Carbineers and First City/Cape Town Highlanders secured footholds on the northern bank, and just west of Empoli 3 Coldstream Guards did the same. Apart from some machine gun and mortar fire, and a patrol clash on the Guards front, the crossing was unresisted.

By the afternoon of 1 September C Company Royal Natal Carbineers reached Arlimino, while the Guards Brigade had secured a substantial bridgehead. Enemy shellfire was heavy, but the German infantry had now broken contact and were in full retreat. The Germans had sown the river bank with mines, and the Guards Brigade reported the thickest minefield which they had yet encountered. Three bulldozers were lost in 24 hours.

It cannot be said that Fifth Army had succeeded in pinning down the enemy, for 1 US Armoured Division on the left, and 88 US Division on the right, both crossed the river on 1 September without making contact. The German Command did not hesitate to switch Divisions from the Arno sector to check the Eight Army attack along the Adriatic coast. On the other hand the chances of Fifth Army being able to deliver an effective attack were proportionately increased.

By 2 September the Prince Alfred's Guard were able to get their tanks across the river, and rapid progress was made in the Divisional task, which was to occupy Mt Albano. The crest is thickly wooded, but the mountain is crossed by a network of roads and by-ways. Apart from shelling and mines the advance of 12 Motor Brigade and 24 Guards Brigade was virtually unresisted. Indeed the only impediments to the advance were a tremendous flood which washed away the bridge at Empoli on 6 September and delayed the crossing of 11 Armoured Brigade: and the orders of IV Corps, which laid down where the front line should run each day, regardless of the

opposition or lack of opposition offered by the enemy. The Guards Brigade report says that the operations **"resembled more the leisurely evolutions of 17th century armies behind cavalry screens, than the pursuit of a retreating enemy by a modern armoured force."** The Germans made no attempt to hold Mt Albano, and a foot patrol of the Royal Natal Carbineers reached the outskirts of Pistoia on 6 September. The Royal Natal Carbineers entered the town without opposition on the 8th and 11th Armoured Brigade were brought into the line on 10 September.

On the 11th the Division regrouped with 11 Brigade on the right, 12 Brigade in the centre, and the Guards Brigade on the left. The Division was ordered to advance and occupy the general line of Northing 91, running some two miles north of Pistoia. The advance into the Appenines had begun.

North of the Arno the ground rises in a series of hills towards the main watershed of the Appenines. Their steep hills rise to a height of 4 000 feet, but cliff faces are rare. From the plain the line of hills appears unbroken, but it is in fact deeply cut by a number of river valleys. Pistoia itself lies in the mouth of such a valley — that of the Ombrone. This river rises only eight miles from Pistoia, and therefore, at this point the watershed of the Appenines is very close to the Arno valley. The plain, valleys and lower slopes of the Appenine hills are thickly inhabited and the slopes are terraced and cultivated. The higher hills are covered mainly by scrub forest.

Roads and railways naturally follow the lie of the land, and the main Florence — Bologna railway running up the Bisenzio valley, enters a 12 miles long tunnel at Vernio.

On IV Corps front, the most difficult sector of the Appenines was immediately north of Pistoia and Prato, as far as the watershed. Here the main peaks of the Appenines occur, and the country is extremely wild and rugged. It might have been expected that the enemy would make his main defence in this area, but this proved not to be the case.

Indeed there was much that was obscure about the Gothic Line. Like its predecessors, Trasimene and Hilde, it was a zone of difficult ground, rather than a fortified defensive line. Air photographs, and the reports from partisans and prisoners indicated that a con-

siderable number of entrenched and wired positions had been prepared on both slopes of the Appenines, but events showed that the retention of the watershed was not a vital necessity for the enemy.

The main assault of the Gothic Line was to be delivered by II US Corps up the Futa Pass, on the main highway between Florence and Bologna. In conformity with this move, 6 SA Armoured Division as the right flanking formation of IV US Corps, had been ordered to push into the hills north of Pistoia. The right boundary of the Division was the Prato — Bologna road and the western boundary ran north and south through a point a mile west of Montecatini.

In view of the nature of the ground ahead, an Indian Battalion, the 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles, specially trained in mountain warfare, joined the Division on 10 September. They were put under the command of 11 Armoured Brigade, which also took over command of 74 British Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment.

On the morning of 11 September a patrol of the Scots Guards patrolling towards Femina Morta found the place held by the enemy and protected a thick belt of wire. The Division had reached an outpost of the Gothic Line.

So ended the first stage of the advance from the Arno. Between 1 and 11 September the 6 Division suffered only 41 casualties of whom 9 were killed. Held back by the rigid orders of Fifth Army, the Division had not been able to press the enemy during his withdrawal. The time was now coming, however, when every hill would be bitterly contested.

On 12 September forward movement into the Appenine foothills met increasing shellfire and patrols began to clash with German ground troops. On the 13th II US Corps opened its great attack on the Futa Pass and good progress was made. The policy for IV Corps was to continue aggressive patrolling, and maintain contact with the enemy. 6 SA Armoured Division was ordered to occupy the high ground between the roads Pistoia — Poretta and Prato — Castiglione.

Strong patrols were pushed out on the Divisional front on the 13th and the 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles occupied Mt Acuto, after slight opposition.

Hitherto 6 SA Armoured Division had been held on a tight rein, but on 14 September there was drastic reversal of this policy and orders from Fifth Army directed 24 Guards Brigade to capture Femina Morta, storm Mt Bersano, and exploit a further 6 000 yards into the most difficult sector of the Appenines. The Guards Brigade official report says:— **“This invitation to break the Gothic Line at one of its strongest points with four battalions — a task which at that time it was doubtful whether II Corps would be able to accomplish with four divisions — was not greeted with enthusiasm.”** After representations by Headquarters, 6 SA Division the attack was called off.

On the 14th an Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regt patrol had a most successful clash with the enemy, killing 12 and wounding 2, but on the 15th a battalion patrol sent towards Mt Porro Del Bagno was ambushed and seven men failed to return. This vigorous patrolling was a prelude to a limited attack on 11 Armoured Brigade front. On 16 September 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles assaulted Mt Alto and Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regt moved against Mt Porro Del Bagno.

Enemy shellfire was heavy and 4/13 Frontier Rifles had to advance along a narrow ridge commanded by Spandau posts. These were cleared one by one, and after some close fighting on the bushcovered crest of Mt Alto, the Indians gained their objective. They were heavily counter-attacked on 18 September, and ammunition ran out. Mules bringing up more ammunition were dispersed by shellfire, but 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles used their bayonets and clung to the mountain.

Meanwhile the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment were involved in sharp fighting on Mt Porro Del Bagno. After a clash with the enemy, commanding group was captured by A Company on the afternoon of the 16th. On the 17th C Company made a flank attack but the enemy held a dominating position on the thickley wooded mountain, and C Company were driven back. Tanks of A Squadron Special Service Battalion attempted to give support but could not force a way through the brushwood. On the morning of the 18th two tanks succeeded in getting into the A Company area, and fired with effect on an enemy observation post. At 1800 hours A Company attacked in the gathering dusk, sup-

ported by direct fire from the tanks, and a barrage was put down by 1/6 and 4/22 Field Regiments. The attack was completely successful and eleven prisoners were taken. The enemy's use of tracer on a fixed line was much to the advantage of the attacking troops. Meanwhile D Company captured a spur on the south west of the mountain. The whole Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment area was heavily shelled during the three days' battle for Porro Del Bagno which cost the battalion 39 casualties of whom 12 were killed. 20 German prisoners were taken from the 956 Grenadier Regiment of 362 Division.

The capture of Mt Alto and Mt Porro Del Bagno did much to deprive the enemy of observation over the divisional area.

The advance into the Appenines was marked by a definite change in the weather. Very cold winds alternated with soaking rain and the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment appreciated the first issue of rum on 20 September.

Patrolling on the divisional front was now intensified in order to gain early notice of any retirement. On 19 September First City/Cape Town Highlanders patrol surprised an enemy party who left behind two caps and a document which identified the 16 SS Reichsfuehrer Division. These were crack troops some of whom had been drawn from Himmler's bodyguard. They showed a confident spirit, and on 20 September a Grenadier Guards patrol was pursued back into its own lines.

Fortunately 6 Division was not compelled to fight these formidable troops along the line of the watershed. The whole German front in Italy was tottering, and for a moment there were hopes of a general collapse. Eighth Army took Rimini on 21 September, and II US Corps announced that it had broken the Gothic Line on a broad front. American troops drove a deep wedge up Highway 65 and reached positions with 15 miles of Bologna. 16 SS Division on 6 Division front was now in a dangerous position, and was compelled to abandon some of the strongest positions in Italy. 11 Armoured Brigade was ordered to advance up Highway 6620 (the Prato-Bologna road), while 12 Brigade moved up Highway 64. By 27 September the First City/Cape Town Highlanders had crossed the main Ap-

penine watershed at Collina, and the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment had reached the southern outskirts of Castiglione Del Pepoli. Minefields and very serious demolitions hampered the advance on both roads, but the enemy's shelling was not heavy and his infantry were in full retreat.

Thus ended the first phase of the battle for the Gothic Line. Although not marked by any general engagement, casualties had not been light. Between 12 and 27 September the Division lost 41 killed, 250 wounded, and 31 missing. 103 prisoners were captured.

Beyond Castiglione could be seen the Mt Vigese — Mt Salvaro heights, names ever to be famous in South African military history.

THE BATTLES OF THE GOTHIC LINE, OCTOBER 1944.

On 27 September Genl Crittenberger, commanding IV US Corps, ordered Maj Genl Poole to withdraw the Guards Brigade at once from the area west of Pistoia, in order to support 11 Brigade on the Prato-Bologna road. The main weight of 6 SA Armoured Division was to be transferred to this road in order to protect the left flank of II Corps.

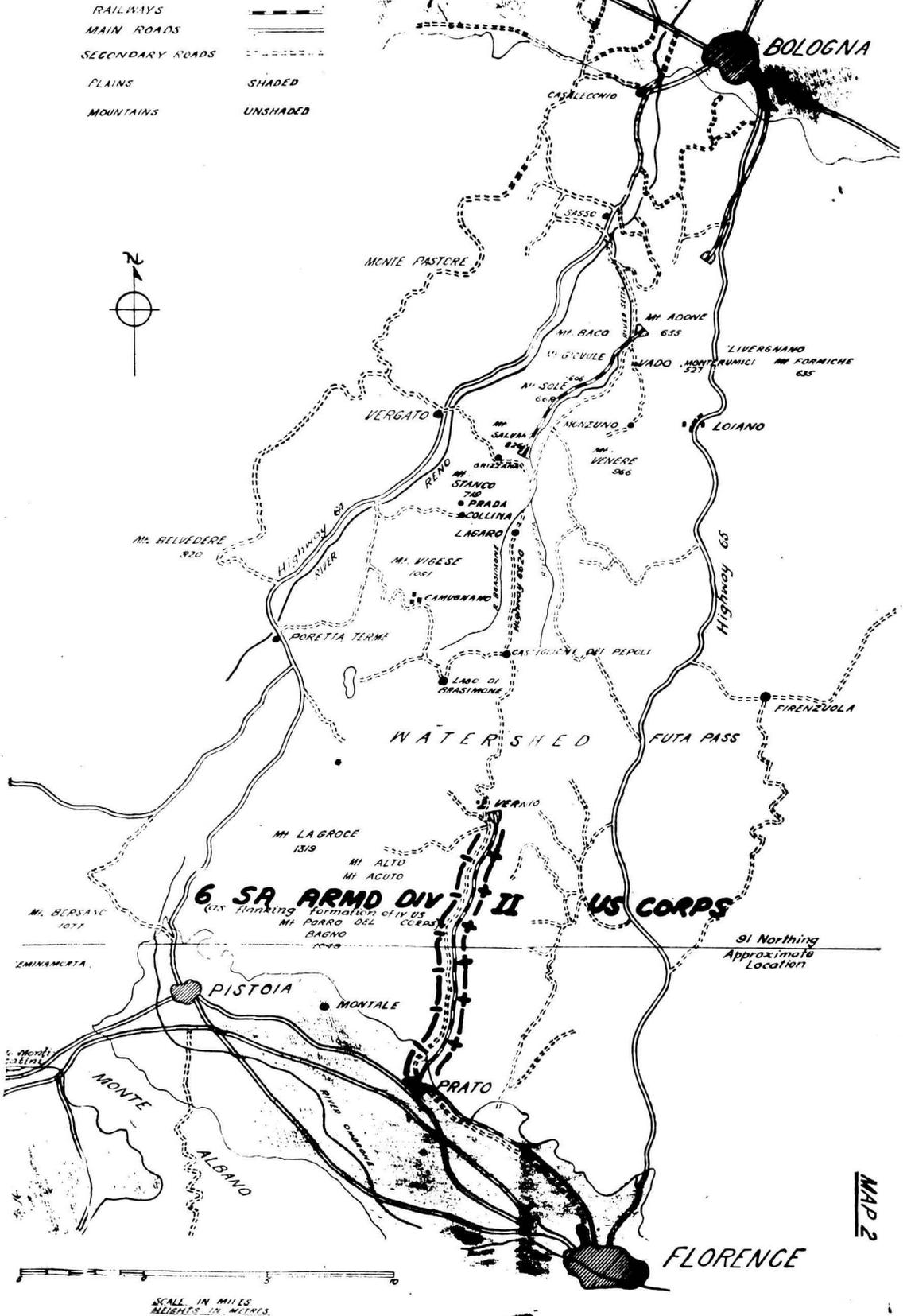
In passing on this order Divisional Headquarters announced that 6 SA Armoured Division would advance with all speed on Bologna and protect the left flank of II US Corps. The Guards Brigade was ordered to capture the Catarelto Ridge and exploit 6 000 yards beyond. Armoured Brigade was to protect their left flank by capturing Mt Vigese. 12 Motor Brigade was to be held in Divisional Reserve in the Montale area. The artillery was considerably strengthened. 178 Medium Regiment Royal Artillery came under Divisional Command, and two American 240 mm howitzers moved into the Divisional area. 74 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment left the Division.

It will be seen that the Divisional order laid emphasis on advancing on Bologna. It will be noted, however, that the Division was committed to an advance along a secondary road in very difficult country.

Before describing the desperate series of battles which ensued, it will be as well to consider the terrain. (See Maps 2 and 3).

Castiglione Del Pepoli is a village of substan-

AREA - FLORENCE - BOLOGNA

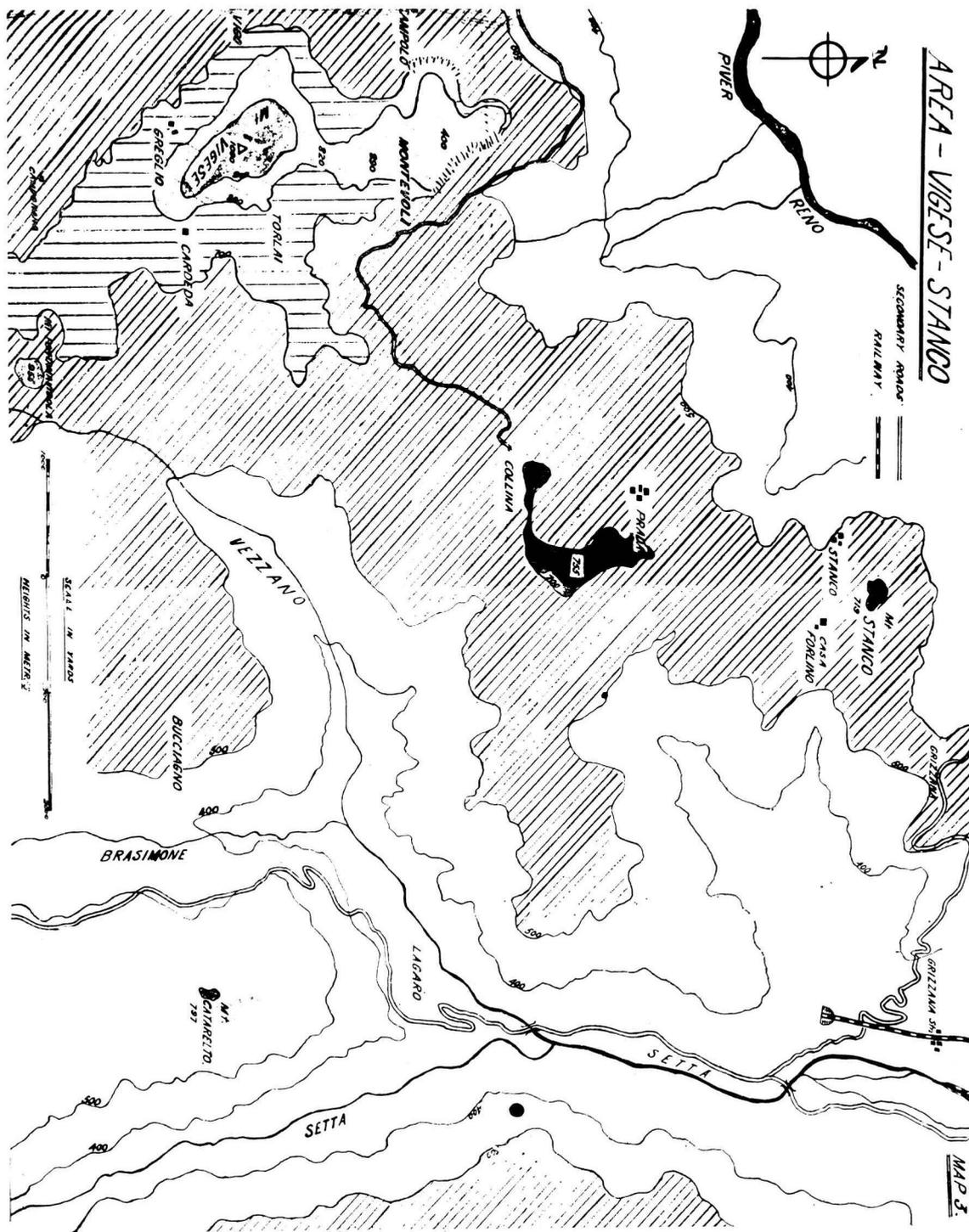


tial size lying on the northern slopes of a prominent cluster of mountains. It is less than 25 miles from Bologna, and in normal times is a popular winter sports resort. The Brasimone stream curls round at the foot of the village, and then follows a northward course.

Castiglione is connected with Prato by a secondary road, which although in good condi-

tion on the arrival of 6 Division soon broke up badly under the heavy traffic.

The small stream of the Brasimone is a tributary of the Setta River and runs into it north of the Catarelto Ridge. Its Valley separates that ridge from the high ground on the west, which culminates in the very steep slopes of Mt Vigese.



The Catarelto Ridge lies in the angle of the streams Brasimone and Setta. It is some four miles in length and little over a mile in width. The ridge maintains a comparatively even height, but Mt Catarelto at its northern end is somewhat higher than the ridge itself. There are some belts of thick forest on the mountain and ridge, but the greater part of it is covered by farmland. Such was the feature which the Guards Brigade was now ordered to capture.

Although some optimists considered that the war in Italy would be over in three weeks, the Guard had no illusions about the task ahead. During the move to Castiglione the Brigade Intelligence Officer noted the rugged country, and its impoverished and forbidding appearance. Roads and tracks were few and heavy rain and thick mud were bound to have their effect.

Traffic movement on the 28th was extremely difficult owing to rain and mud, and only two companies of 1 Scots Guards and a troop of A Squadron of the Pretoria Regiment reached Castiglione during the day. 11 Armoured Brigade were unable to give any information about the enemy, but that afternoon the Scots Guards advancing along the Catarelto Ridge made contact with the enemy in a thick mist. At dawn on 29 September, the Scots Guards resumed their advance, and in spite of a certain amount of machine gun and mortar fire cleared the greater part of the ridge. It was found that the enemy was holding Mt Catarelto in strength.

The attack developed on the 30th, and met with fierce oppositions. The Pretoria Regiment managed to get two Stuart tanks on to the ridge and they were able to give some machine gun support. The Scots Guards got within 200 yards of the crest of Catarelto, but the enemy's resistance was fanatical. It was impossible to advance further, and during the night, and at dawn, the Germans sent in two strong counter-attacks. Very hard fighting followed, and the Guards were assisted by the mortars and machine guns of B Group 1 Light Infantry. 166 (Newfoundland) Field Regiment was in close support and 7/23 Medium Regiment brought down fire at their request. Although the Scots Guards were forced to draw back their left flanking company, the enemy did not press his advantage in the face of very heavy artillery and ma-

chine gun fire. Attempts were made to bring up Pretoria Regiment tanks to assist the Guards, but the rain-soaked road collapsed under their weight.

While this furious struggle was raging on the Catarelto Ridge, C Squadron of the Pretoria Regiment led the advance of 3 Coldstream Guards up the western banks of the Brasimone, and reached the area of Bucciagno directly opposite to Mt Catarelto. Enemy machine gun fire was heavy, but attempts by the Schutzstaffel (SS) troops to infiltrate during the night 1/2 October were beaten off. The Scots Guards having been badly knocked about, 5 Grenadier Guards were ordered to storm Mt Catarelto on 2 October. The attack was delivered in thick mist and blinding rain, and although the attacking troops got within 50 yards of the crest, the enemy refused to be dislodged. Twice the leading company attempted to storm the crest, and twice they were beaten off. The thick mist greatly restricted supporting fire, and it was decided to call off the attack pending an improvement in the weather.

Plans were made to resume the assault on 3 October, but during the night of 2/3 October a Grenadier Guards patrol reached the crest of Catarelto and found that the enemy had withdrawn. He had fallen back along the whole Brigade front and 3 Coldstream Guards completed the occupation of the Bucciagno Ridge. The German retreat had probably been hastened by the American occupation of Mt Del Galletto four miles north-east of Catarelto. So ended one of the fiercest actions in which 6 SA Armoured Division was engaged, and which cost the Guards Brigade 22 killed, 86 wounded, and 23 missing.

Meanwhile 11 Armoured Brigade was advancing against Mt Vigese, a dominating feature which towered up on the left flank. On 30 September the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment occupied the village of Camugnano while 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles on their right flank secured Mt Fontanavidola. The advance continued on 1 October, and it was confirmed that the enemy was holding Mt Vigese. The Royal Natal Carbineers were put under 11 Brigade command.

On 3 October D and C Companies Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment passed through the Royal Natal Carbineers and ad-

vanced against the southern spurs of Mt Vigese. D Company took Cardeda after a brisk engagement and then occupied Torlai.

The night was wet and dark, and at 2330 hours the platoon in Torlai was heavily attacked. The infantrymen fought until their ammunition ran out and then executed an extremely skilful and orderly withdrawal. Further enemy attacks were broken up by artillery fire.

Attempts by D Company to retake Torlai on 4 October were unsuccessful and the enemy's mortar and rocket fire inflicted 17 casualties. The blast effect of his rocket projectiles was devastating. SSB tanks, trying to assist D Company, lost tracks or bellied in mud. On the night of the 4th, Number 1 platoon of D Company again attacked Torlai and after fierce house-to-house fighting cleared the village.

At 0200 hours the Germans launched a counter-attack in force and desperate fighting followed. The enemy approached Cardeda but our fire was so heavy that he did not press the attack. The 4/22 Field Regiment bombarded Torlai with good effect and the battle died down at 0500 hours.

D Company Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment held a roll call in Cardeda and found that they had lost during the past two days 2 killed, 21 wounded and 19 missing. A patrol sent out that morning established that the enemy was still holding Torlai. The body of Pte Joseph was found lying beside his Bren, which he had been heard firing until 0500 hours. Subsequently the graves of 78 Germans were found around Torlai.

The events of the previous two days had shown the futility of attempting to hold Torlai with small pockets. Moreover there was no advantage in holding the position at all, so long as the enemy was in possession of the commanding slopes of Mt Vigese, and so was able to send reinforcements across from Montevolo.

Accordingly Brig Furstenburg decided to attack from the west in order to carry the crest of Mt Vigese, and cut off the Germans from Montevolo. The Royal Natal Carbineers were detailed for this task.

At last light on the 5th, A and B Companies concentrated at Greglio with C Company some 1 200 yards in rear. A Company was ordered to take the summit of Mt Vigese and establish

a platoon on a position overlooking the neck. B Company was to take Vigo, and C Company to exploit.

A Company moved off at dawn on 6 October and a platoon made straight for the summit of Mt Vigese. It was a silent attack without artillery preparation. Advancing up the steep slopes in thick mist the platoon fell upon a German position near the summit and took it completely by surprise. Nine prisoners were taken, including the captain responsible for the Vigese-Vigo area.

A second A Company platoon after a sharp fight, captured a machine gun post halfway down the slope and the Company took up positions overlooking the neck Montevolo and Vigese. Meanwhile B Company captured Vigo after calling for artillery support. In these brilliant operations the Royal Natal Carbineers took 17 prisoners and killed a number of Germans without sustaining a single casualty.

The Germans in Torlai, finding their retreat threatened, evacuated the village under cover of heavy rain and mist.

Patrols on the 7th found evidence of a considerable withdrawal. The Montevolo massif was clear and Collina and Camplo had been abandoned. The successful Royal Natal Carbineers attack no doubt influenced this withdrawal, but the enemy probably wished to shorten his front in view of the heavy American pressure up Highway 65.

The fighting for Mt Vigese cost 11 Armoured Brigade 12 killed, 50 wounded, and 19 missing.

On 5 October, 6 SA Armoured Division was put directly under command of Fifth Army. An American Force, equivalent in strength to a brigade, and known as Combat Command B was put under 6 Division. This force had been advancing up Highway 64, and on 5 October was on the southern outskirts of Porretta.

6 Division's intentions for 7 October stated that 11 Armoured Brigade would advance along the high ground through Prada to Mt Stanco. East of the River Setta II US Corps had secured an outstanding success by the capture of Monzuno on 5 October. It was intended to pass the Guards Brigade through the Monzuno area to launch an assault on Mt Sole. Such an attack, if successful, might

have compelled the enemy to abandon the whole Stanco-Salvaro feature, and would have contributed to a decisive break-through to Bologna. Unhappily this movement of the Guards Brigade was cancelled, because of the setback to 11 Armoured Brigade at Mt Stanco.

Two miles north of Collina is the rounded knoll of Mt Stanco, which is approached by a ridge running from Vigese. This ridge is extensively cultivated, with some patches of forest. Stanco itself is covered by straggling bush, but there are orchards on the southern slopes and a fringe of chestnut trees at the foot of the northern slope.

Brig Furstenberg decided that 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles should concentrate at first light on 7 October in the Camugnano area. The battalion was then to pass through the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment, occupy Prada, and capture Mt Stanco. Thereafter it was to exploit to Mt Salvaro. The Indians were faced with a difficult task which involved concentrating in the dark and marching along unreconnoitred tracks and through thick mud for 6 000 yards to the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment positions. They had to advance against an enemy whose strength and dispositions were unknown, and against whom they had not done any patrolling.

Nevertheless 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles, after an arduous march and some sharp skirmishes, occupied Mt Stanco by dusk on the 7th. The weather deteriorated during the day and no jeeps were able to get as far as Stanco. A Company did not come up until 2000 hours, after marching continuously for fourteen hours. At dawn on 8 October heavy firing broke out around the mountain, and intense mortar fire out off the forward Companies from reinforcements in Prada. The forward observation officer's jeep and wireless set had been bogged down en route to the mountain, and it was deemed imprudent to give the Indians artillery support by blind firing. After two hours fierce fighting the Indians' ammunition ran out.

Mules bringing up more ammunition were dispersed by shellfire and the mountain was abandoned. Fugitives succeeded in infiltrating through the enemy, and only 37 casualties were suffered. The action showed the importance of having a pre-arranged fire plan to cover an objective when taken.

Prisoners and captured documents revealed that II and III Battalions of the 36 SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment were lying astride Mt Stanco.

On 8 October a Divisional order announced that the line would be held on a four-brigade front, and for this purpose 12 Motor Brigade was moved up to hold the Mt Vigese-Montevolo area. 11 Armoured Brigade was told to take Mt Stanco and exploit to Mt Salvaro. Indeed the action proved that to secure Mt Stanco was a task beyond the powers of a single battalion.

Patrols were sent out on the 9th, one of which almost reached the summit of Mt Stanco.

It was decided to attack on a two-company front — D on the right and B on the left. Advancing at dawn both Companies made rapid progress, and captured their objectives by 0640 hours. There can be little doubt that the enemy deliberately allowed this attack to develop in order to launch an effective counter-stroke.

At 0840 hours the enemy was reported to be forming up for a counter-attack, and the whole of the Divisional artillery, augmented by the 4.2 inch mortars of the RDLI, brought down their curtain of fire. Communications with the guns were not good, and the enemy succeeded in crossing open ground and reaching the bushes on the northern slopes of Mt Stanco.

At 1005 hours the Schutzstaffel troops put in a sharp attack and after overrunning the right-hand platoon of D Company captured Forlino. C Company was sent up to recover Forlino, and came under very heavy fire in doing so.

After mid-day the enemy's main attack, estimated at two companies strong, came in from the south-west, taking advantage of a gully. Confused fighting developed and Forward Observation Officers declared that they could not engage without endangering their own troops. B Company's left flank was threatened, and the A Company Commander ordered both B and D Companies to withdraw. They did so in good order covered by C Company. The rearguard platoon of this company put up a splendid resistance and suffered 11 casualties, all of whom were successfully evacuated.

The action cost the Royal Natal Carbineers 56 casualties of whom 10 were killed and 10 missing. Three officers were among the dead. The German casualties were heavy, and 12 Brigade Intelligence Summary remarked on the enemy's fanatical disregard of defensive fire. The German tactics were undoubtedly skilful and the action was remarkable for the fact that three companies of the Royal Natal Carbineers fought a battle against an enemy force estimated at two battalions.

6 SA Armoured Brigade reorganised for the third battle of Stanco. 11 Armoured Brigade took over the Mt Vigese sector, while 12 Motor Brigade (with the Royal Natal Carbineers back under command) became responsible for the capture of Stanco.

B and D Companies Royal Durban Light Infantry and a platoon of C Company were put under 12 Brigade Command. On 9 October 5 Grenadier Guards took over the Montorio Ridge from the Americans and on the 10th 3 Coldstream Guards advanced their line forward of Cisalpina to protect the right flank of the Royal Natal Carbineers.

The task of 12 Motor Brigade was to take Mt Stanco and then exploit north-east along the ridge towards Mt Salvaro. 11 Armoured Brigade was to protect the left flank, while 24 Guards Brigade was to stage a demonstration. The attack was to be supported by all available artillery. In other words the 8 Division was to fight the battle as a division.

The administrative problems were immense. To move 12 Brigade to concentration areas south of Stanco, it was necessary to use a narrow, muddy, and extremely difficult jeep track along which all the equipment, supplies, and ammunition for four battalions had to come. The weather had turned bitterly cold and there was snow on the higher mountains. Yet a large number of men in the Division were still without battle dress. Boots were in a state of considerable disrepair and wet feet were to cause serious foot trouble.

The country was quite unsuited to tanks, and the Natal Mounted Rifles/SA Air Force, much to their chagrin, were now in the process of conversion to infantry.

Brig Palmer decided to assault Stanco on a two battalion front, with Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment on the left, and First City/

Cape Town Highlanders on the right. The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment were to capture the summit of the mountain, while the objective of First City/Cape Town Highlanders was Point 650 on the eastern spur of Mt Stanco.

At 0430 hours on 13 October, 24 Guards Brigade staged a diversion by attacking Grizana station. They were supported by a dummy barrage, which is said to have mystified the enemy.

At 0500 hours on the 13th a terrific artillery bombardment came down on Stanco, thus heralding the largest set-piece attack which South African troops had undertaken in Italy. The 4.2 inch mortars and medium machine guns of the Royal Durban Light Infantry added their weight to the Divisional artillery, which fired over 10 000 shells at the enemy. Two American medium regiments and three American heavy guns took part in the bombardment. The attack was supported by 139 guns. The German artillery did not remain silent and A Company Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment were heavily shelled on their Start Line.

A direct hit caused 12 casualties in one platoon. Nevertheless the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment pushed forward with determination. At 0559 hours a platoon of A Company reported they had reached the summit of the mountain.

The enemy's machine gun and mortar fire was very severe, and he clung stubbornly to positions near Stanco village, and in Casa Forlino. The artillery and 4.2 inch mortars continued to assist the infantry by firing concentrations as called for by the assaulting troops, and A and C Companies Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment captured their objectives by 1020 hours.

First City/Cape Town Highlands found the opposition more stubborn, and the battalion suffered heavily from very accurate machine gun fire. Three successive attacks on Point 650 were repulsed. At 1145 hours D Company was instructed to take Point 650 "at all costs". After a bombardment by battalion 3 inch mortars, the attack went in. The First City/Cape Town Highlanders official report says: — **"1205 hours. Smoke mortar bomb signal for advance goes down and D Company charge up the extremely steep slopes**

of Point 650, yelling in the approved battle course manner and bayoneting and tommy-gunning the enemy out of his foxholes and machine gun positions. A brisk hand to hand engagement ensues and the enemy, completely demoralised, takes to his heels as the house on Point 650 quite inexplicably blows up." The enemy showed no respect for the Red Cross and a stretcher-bearing section was badly shot up. The survivors from Point 650 fled into the arms of A Company Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment, which killed at least 12 and took 13 prisoners.

Twice the enemy attempted to form up for counter-attacks, but these efforts were crushed by artillery and mortar fire. By mid-afternoon the mortaring and shelling died down, and 12 Motor Brigade was secure on Mt Stanco.

The Brigade casualties totalled 141. The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment lost 28 killed and 63 wounded and the First City/Cape Town Highlanders 12 killed and 38 wounded. On the other hand the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment took 93 prisoners and First City/Cape Town Highlanders 35. The enemy's losses in killed and wounded were undoubtedly heavy.

At the time the attack opened the enemy was relieving 16 SS Division by 94 Infantry Division and prisoners were captured from both divisions. They seemed badly shaken. 6 SA Armoured Division Intelligence summary of 17 October states: **"In the opinion of all Prisoners of War from 274 Grenadier Regiment we owe the success of the attack on the village and Mt Stanco on 13 October 1944, to extremely effective artillery preparation and the timing of the infantry attack. All the prisoners of War say that never in Russia or any other field of battle have they experienced such accurate and concentrated artillery fire. Some of the heavy machine guns were put out of action immediately after our artillery concentrated on them. Most of the shells were wasted since the first rounds usually hit the target. When the artillery fire lifted and the Germans prepared for the infantry attack our infantry were there already and in some cases even behind them."**

An officer of the CRA's staff drew attention at the time to the importance of pre-arranged defensive fire tasks and said: "Defensive fire

tasks were pre-arranged from the map and air photographs and fire was put down as part of the programme on these tasks. Not only does this provide a certain amount of cover while the infantry is mopping up on the objective, but it also gives Forward Observation Officers, Company and Platoon Commanders an indication of where the pre-arranged tasks lie on the ground and subsequent Defensive Fire can then be easily and quickly arranged."

The capture of Mt Stanco was a most important success, but it was only one step in what had developed into a bloody battle of position. An Intelligence Summary of 16 October stated: **"Enemy resistance along the whole front of the Fifth Army attack shows no signs of slackening and every Allied advance provokes an immediate counter-attack, supported by artillery fire as heavy and concentrated as we have ever encountered in the Italian theatre. With the advantage of precipitous terrain, ideal for defence, good lateral communications behind his front line, and excellent gun areas astride the valley roads which lead down to the Bologna-Rimini highway, on which lie his forward dumps, the enemy has been able to stabilise his line and in obedience to orders apparently emanating from the Fuehrer, is now fighting desperately to hold it at all costs."**

12 Motor Brigade continued its advance. A narrow, razor-backed ridge links Mt Stanco and Grizzana, and above Grizzana rises the Mt Salvaro massif. There are a number of intermediate points between Grizzana and Point 826, the summit of Salvaro. Point 689 is the first, Mt Pezza the second and Point 806 the third.

The Mt Salvaro feature is much more wild and rugged than Mt Stanco. The usual farmlands cluster round the southern slopes, but the high ground is covered with thick bush alternating with rocky and precipitous crantzes.

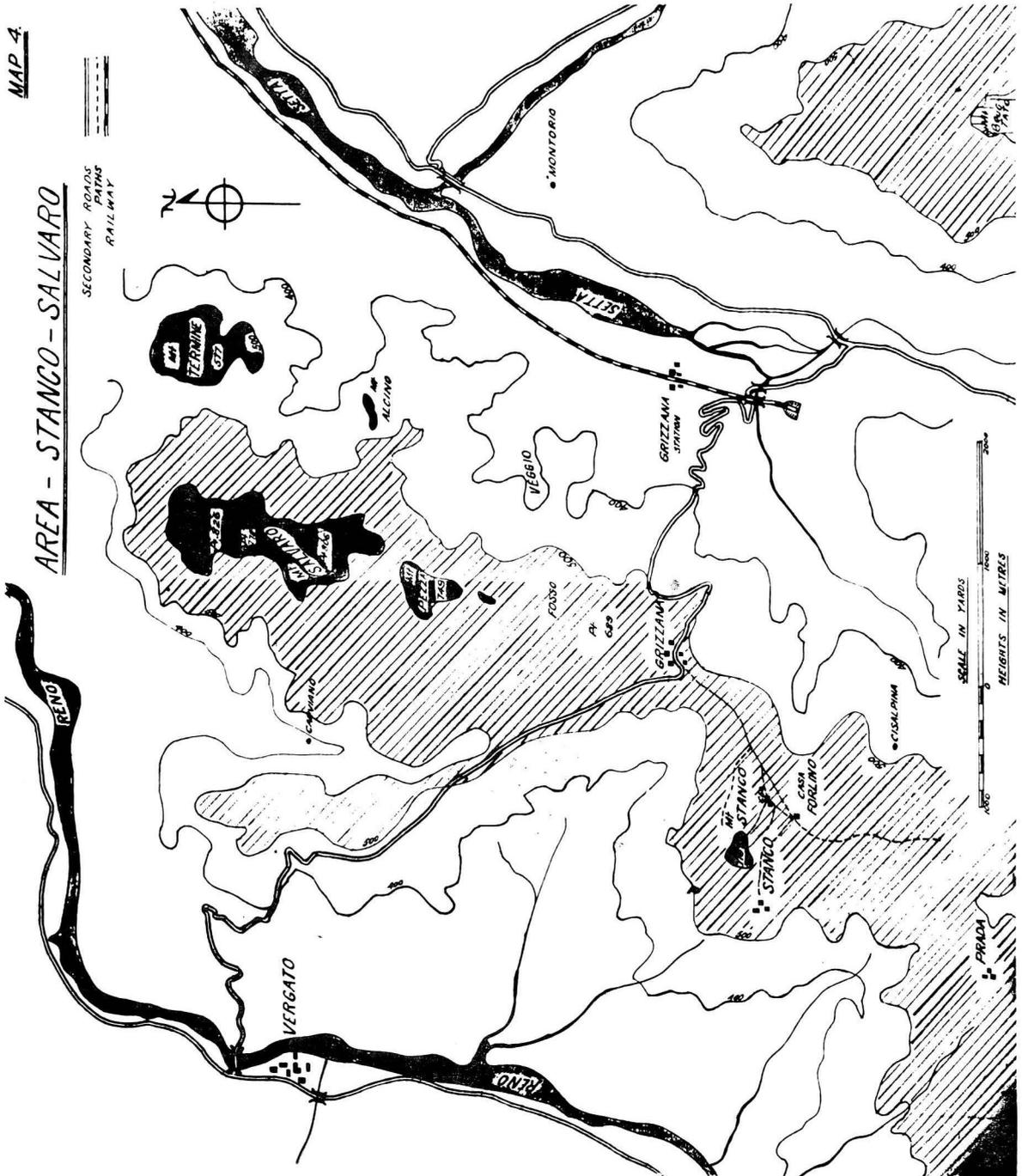
On 15 October C Company Royal Natal Carbineers reached the crest of Point 689 without opposition, apart from mortar and artillery fire. Patrols were sent out, and it soon became clear that a serious action would be required to clear the enemy from Mt Pezza and the massive spur jutting out on the west of the mountain.

The Guards Brigade moved forward to con-

form with Brig Palmer's advance, and the Scots Guards occupied Veggio on 15 October. This advance was of the first importance as it opened the road from Castiglione to Grizzana and so did much to ease 12 Brigade's communications. Engineers of 12 Field Squadron and 42 Field Company, Royal Engineers laboured on the road and by the afternoon opened it for jeeps. The supply line, however, was completely overlooked from the German positions on Salvaro.

Brig Palmer decided to attack Mt Pezza with two battalions supported by troops of B Squadron Prince Alfred's Guard, who had been able to get their tanks up to the Grizzana area.

On the afternoon of 17 October the Royal Natal Carbineers attacked Mt Pezza and the First City/Cape Town Highlanders assaulted the western spur. The attack was supported by 7/23 Medium Regiment, 1/6 Field Regi-



ment, and the Royal Durban Light Infantry. Prince Alfred's Guard tanks made a feint down the Carviano road, and drew off much of the enemy's fire. Nevertheless his mortaring and shelling were very heavy, but both battalions took their objectives. The Royal Natal Carbineers lost 4 killed and 18 wounded and the First City/Cape Town Highlanders 1 killed and 7 wounded. The enemy's losses were much greater and he lost 56 prisoners. Some of them were from the 94 Division, and some from the 16 SS, indicating that the enemy had adopted the extraordinary course of placing a divisional boundary on an important objective. During the night 17/18 October divisional artillery and mortars brought down defensive fire and frustrated German counter-attack plans.

On the map Mt Salvaro looks much like a figure 8, with broad northern and southern sections and a narrow waist. Point 806 is the southern section, and Point 826 the northern. The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment were ordered to capture Point 806 and then exploit to Point 826. The battalion concentrated on Mt Pezza in thick mist on 18 October. It was arranged for 24 Guards Brigade to attack Mt Alcino on 19 October in conjunction with the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment attack.

B and D Companies Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment crossed their Start Line at 0545 hours on the 19th and found the going steep and difficult. For 15 minutes the advance was made in silence, and accordance with the plan the artillery and mortars did not open fire until 0600 hours. D Company reached Point 806 by 0740 hours, opposition being slight. Considerable fighting developed on the western side of Salvaro, and it took three hours to clear the thickly wooded area. Towards midday the enemy started very heavy shelling and mortaring. During the afternoon he tried to infiltrate between B and D Companies, but his attempts to counter-attack failed before accurate small arms and mortar fire. It was found that Point 826 was held in strength, and 12 Brigades official report says:— **"In view of the heavy casualties among our own troops, the continuous heavy shelling and mortaring of the forward positions and the great difficulty experienced in getting ammunition and supplies forward to these positions, it was decided any further forward move on this day was impracticable."**

The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment lost 3 killed and 25 wounded in the action, but captured 17 prisoners.

Meanwhile the Scots Guards had attacked Mt Alcino supported by the fire of C Squadron Pretoria Regiment. It was important to secure this feature in order to protect the right flank of 12 Motor Brigade. Mt Alcino was a most formidable position, and owing to previous casualties the Scots Guards were suffering from an acute shortage of officers and platoon sergeants. After severe fighting extending over three days the enemy withdrew from the mountain on the evening of 21 October.

On 20 October the enemy launched several counter-attacks against the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment, but the battalion hung on to 806. Casualties and wastage had now reduced the strength of the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment Companies to the following:—

A Company 50: B Company 44: C Company 45: D Company 41. B Company Royal Natal Carbineers was brought forward in support, but the position of the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment was unenviable. 12 Brigades official report says:— **"During this period the greatest difficulty was experienced in bringing up ammunition and supplies. Jeeps could go only 1 000 yards forward of Fosso after which all material had to go forward up the steep rocky slopes by mule. The narrow mule track, furthermore, was under heavy shell and mortar fire with the result that casualties were sustained among mules and porters while many mules bolted and were lost with their loads. To assist in the matter, a small portar force was hastily organised from the men of the battalion and also from dismounted tank crews from the Prince Alfred's Guard. In the ensuing 36 hours those men worked themselves to the stage of exhaustion carrying ammunition and supplies up the hill and casualties down the hill. Even with these efforts, it sometimes took as much as twelve to fourteen hours to get a casualty from the battlefield down to the Regimental Aid Post at Fosso. Furthermore water at one stage had run out to such an extent that there was none available up on the hill even for casualties. Ammunition too ran so short at one stage that it was being taken from the rear companies to allow the forward companies to keep up firing. Enemy shelling and mortaring on all forward positions held by the brigade and**

especially on Points 806 and 748 were on a scale far heavier than experienced anywhere in the Italian campaign by our troops before." Much of this fire was undoubtedly directed by the enemy from Mt Alcino, the eastern slopes of 806 being in direct view of this feature.

There are limits to human endurance, and those limits were now being reached. The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment were exhausted and the battalion had lost 223 casualties since the battle of Stanco opened. Accordingly it was decided to relieve the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment by the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment, who would then undertake the capture of Point 826. The Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment moved up from 11 Brigade sector on 21 October and took over on Point 806. The Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment came under 12 Motor Brigade command, and the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment were put under 11 Brigade.

The Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment were also far from fit for a major battle. Their report says:— **"The Battalion is very low in strength and all are tired out. For seven weeks the battalion has fought and advanced in wet, bad weather and Salvaro will be a test indeed."**

The flanks of the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment were protected by the precipitous slopes of Mt Salvaro, but this meant that the only line of approach for the attack on 826 day along the narrow knife-edge ridge connecting that point with 806. North of Point 806, the ridge narrows and descends to Point 778, some 500 yards ahead. Then the ridge climbs again and four hundred yards further on is Point 826. The northern slope of Mt Salvaro is also acute, but a low neck trends away to the north-east and finally connects the Salvaro feature with Mt Sole.

On 22 October visibility was extremely poor, and mist alternated with rain. Patrols were sent out to Point 778, and found the enemy occupying buildings in that area. That afternoon two platoons of the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment made a brilliant raid on Point 778, and after a sharp fight took 45 prisoners. Counter-attacks from 826 were beaten off, and the raiding force withdrew after losing 3 killed and 5 wounded.

Prisoners taken on Point 778 came from no less than three battalions, and it appeared that Point 826 was held by a mixed group drawn from 94 Infantry Division.

Plans were made for the decisive attack on 23 October. The First City/Cape Town Highlanders were holding firm west of Mt Pezza and patrolling vigorously in that area. The Royal Natal Carbineers were in rear of the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment and when the latter battalion attacked, were instructed to take over Point 806. B Squadron Prince Alfred's Guard was allotted harassing fire tasks.

The attack was to receive unprecedented artillery support.

Apart from the two mediums and two field regiments of the Divisional artillery two Medium Regiments from an Army Group Royal Artillery were to bring down a series of "stonks" and "murders". The Medium machine guns and 4.2 inch mortars of the Royal Durban Light Infantry were to add their quota to the inferno. The mortars were allotted areas which could not be reached by gunfire owing to crest-clearance problems.

As soon as the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment had captured Point 826, the Scots Guards were to assault Mt Termina. Lt Col Reeves-Moore decided to attack with A and B Companies forward, and C following in close support. Considerable difficulty was experienced in getting food up to the attacking troops and A Company did not receive their evening meal until 0130 hours on 23 October, when it was cold and unpalatable. At 0545 hours A and B Companies moved in to the attack, and the artillery let loose their tremendous bombardment. The assaulting troops advanced rapidly, so rapidly indeed that most of the enemy's defensive fire fell behind them. The enemy had returned to Point 778 during the night, and brisk fighting developed among the houses there. The German artillery and mortars now got the range, and heavy casualties were suffered by the attacking troops. Point 778 was finally secured at 0715 hours and eleven prisoners were taken.

A and B Companies pressed on, but were met by intense machine-gun fire from houses some 200 yards beyond the neck. C Company moved up in close support, and D Company

took over on Point 806. A period of stalemate followed, during which the mortaring on both sides was terrific.

Finally B Company's right hand platoon succeeded in enfilading this position, while the centre platoon of B Company made a front attack. The enemy withdrew leaving 11 prisoners in our hands. It was now 1130 hours.

Under cover of mist the leading troops worked their way forward up the southern slopes of 826. Suddenly the mist lifted, and they had to withdraw to cover under violent Spandau fire. Lt Col Reeves-Moore says in his report:—

“Point 826 the objective was now within 250 yards with all its approaches over open flat-tish ground. The enemy was dug in the depth of 5 to 6 feet, and every dug-in position had a Spandau . . . The advance was again halted, no manoeuvring was possible even by individuals and again enemy mortaring, direct from Point 826 became intense. This was the crisis of the day — the Battalion has suffered severe casualties of which 7 were officers and 20 NCO's — no headway could be made over that open ground and ammunition was running short.”

Fire power was needed, and it was decided that after 40 minutes mortaring, the artillery would put down a five minute “murder”, and then A, B and C Companies would charge the objective. Advantage was taken of the pause to bring up more ammunition and grenades — a difficult task in the face of the enemy's persistent and accurate shelling.

As soon as the artillery ceased fire the attack went in. Lt Col Reeves-Moore says: — **“The enemy was outfought and outmanoeuvred — he surrendered right and left. Positions were rapidly dug-in and consolidated in all-round defence and prepared for counter attack. This was completed by 1630 hours. At 1655 hours, 27 enemy, shouting, approached from the direction of Point 516. B Company right platoon allowed them to come up to within 100 yards when three Bren guns opened . . . ”**

Other attempts to counter-attack were smothered by artillery fire. Fortunately the Battalion had consolidated well down the slopes of 826, and the enemy's artillery concentrated on the summit itself.

Spasmodic shelling and mortaring continued throughout the night. The evacuation of casualties was a heart-breaking task, and many

had to be left on the mountain in the cold and rain.

Lt Col Reeves-Moore said:— **“The battlefield is a gruesome sight — the large tracts of densely wooded area have been laid bare by the terrific concentration of mortar and shell fire — enemy dead, weapons, equipment and ammunition are strewn about everywhere and the battalion, depleted, tired, wet, coughing and most of the men suffering with swollen feet . . . has given of its best . . . ”**

The Scots Guards attacked Mt Termine on the afternoon of the 23rd, but the attack was called off when an extensive minefield was discovered. The enemy abandoned the ridge that night, and it was subsequently found that none of the mines were armed.

Patrols operating forward of Mt Termine found the bodies of many civilians, who had been brutally done to death by Schutzstaffel troops during September.

The capture of Point 826 marked the end of the most desperate close quarter fighting of the campaign — at least as far as South African troops were concerned. Mt Salvaro was the highest and most dominating ground between Mt Vigese and Bologna, and its occupation was essential to a further advance along the Reno or Setta valleys. Its conquest was a great tactical achievement, and although casualties had not been light, those of the enemy were far heavier. Indeed 12 Motor Brigade operations from Stanco to Salvaro were remarkable for the fact that ground which greatly favoured the defence was torn from a stubborn and skilful enemy, without his being able to exact a proportionate penalty in casualties. The artillery fired 7 369 rounds in support of the attack on Point 826 and Royal Durban Light Infantry mortars expended 1 753 bombs.

The Division received no air support during these operations and success was due to the skilful handling of a very powerful artillery, coupled with the self-sacrifice and sound tactics of the assaulting infantry.

The Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment lost 15 killed and 81 wounded, but the battalion captured 56 prisoners, and over 80 enemy dead were found on the battlefield.

Preparations were now made for further attacks, but the 6 SA Armoured Division had virtually reached the limit of its progress for 1944. Winter was at hand.