

THE TIGER TRIUMPHS



THE STORY OF THREE GREAT DIVISIONS IN ITALY

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MAPS AND DIAGRAMS

INDIAN BATTLEFIELDS IN ITALY	Page 6
LOWER ADRIATIC SECTOR	Facing page 26
MONASTERY HILL MASSIF AND CASSINO TOWN	Page 40
EIGHTH INDIAN DIVISION IN PURSUIT	„ 82
GOTHIC LINE BATTLEFIELD IN THE HIGH APENNINES	„ 118
THE BREAK-THROUGH ON THE RIVER LINES	Facing page 188

I. THE LOWER ADRIATIC

CHAPTER ONE

THE NEW CAMPAIGN

TWO EARLIER VOLUMES* have revealed how faithfully India bore her share of Great Britain's heavy commitments in Middle East and in the great deserts during the first four years of war.

During that period Italy's East African empire toppled into ruins. Iran, Iraq and Syria were made secure. In Western Desert, the tide of advantage ebbed and flowed, but the Mediterranean campaign steadily became a heavier drain not only on Italian but on German resources. Finally the United Nations mustered their strength, and in a great drive destroyed the last vestiges of Axis power in Africa. The Indian troops who at one time had been the only infantry division in Middle East, remained in the van of the battle for three years, and it was justice that at the finish in Tunisia they should have added to their already remarkable bag the German Commander-in-Chief, and many thousands of his men.

With the war in Africa over, Fourth Indian Division withdrew from Tunis to Tripoli. There the King Emperor came to thank his men in person. The Indians moved eastwards across a score of familiar battlefields, and concentrated during the summer of 1943 at Alexandria. The sepoy took their ease, knowing well that when the battle mounted in vehemence, the call again would come to them.

Near at hand comrades likewise were waiting for the word. Eighth Indian Division, which had lost a brigade at El Alamein, was again at full strength, and eager for employment. Tenth Indian Division, which had swept through three little wars in Iran and Iraq only to meet unmerited disaster in Western Desert, had trained earnestly in Cyprus and Syria for more than a year against the campaign to come. Further east, Sixth Indian Division and Thirty-First Indian Armoured Division, in garrison in Iran and Iraq, hopefully scanned the west, seeking some portent of battle. Thus five Indian Divisions stood waiting for the call—no small contribution to the war against Germany at a time when the Japs stood at the gateways of Bengal.

It was quite impossible that all these fine troops should be employed in Europe. Indeed, in the summer of 1943 many believed the services of Indian forces in the Western theatres to be at an end. Although Middle East and the deserts were tranquil, garrison requirements there continued to be substantial. Moreover, Burma was India's chief anxiety, and it seemed probable that the tough seasoned veterans

* NOTE.—*The Tiger Strikes*—the narrative of the Eritrean campaign, the battle of Sidi Barrani, and the Syrian campaign. *The Tiger Kills*—Western Desert from 1941 onwards, and the Tunisian campaign.

of Western Desert would be redeployed against the still unshaken Japs. There was another important consideration. Day by day the conflict had become more and more a technician's war. Every new weapon bred a new defence. Specialist cadres multiplied. To win battles against the Germans the private soldier must not only know something about a great many subjects, but he must supplement his courage and determination with exceptional adaptability and resource. In such a war, thought some wiseacres, the Indian soldier, in spite of his unmatched bravery and discipline, would be too greatly handicapped. On this account the supreme test of the European theatre would be denied him.

Such speculation betokened ignorance of much that had happened in the first four years of war. The sepoy, although no longer recruited exclusively from the so-called "martial races", still for the most part came out of the Indian countryside, and brought with him the ryot's limited horizon. The limits were those of opportunity rather than of intelligence, for when once the Indian recruit stepped into the outside world, he speedily caught the ferment in the air, and responded to the stimuli of new ideas. By 1943, Indian troops were singularly well informed, not only regarding the business of battle, but also concerning the world at large. As an illustration, their Army newspapers now appeared in eleven languages, instead of two as in peace time. Even the impassive Gurkhas had their Gurkhali news sheet, which they read with avidity. The increase in general knowledge, induced by the sight of new lands, contacts with diverse peoples, training in new routines, was reflected in the alacrity with which Indian troops became adept in the latest devices of war. Over and over again, in the course of this narrative, episodes will supply illustrations of the quickness of mind and ingenuity of Indian soldiers on critical occasions. Mastery of new weapons challenged, but did not impede, the progress of their education. Under stress of necessity the sepoys learned the new trades of warfare easily and thoroughly, in a manner which astonished their mentors.

Nor was this quick-mindedness only characteristic of the fighting troops. In the long array of ancillary services essential to modern warfare, Indian units undertook new duties with enthusiasm and ability. As far back as 1941, New Zealand engineers, building a standard gauge line in Western Desert, undertook to teach two companies of Indian Sappers and Miners the routine of railway construction. Within three months, to the joy of their Kiwi instructors, the Indians were laying daily yardages of track equal and even superior to those of the New Zealanders themselves. Under similar circumstances, in the three thousand miles between Teheran and Tunis, hundreds of miscellaneous Indian units had skilled themselves in new occupations. No less than 224 of these formations followed the Indian divisions to Italy, and if their names do not appear prominently in this story, it is because

of the exigencies of narrative, and not because they did not make a full contribution to the final victory.

Whatever the speculations of clubs and messes, Field-Marshal Alexander knew the facts. Soon after the fall of Tunis he let it be known that he proposed to employ Indian troops in Europe. The Anglo-American thrust, in Mr. Churchill's phrase, into "the soft under-belly of the Axis", opened with a landing in Sicily in July. 3/10 Baluch Regiment, 3/12 Frontier Force Regiment, and certain pioneer companies, participated in these landings, as elements in the administrative "Brick" which controlled the beachheads. The invasion swept northwards and cleared Sicily; with scarcely a pause Eighth Army leapt the narrow straits into the toe of Calabria. In early September Fifth Army stormed ashore at Salerno, to the south of Naples. Here under Beachmasters Command went the Jodhpur Sardar Light Infantry, a fine State Forces unit, whose services in this tricky enterprise were recognized by a D.S.O. for Major Ram Singh and five other awards—the first decorations for Indian troops in Europe in this war.

Two armies abreast, the advance up Italy began. The Italians surrendered, and at first it seemed possible that rather than maintain a battle line with two seaward flanks, the enemy would abandon the Kingdom and would withdraw to main defensive positions along the great wall of the Alps. This hope was unfulfilled. Fresh German formations rushed south to reinforce the stubborn rearguards which slowed down the Allied advance. A captured document gave the following succinct reasons for the decision of the Germans to turn Italy into a battlefield:

- (1) It was best for Germans to fight as far as possible from the Fatherland.
- (2) The United Nations should be denied the use of Italian airfields from which fighter-bombers might attack the Reich.
- (3) The United Nations should be denied the use of the ports of Genoa, Trieste and Venice, which would continue to be used as German bases for harrying the sea supply lines of the Mediterranean.
- (4) Germany should continue to draw plentiful supplies of war material from Italian factories. The German Army could live on the Italian countryside, and could even export food to Germany.
- (5) Italy was the first and last member of the Axis in Europe, and could not be abandoned without loss of prestige.

It seems possible that these excellent reasons were implemented in the minds of the German General Staff by a further pertinent consideration. Much of Italy consisted of terrain which lent itself to military defence. On such battlefields resolute garrisons might sell ground at an extortionate price in blood. The flat narrow peninsula of Calabria offered few obstacles to invaders, but eighty miles north of the Gulf of

Taranto, where the ankle of Italy begins to swell into a calf, a mountain chain emerged in the centre of the Kingdom. These mountains created watersheds which directed the Italian rivers to the east and to the west, into the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian seas. Scores of such rivers on each coast lay across the path of any invader from the south, and each of these watercourses offers an individual obstacle to mechanized forces.

As the Italian peninsula widened, the central mountain spine thickened and increased in substance, until it towered into the Sierra-like ridges and lofty crests of the High Apennines. This mighty natural fortress commanded both the eastern and the western littorals of Italy. Beyond the Apennines lay the flat fruitful plains of Emilia and Lombardy, but here likewise the water barriers continued; instead of brawling torrents in gashed ravines, great rivers, of which the Po is the mightiest, wound across the land between artificial dykes raised above the plain. These fertile provinces grew much food, and in the midst of their rich fields stood the arsenal cities of Milan and Turin, where behind blued windows the machines roared for twenty-four hours daily, shaping the tools of war. Italian agriculture and industry alike made handsome contributions to the German war machine. It was inconceivable that such resources should be surrendered without a struggle.

Enemy strategy, therefore, was based on the possibility of bleeding the Allies white at low cost to Germany. Every advantage of terrain would be exploited to the full, and enemy forces would be committed to decisive battle only in key positions. Such positions would be covered by new fortifications in the rear. The entire Italian peninsula would be transformed into a fortress which would engulf as many Allied formations as possible, pinning down large bodies of troops which otherwise might be free to strike elsewhere.

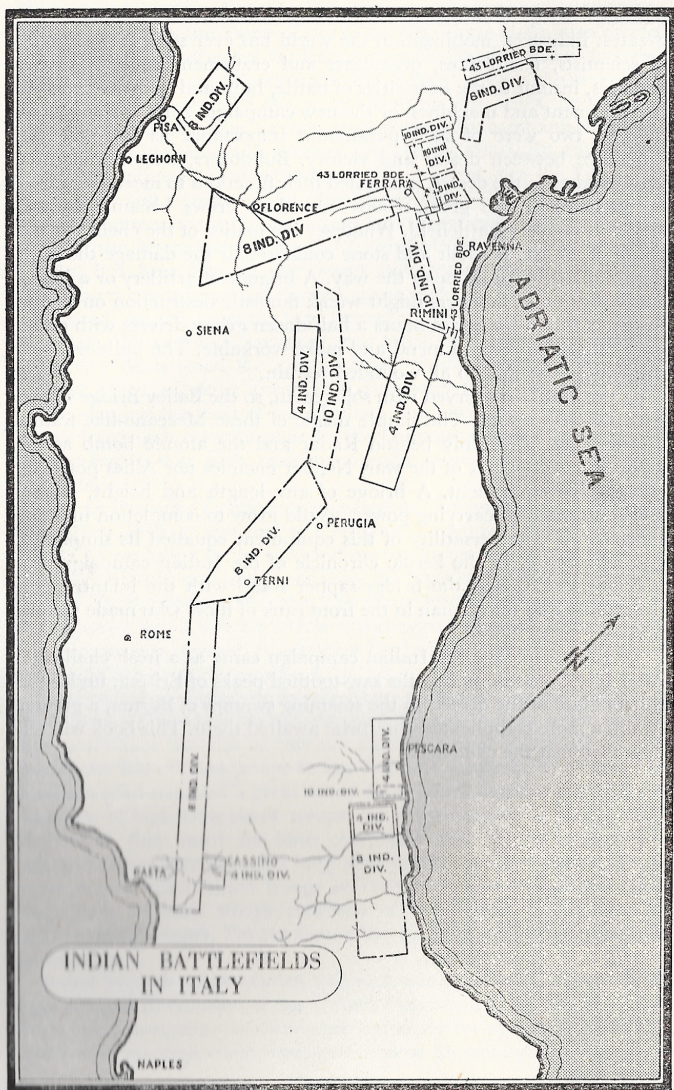
Such strategy, however, imposed two necessities on the enemy. A large body of troops must be kept available not only in order to man the battle lines but also to garrison successive reserve positions. Comparatively few of these troops at any one time would be in action. The German plan required a great many men, and it likewise required the presence of high class shock troops; for if men are to be thin upon a battlefield they must be both competent and indomitable. Field-Marshal Alexander revealed long afterwards, that there were always more enemy than Allied troops in Italy, and a comparatively high percentage of such troops consisted of the flower of the German Army—paratroopers, Panzer Grenadier divisions and other specialist formations.

Faced by such concentration and such quality of opponents, a stern task awaited the soldiers of the United Nations in Italy. On the other hand, their mounting labours were lightened by new tools of battle. Gone were the days when emergencies must be met by improvisations

out of the scrap of battlefields. Behind the Allied armies now stood the greatest industrial mobilization the world has ever seen. A vast array of scientists, technicians, organizers and craftsmen, sensitive to the vagaries, instant to the necessities of battle, built and delivered a spate of equipment and machines for the new campaign. Among a thousand devices, two were of such paramount importance as to make the difference between defeat and victory. Bulldozers, long the envy of commanders in the desert, multiplied their functions to meet a hundred emergencies. These great scoops and their crews became integral elements of every battlefield. Whatever the malice of the enemy or the whim of nature, if earth and stone could repair the damage the bulldozers speedily would open the way. A brigade of artillery or a heavy concentration of bombers might wreak fantastic destruction on a vital target. Yet in a matter of hours a half-dozen grimy drivers with chugging caterpillars would mend and make workable. The bulldozer was surgeon-on-the-spot to all wounded terrain.

As the bulldozers served with solid earth, so the Bailey Bridge served with unstable water. The simple magic of these Meccano-like frames and sections ranks only behind Radar and the atomic bomb as the greatest development of the war. Neither enemies nor Allies possessed comparable equipment. A bridge of any length and height, of any tensile strength or carrying power, would grow to completion in a few short hours. The versatility of this equipment equalled its simplicity, and as a result, in the heroic chronicle of the Italian campaign, the bulldozer-driver and the bridge-sapper stand with the infantryman, the gunner and the airman in the front rank of those who made victory possible.

To Indian soldiers the Italian campaign came as a fresh challenge. After bitter ordeals among the saw-toothed peaks of Eritrea, under the thirsty glare of the desert, in the steaming swamps of Burma, a greater strain, a more complicated enterprise awaited them. This book will tell how they met the challenge.



CHAPTER TWO

EIGHTH DIVISION
ADVANCES

AT DAWN ON SEPTEMBER 19TH, 1943, six liners entered Taranto harbour, in the instep of the foot of Italy. This convoy bore Eighth Indian Division, whose battle order on arrival was as follows:—

G.O.C. Major-General Dudley Russell, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.
(*Brigadier C. H. Boucher, C.B.E., D.S.O.*)

17th Infantry Brigade
1st Royal Fusiliers
1/12 Frontier Force Regiment
1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles

(*Brigadier T. S. Dobree, D.S.O., M.C.*)

19th Indian Infantry Brigade
1/5th Essex Regiment
3/8 Punjab Regiment
6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles

(*Brigadier B. S. Mould, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.*)

21st Indian Infantry Brigade
5th Royal West Kent Regiment
1/5 Mahratta Light Infantry
3/15 Punjab Regiment

Machine Gunners

5/5 Royal Mahratta (Machine Gun Battalion), Mahratta Light Infantry

Reconnaissance Regiment

6 D.C.O. (Bengal) Lancers

Artillery

3 Field Regiment R.A.
52 Field Regiment R.A.
53 Field Regiment R.A.
4 Mahratta Anti-tank Regiment I.A.
26 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment R.A.

Engineers

7 Field Company
66 Field Company
69 Field Company
47 Field Park Company
(All Bengal Sappers and Miners)

Medical Services

- 29 Field Ambulance
- 31 Field Ambulance
- 33 Field Ambulance

The Division possessed a leavening of veteran units. Royal Fusiliers had been engaged in the first Jebel Campaign in 1940, and afterwards against the Vichy French in Syria, 6/13 Frontier Force Rifles had fought in Eritrea, 3/15 Punjabis in Somaliland, 1/3 Mahrattas and the Royal West Kents, together with 3 and 53 Field Regiments, had been blooded in Western Desert as part of 8th Army.

Major-General Dudley Russell had had a distinguished career. After commanding the battalion of Frontier Force Rifles which now served under him, he had completed the East African campaign as a staff officer with Fifth Indian Division. In the autumn of 1941 he took over command of 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, and became known in Western Desert as a tenacious and resourceful leader. "Pasha" was a man of immense energy, with a highly retentive memory and a flair for organization. His men knew him by his broad-brimmed slouch hat, his long staff, and by his contempt for danger. Like many Desert leaders he dressed to please himself; only in the coldest weather were shorts, grey shirt and chaplies replaced by battle dress. Those who knew him intimately found him to be a charming personality, with a wide knowledge of the world and a rare fund of military experience.

Eighth Indian Division concentrated to the east of Taranto and immediately began to follow north in the path of Eighth Army. A screen of rearguards had confronted General Montgomery's men as they pushed northwards through Calabria, Basilica and Puglia. These provinces comprise the foot and ankle of Italy, where the land is flat. The rivers tend to empty into the south, and so constitute no obstacle to troops advancing from that direction. One hundred and forty miles north of Taranto the broken land begins. Thereafter, for many miles along the Adriatic, rolling ridges and valley bottoms succeed in monotonous procession. Where spurs from the central mountain spine approach the coast, the ridges are sharper and more irregular, the valleys narrower and more abrupt. Twenty miles west of the mouth of the river Sangro, the Maiella massif abuts into the lowlands; the countryside between the sea and the mountains increases in ruggedness. The ridges are high, hog-backed, and even razor-backed; the water-courses are deep-cut and steep-banked. The roads are of secondary class, and usually traverse the crests of the ridges, in exposed positions. The countryside is intensively cultivated, even steep rocky hillsides being terraced for garden patches and vines; the ditches and terrace walls are lined with pollarded willows and larches. On stony and sparse ground unfit for cultivation, thick clumps of scrub and

bramble grow. The tightly clustered houses of the villages stand on the crests of the higher ridges. These hamlets offered excellent observation points, and afforded cover for men and guns.

It was in such countryside that the enemy elected to make his first stand. A flexible defensive zone had been created, which the Germans called the Gustav Line. Its positions began on the Adriatic coast near the mouth of the Sangro river, south of the port of Pescara. The zone traversed the valley of the Sangro to the southern slopes of Monte Greco. Thereafter the fortifications followed the line of the Volturno Valley through Central Italy, thence through the Mignano Gap to Monte Camino, and on down to the Tyrrhenian coast.

Eighth Army confronted the Gustav positions between the Maiella mountains and the sea with three corps in forward positions. Eighth Indian Division went forward to join 5 Corps under Lieut.-General C. W. Allfrey, C.B., D.S.O., M.C., who had made acquaintance with Indian troops in the last stages of the Tunisian Campaign. Seventy-eighth British Division, with an unsurpassed record in the North Africa fighting, Fourth Army Tank Brigade and Special Service Brigade comprised the other troops in Fifth Corps. Prior to the arrival of Eighth Indian Division the Corps had been harassing the retreating Germans vigorously in the Termoli area, where the River Biferno interposed a water barrier across the path of the advance. The enemy was sufficiently sensitive to this pressure to bring up a fresh division from reserve.

This new division was of less concern to General Montgomery than that age-old enemy of the offensive, bleak winter. The weather had broken; autumnal rains filled the valleys and softened the hillsides. Placid streams became brawling torrents overnight. Sodden roads crumbled under the unaccustomed traffic and retaining walls slid from under along steep hillsides. The fields and pastures churned into mud, so that lorries skated on their way, or skidded into the ditches with wheels spinning helplessly. All bridges had been systematically destroyed and the approaches to fords and to likely diversions had been heavily mined. Every resource of military science had been enlisted to impede advancing troops, to expose them to fire, and to shelter the defenders.

Battlefields more unlike the open ranges of Western Desert could not have been imagined. Distances now must be measured by hours rather than by miles. Traffic was pinned to a few highways. Moreover, secrets could not be kept. The countryside swarmed with civilians, homeless and vagrant, giving enemy agents cover for their activities. Surprise, like speed of movement, was impossible to attain. The battle therefore had to be fought the hard way. The enemy must be found and destroyed in his strength.

On October 18th, 17th Indian Infantry Brigade relieved a British

brigade at Larino, four miles south-east of the Biferno. Fifteen miles beyond the Biferno the river Trigno, a more substantial stream, runs parallel to Route 86, one of the main roads from Central Italy. The advance from the Biferno was resumed with Seventy-eighth British Division in the coastal sector, moving on the right flank of the Indians, and Fifth British Division keeping pace on the left of 17th Brigade.

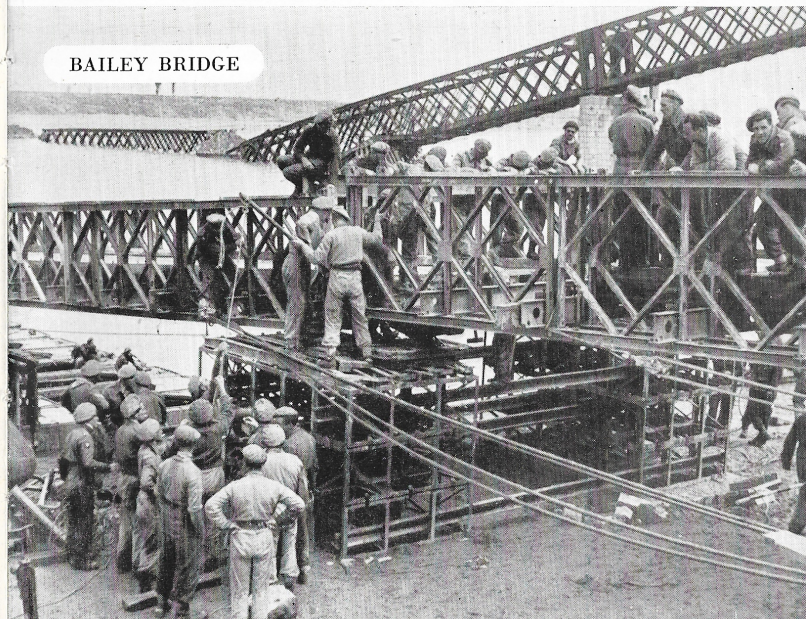
On the night of October 20th the Divisional Artillery fired its first rounds in Italy. That same night two companies of Royal Fusiliers crossed the Biferno and seized high ground to the north of the river. For the next three days patrols worked forward through the rolling countryside towards the Trigno. Except for skirmishes with similar enemy patrols, no opposition was encountered. On the night of October 24th 1/12 Frontier Force and 1/5 Gurkhas passed through the Royal Fusiliers and took up the running. 17th Brigade now widened its front, with the 6th Lancers in touch with Seventy-eighth Division, and the Gurkhas linked up with First Canadian Division on the left. Five miles short of the Trigno, 19th Brigade passed through 17th Brigade, with 1/5th Essex and 3/8 Punjabis leading. An ominous portent was the identification of First German Parachute Division on the front, one of the most skilful and belligerent of German formations. Nevertheless, only sharp skirmishes ensued when 19th Brigade took a firm grip on the south bank of the Trigno through occupation of Monte Mitro and Montefalcone.

In this neighbourhood the Trigno ran between steep escarpments, whose crests stood fifteen hundred feet above the bottom of the valley. In many places the banks were sheer. The river was one hundred yards wide and in full view of the enemy on the ridges to the north. Ordinarily no more than two feet deep, the stream had risen sharply as a result of the autumnal rains. All bridges were blown, and all approaches mined. The arrival of 13th and 34th Indian Mule Companies, those ubiquitous carriers of yesterday who have justified their survival over and over again in the present war, solved the immediate supply problem. 19th Brigade (Brigadier T. S. Dobree, D.S.O., M.C.) immediately prepared to force the Trigno, in order to seize Tuffillo Village and Monte Ferrano on the high ground. Intelligence reported the positions to be defended by paratroopers, who were fully aware of the purpose of the Indians.

For three days before the attack, heavy rains hampered preparations. Tracks deteriorated into quagmires. The roads had been so thoroughly destroyed that it was necessary for bulldozers to work upon by-passes and diversions, often in full view of the enemy. Under lowering skies, pelted by cold rains, the infantry waited dourly. By the end of October the approaches to the Trigno were organized, and at 0345 hours on November 2nd, 6/13 Frontier Force Rifles silently defiled into the icy stream and began to cross. The supporting barrage burst on the ridge



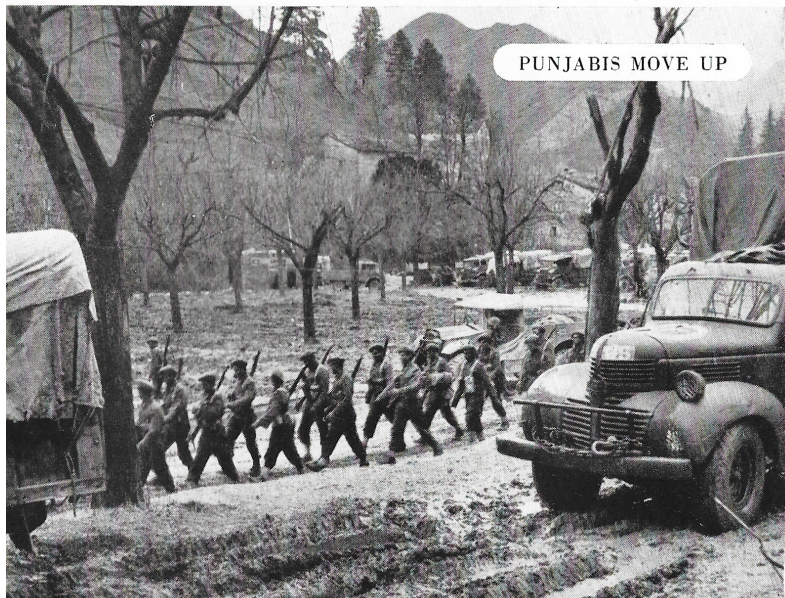
BULLDOZER



BAILEY BRIDGE



OPEN FRONT—C.I.H. RAIDERS



PUNJABIS MOVE UP

EIGHTH DIVISION ADVANCES

ahead of them, and Eighth Indian Division was committed to its first action in Europe.

Frontier Force Rifles, though out of timing with the barrage, surged up the spur for nearly 2,000 yards, and by 0800 hours had mustered on their start line for the attack on Tufillo Village. The Frontiersmen's assault was launched against a typical German "hedgehog" position. All approaches were mined and booby-trapped. A curtain of mortar bombs covered the minefield. Every house held a sniper. Attempts to close were met with showers of grenades. Quick savage sallies were flung against any ground won. Eventually the battalion was held up, a few hundred yards short of its objective.

On the left of the Frontier Force Rifles, when dawn broke, the Essex began to cross the Trigno. Enemy artillery laid down an accurate shoot on the line of the river. The leading companies pushed through the barrage and up the hillside under murderous machine-gun fire from front and flanks. The convex curve of the slope prevented Frontier Force Rifles from aiding their British comrades as they strove to come up into line. The forward companies pushed on manfully, and reached their first objective. Mounting casualties, however, made the position untenable, and the Essex withdrew to the north bank of the Trigno, taking their wounded with them.

This success stimulated the enemy, and throughout the day Frontier Force Rifles, pinned down on the approaches to Tufillo, remained under heavy, harassing fire as prelude to counter-attack. In the late afternoon a strong force of paratroopers, making good use of natural cover, assembled close to "D" Company on the right fringe of the village. This possibility had been foreseen, and the Divisional Artillery were standing to, hands on lanyards. As the paratroopers dashed to the attack, the range flashed back—the exact yardage to "D" Company's outpost line. Subedar Sawar Khan, commanding the forward platoon, cannily realized that the Germans in the open must suffer more than his own men in their foxholes; so he had shouted over his radio for defensive fire to fall on his own positions. As the shoot came down, the attack faltered and the enemy fled.

That night 3/8 Punjabis joined Frontier Force Rifles in a new assault upon Tufillo. The attack went in on a crescent around the front and right flanks of the village. Two companies were caught in cross fire and lost heavily. Dense darkness made communications difficult. Nevertheless the attack was gallantly pressed home, until German tracer fired haystacks and silhouetted the Indians as they advanced. This ruse revealed to the enemy how few continued the assault. The paratroopers counter-attacked at once, forcing the Punjabis and Frontiersmen back to their start lines.

On November 3rd/4th, for the third night in succession, the same two gallant battalions struck for Tufillo. On this occasion each

battalion was reinforced by a company of Mahratta machine-gunners. Enemy concentration shoots swept down on the outskirts to the village, and in the darkness companies scattered and lost touch. The same defensive fire caught the mule trains carrying consolidation weapons and ammunition. The consequent disorganization rather than the enemy impeded the advance, for the recurrent assaults had had their effect, and the Germans were already retiring to their main battle positions. It was not until the following night that the patrols discovered that Tuffillo was empty, and that the front was open.

During the fighting, 21st Brigade (Brigadier B. S. Mould, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.) had been moving up in support. (While passing through Montefalcone 3/15 Punjabis detected an enemy agent signalling by means of peals on the church bells.) By November 5th the two brigades were abreast, and in the next forty-eight hours they pushed forward for several miles beyond the Trigno. The Divisional problem no longer was to eject the enemy, but to maintain the troops on the move. Sapper and transport services laboured for twenty-four hours daily at the task of preparing roads and of passing supplies forward. On the main Divisional route Montefalcone exhibited a museum piece in road construction. A flight of steps on a steep hillside had been levelled off with concrete to form a skidway on which vehicles were winched up and lined down. A senior officer who visited Eighth Indian Division refused to believe that the forward Brigades could be maintained over such improvisations, but within forty-eight hours of the evacuation of Tuffillo, Divisional communications were sufficiently stable to warrant intensified pursuit of the enemy.

During this advance, 6th Lancers on the left of the Divisional front ferreted deeply in enemy territory. A detachment of the Cavalrymen rushed the village of Castello behind the enemy's lines. The patrol seized prisoners, only to be charged by motor-cycle combinations armed with machine-guns. The alacrity with which the enemy struck back on such occasions was characteristic of the perfect training and exuberant morale of the German troops who confronted Eighth Army.

On November 7th, 17th Brigade, which had been serving under Seventy-eighth British Division, returned to the fold, and on the same day 166th Newfoundland Field Regiment joined Eighth Indian Division—another of those contacts with far-flung parts of the Commonwealth which this war has made memorable. 17th Brigade came into the line on the right flank of the Division, and Royal Fusiliers, with a quick rush, captured a valuable bridge over the Senello ravine. Demolition charges were already in place, and the crossing was deemed of sufficient importance for a German engineer patrol to return next night in the hope of discovering careless sentries. This party was destroyed. 1/5 Gurkhas passed through, and under severe shell fire seized a dominating knoll near the river Osento. The hamlet of Atessa

stood on still higher ground, sheer above the river. When night fell the Gurkhas advanced to attack the village with three companies in line, reached the enemy's outposts without being discovered, and went in with the bayonet. In a lively account their commander, Major Morland-Hughes, described the assault.

"It was a nightmare trying to call the lads to heel and to point them in the right direction. They were having the time of their lives winking fat Jerries out of barns and hotting up the less mobile ones with bursts from their tommy-guns. All through the night I kept encountering Jemadar Pitragh Pun (later killed near Caldari), as he roved in the hunt with his revolver in one hand, a grenade in the other, and his kukri between his teeth."

By 2100 hours the Gurkhas had overrun the village and were digging in. A fierce counter-attack was repulsed by the expenditure of nearly all small arms ammunition. Signallers, artillery officers, and the transport services worked feverishly to establish communications and to get supplies forward. With only scattered clips of ammunition remaining, the dauntless Gurkhas awaited the next assault. At midnight a strong enemy force, covered by flanking machine-gun fire, tried to crash through "C" Company. As the Germans closed, the Gurkhas counter-charged with kukris. Their knives took a terrible toll, and the enemy fled in disorder, sped upon their way by Rifleman Okel Gurung, who had snatched a machine-gun from his first victim, instantly to bring it into play upon its former owners. Among the bodies found next morning was that of a much-decorated officer.

(It is sad to record that Rifleman Gurung, a most courageous youngster, who afterwards won both the Indian Order of Merit and the Military Medal, was killed in the final battle of the Italian campaign.)

Next morning Gurkha patrols exploited beyond Atessa without contacting the enemy. The way to the Sangro was open. 19th Brigade passed through 17th Brigade and spread out across the countryside to the north-west. This extension of the Divisional front was designed to screen the New Zealanders, who had recently landed in Italy and were coming into the line on the left of the Indians. 3/8 Punjabis turned directly into the west and attacked Pirano with tanks in close support. After some bickering the enemy withdrew. Concurrently 6/13 Frontier Force Rifles moved almost due south on Archi, a small town on a cone-shaped mound about 2,000 yards south of the Sangro. Before dawn on November 18th a carrier patrol explored the outskirts of the town without encountering opposition. Unfortunately the troops sent to seize and to consolidate approached the village by a different road, and bumped into a last-stand rearguard dug in among the tombstones of the village cemetery. Brisk fighting ensued, in which Captain Whitehouse, commander of the Sikh company, was killed. It was not until next day that the town was cleared, and patrols of the Essex

passed through the Punjabis to explore the swollen Sangro in search of crossings. The position at Archi gave excellent observation over the valley as far as the river mouth twelve miles away.

(The Sangro sometimes flows east and west, sometimes north and south, and sometimes in between. As the general axis of advance lay into the north, to avoid confusion this narrative will refer only to the north or south bank of this river.)

The comparative ease of the early advances of Eighth Indian Division did not deceive anyone as to the rigours to come. It was obvious that with the first spurs of the Maiellas extruding only 15 miles from the coast, and with a substantial river like the Sangro thrown as a moat across these miles, the enemy would stand stubbornly in such a position. Detailed reconnaissance revealed, as one officer put it, "the lie of the land to be distinctly Boche". South of the river a high ridge breaks sharply into the valley bottom. On the northern bank, half a mile beyond the bed of the stream, a well-defined escarpment rises, covered with stunted trees and slashed by gullies. This escarpment gradually mounts for a further 1,000 yards, where a series of humpy knolls mark the highest ground of all. Upon these knolls stand the villages of Fossacesia, San Maria, Mozzagrogna, Romagnoli and Andrioli. These scattered hamlets on the crest of the escarpment provided ideal sites for characteristic German defensive positions, and they had been "hedgehogged" as the anchor strongholds of the eastern flank of the Gustav Line.

From look-outs on this high ground the enemy had complete observation over the southern approaches to the Sangro. Any attempt to close up on the river could be instantly detected. The villages had been transformed into fortresses, with shelters 20 feet deep, machine-gun nests and connecting tunnels proofed against the heaviest shelling. Houses in key positions had been reinforced with concrete. Pill-boxes had been built. Often different floors or different rooms in the same building were converted into separate strongpoints, so that if assailants broke into one side of the house, the other side still could be defended. Escape tunnels connected the houses, and the storming of one strong point usually left the victors under fire from a nearby redoubt.

Before the villages could be reached, it was necessary to traverse deadly ground seeded thickly with anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. Minefields in aprons and belts covered all approaches, and constituted an even greater impediment than the pillboxes and weapon pits of the villages. In the two years since the land mine became a specialized weapon, the enemy had continued to improve his types and sowing technique, until these devilish devices were a fearful obstacle in the path of every advance. No longer could mine detectors guarantee clean ground, as the enemy used mine-cases of wood, pressed paper, plastic and other non-metallic materials, which gave no response to

the sweep. The little Schu-mine, of cheap manufacture yet powerful enough to shear off the feet of anyone luckless enough to tread upon it, was broadcast in millions, not only on tracks and possible diversions, but at random over the countryside. This abominable machine inflicted more casualties on troops in attack than any other weapon. Delayed action mines, which absorbed a number of pressures before exploding, added new terrors on tracks and highways. No braver acts have been performed in this war than the rescue of men trapped or wounded on minefields. It was felt by many to be invidious that a distinction should be made and that the Victoria Cross and other usual military decorations should be withheld for outstanding heroism on minefields. No battlefield afforded greater risks or evoked colder courage.

The plan of battle for assault on the Gustav Line by Fifth Corps called for heavy concentrations on narrow sectors. The Corps front extended fifteen miles inland from the Adriatic coast, and was held from right to left by Seventy-eighth British Division, Eighth Indian Division, and Second New Zealand Division. An elaborate deception plan was employed to conceal the focal point of attack. On the adjoining Thirteenth Corps front a false picture was built up by aggressive patrolling, dummy guns and false dumps, together with a fictitious Army Sending Station which continuously filled the air with pseudo-signals.

The attack would be opened by Seventy-eighth Division in the coastal sector. When a bridgehead had been established, Eighth Indian Division would break into the main defensive positions on the crest of Mozzagrogna—San Maria ridge. Simultaneously, on the left of the battlefield, the New Zealanders would strike with a double thrust, to the north-west with Chieti as objective, and to the south-west down Route 5, to cut German lines of communications east of the Maiella mountains.

This ambitious plan had been adopted in spite of one incalculable obstacle—the weather. The winter rains had set in, and no reprieve from bitter cold, swollen streams, and sodden earth could be expected. The Sangro in spate averaged five feet in depth, and was of such turbulence that patrols on more than one occasion had been drowned. The infantry bivouacked miserably in boggy fields under pelting showers. Transport speedily churned the water-logged earth into mud soup; vehicles slithered and skidded uncontrollably on the greasy tracks. Heavy transport and guns were winched and manhandled into position by their shivering, mud-soaked crews. Sappers and transport services toiled unceasingly to keep the roads open, and to get supplies through to the advanced positions. The Provost Corps—those battle-masters whose names so seldom appear in the record—manned their posts for twenty-four hours in the day, clearing traffic jams, sorting

out priorities, and keeping the tide of vehicles flowing. By herculean efforts preparations for the assault were completed, and in the dense darkness of 0415 hours on November 20th, troops of Seventy-eighth British Division, whose patrols for some days had dominated the northern bank of the Sangro, attacked in the coastal sector. By first light a bridgehead had been established. The enemy chose not to fight back, but to stand at bay in the midst of his maze of defences among the villages on the crest of the ridge.

No sooner had the attack began than rain poured in torrents. The Sangro rose and spread across its valley. Vehicles were unable to traverse the morass, and vital bridging material could not be brought to the launching sites. Without bridges Eighth Indian Division dared not attempt a frontal assault on such a heavily fortified position, since without consolidation weapons and materials gains could not be held. It was necessary therefore to postpone the Indian attack, and the operation opened inauspiciously with one brigade of Seventy-Eighth marooned in a shallow bridgehead on the north bank of the Sangro. The commander of the British Division felt that at all costs he must thicken his troops on the enemy's side of the river. In the next night a second brigade forded the Sangro and dug in on the rising ground under the escarpment.

For thirty-six hours the Sappers toiled without ceasing on the vital bridges. The quagmire approaches greedily sucked down every type of revetting material—road rail, road metal, logs, faggots, fascines and railway sleepers. Many tons of every type of reinforcement were hammered in to assure firm abutments. By the morning of November 22nd, the first bridge was ready for vehicles. That afternoon three crossings were available. All night tanks and anti-tank guns rumbled over, and came up into close support of the infantry. November 23rd was fine and one hundred fighter bombers battered the villages on the crest of the ridge. No deception could conceal the imminence of a major operation, and Field-Marshal Kesselring, who visited the front on November 22nd, ordered another Panzer Grenadier Division to reinforce the Adriatic sector with all haste.

The next stroke, however, came from General November. A fair day on the coast coincided with a cloudburst in the Maiella mountains. Storm water came surging down, and by the evening of November 23rd the bridges were awash and the spate had undermined the approaches and abutments. One bridge collapsed, the others were unusable. The two brigades north of the Sangro were still marooned, and short of supplies essential to battle. If their predicament were detected, the enemy was in a position to destroy them.

To British forces a river may be a barrier, but an ocean, never. Two detachments of DUKWS, those queer amphibious carriers, appeared out of nowhere, and began to ferry supplies and ammunition

from the southern to the northern beaches adjoining the mouth of the Sangro. They worked without ceasing for forty-eight hours, and transported two thousand tons of supplies. No sooner had this ferry service been established than the Sangro subsided as rapidly as it had risen. Damage to the bridge approaches, however, held up the movement of troops on the Indian front, and it was not until the night of November 24/25th that 3/15 Punjabis of 21st Infantry Brigade crossed the stream and relieved a battalion of Seventy-eighth Division in the gully below Mozzagrogna.

A fine day on the 25th gave the dive-bombers a second outing. British and Indian troops in reserved seats on the edge of the escarpment observed the display with the utmost satisfaction. That night, 1/12 Frontier Force Regiment and part of 1/5 Mahrattas, came up on the left of the Punjabis. By dawn, thirty-six hours later, all of 17th and 21st Brigades were across the river, with mule transport trains busily establishing dumps of equipment and supplies. It was boldly decided to use the bridges by day, in full view of the enemy. The Germans shelled the crossings continuously, but the flow of vehicles and tanks was unimpeded. The shallow bridgehead was now crowded to bursting with the troops, supplies, and supporting arms of two divisions.

While these preparations were in hand, the battle had opened elsewhere. It will be remembered that 19th Brigade had spread out on a wide front on the left of the corps sector, in order to screen the deployment and advance of the New Zealanders. It was decided to use this screen to establish a bridgehead at Calvario, eight miles inland from Mozzagrogna. At 0300 hours on the morning of November 23rd 3/8 Punjabis advanced to force the Sangro in a silent attack, and to seize a high, wooded knoll on the north bank of the river.

In the darkness, "C" Company under Captain Gardhari Singh, led the way, wading through turbulent floods up to the men's chests. Wet and shivering, the Punjabis emerged and began to clamber towards their objective. Other companies of the battalion followed in close support. One hundred yards short of the crest the alarm was given, and enemy machine-guns and tanks opened fire. Alert New Zealand gunners instantly pinpointed the flashes from the tank guns, and sent the panzers scurrying with salvos of well-placed shells. The leading Punjabi sections, undeterred by the traversing spandaus, stalked the machine-gun posts and destroyed them. The crest was won.

Behind the Punjabis, 1/5 Essex followed across the river in pouring rain. New Zealand engineers had stretched a rope from bank to bank, and two Sappers stood in the bed of the stream for hours, pinioning it against the current in order that the waders might have a steady guideline. By dawn the Essex were mustered on the far bank, and at the height of the storm launched an attack on a three-company front on the right of the Calvario knoll. The Home County men were met by

withering machine-gun fire. In spite of heavy casualties they gallantly forged ahead and established themselves in houses on the fringe of Calvario village. A clump of Germans dashed to the counter-attack at the moment when Private Bishop, an Essex machine-gunner, appeared with his weapon at an upper window. The bulk target was a marksman's dream, and Bishop broke the rush single-handed.

When day came Punjabis and Essex clung to their positions in a shallow crescent around the precarious bridgehead. Once again the malice of the weather intervened. The Sangro suddenly rose four feet, and made the fords impassable for wheels. Mule trains were rushed up, but the animals were swept off their feet and carried down the river. Several wounded were drowned when attempts were made to evacuate them in mule litters. Detecting the difficulties the enemy concentrated a heavy shoot on the crossings and threw in a strong counter-attack. On the right flank a company of the Essex was forced back to the river bank. The Punjabis smashed three similar assaults in quick succession. Most of the officers were down, one company losing three commanders before noon. In the late afternoon Jemadar Sumerze Ram took command of the 12 remaining men of one Punjabi company, and beat off a fourth attempt to overrun the position.

That evening Essex and Punjabis were so thin on the ground that the forward companies were withdrawn from the positions which they had won at such a heavy cost. Captain Gardhari Singh, however, having led the attack, felt a proprietary interest in Calvario, and withdrew unwillingly. Next morning he signalled to the brigade commander that the enemy could be in no better case than themselves. He was sure, he said, that the Boche had been fought to a standstill. He asked permission with his handful of gallant survivors to attempt to reoccupy Calvario. Permission granted, he advanced without opposition—the enemy was gone. The Essex and remaining Punjabis came forward and consolidated the objectives which they had abandoned a few hours before. A bridgehead across the Sangro had been established for the New Zealanders.

Its task completed, 19th Brigade moved back to join Eighth Indian Division in the Mozzagrogna area. Before its arrival the main attack had begun.