

***BASED ON EXTRACTS FROM THE REGIMENTAL WAR CHRONICLE OF THE
OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY VOL3 1942/1944***

**SEVENTH BATTALION
FROM JULY TO 31st DECEMBER, 1943**

THE INVASION OF EUROPE

In July Sicily was invaded. X Corps, concentrated in and around Tripoli, were held in reserve and were prepared to move to Sicily if the progress of the assault was delayed. At the same time, plans were going ahead for the invasion of Italy. Two operations were prepared. The first, named "Buttress" involved a landing by X Corps on the instep of Italy. The second, called "Avalanche," and described as more hazardous, was the plan for landing in Salerno Bay. The assault on Italy was the first mam attack by ground forces on the Continent of Europe and no very reliable estimate could be made of the reaction to it. The Eighth Army landed first, on the toe of Italy, with the object of holding the toe, thereby freeing the Straits of Messina for shipping. The defeat hi Sicily and the landing at Reggio had decided the Italian Government to surrender. The assault in Salerno Bay was to take place a few hours after this surrender was announced. It was hoped that the German forces would concentrate against the Eighth Army, thereby allowing the Fifth to trap them in their rear. The Germans did not respond as required, but, instead, attacked the Fifth Army with the object of destroying it. The Eighth Army was then called on to make a sudden and long advance to relieve the crisis at Salerno, a task entirely beyond the original role for which it landed in Italy and outside its administrative capacity with the limited transport available. The fact that newspaper correspondents motored from the Eighth to the Fifth Army has been used as a criticism of the Eighth, whereas it is only a tribute to General Kesselring's astuteness. It is interesting to compare the German reaction to the later landing at Anzio, which was designed, as opposed to the Salerno attack, to draw off German troops from the Allied army on the Garigliano. Kesselring's immediate reaction was to reinforce his southern troops, once again not dancing to the Allied tune. Later the Anzio bridgehead was subjected to the fiercest assault, as all the world knows.

Although little could be foretold of the probable trend of events hi Italy, there appeared in some quarters to be an air of optimism and, undoubtedly, some of the troops also imagined that there would be a "swan" to the Alps. Such views may well be held by those who study warfare comfortably with the aid of their daughter's school atlas, but to anyone who looked, even casually, at a larger scale map of Italy or who had studied the fighting in mountains in the 1914-18 war, or who considered the fighting ability of the Germans, it could only appear that the campaign would be one of bitter fighting and toil.

Until their final defeat in May, 1945, Kesselring's army of 2,000,000 men fought desperately up the length of Italy. This was the army which was to form, finally, the southern base of the Nazi Alpine fortress, and it was prepared to fight for every feature. In no campaign, except hi Burma, did the climate and the country combine as in Italy so cruelly against the soldier. A regiment could have men in the malarial swamps and men getting frost-bitten at the same time. In winter, torrents poured down the narrow valleys, sweeping away bridges and communications. The wounded, as well as ammunition, food, water and clothing, all had to be man-handled on the mountains, from the tops of which the Germans had to be driven in close-quarter fighting.

The effect of artillery fire on the rocky mountains was terrific and bears little comparison to the effect of shell-bursts in soil, where, owing to the shell's penetration, much of the explosion is forced upwards. The tops of the mountains under artillery fire have been well described as resembling an erupting volcano. And on these hills men crouched between boulders or in sangars, the digging of slit trenches usually being impossible.

Here was "the soft under-belly of Hitler's Europe." Here the infantrymen fought the most desperate battles of the war.

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Perhaps for these reasons little publicity was given to this campaign, and alone of the great campaigns no film was made to show the people in England the conditions and the heroism of the army in Italy.

Planning for the invasion involved long hours of detailed work carried out in tents in very hot weather. Alterations seemed endless.'

The damage to a vessel in Sicily, for instance, could mean the complete alteration of landing tables and could affect tactical employment. The planning for "Buttress" was nearly completed when it was decided that, in view of the victory in Sicily, Operation "Avalanche" would take its place.

At the same time, training in combined operations and mountain warfare was pressed ahead. The combined operations training was chiefly done at Zuara, a pleasant little harbour west of Tripoli. There Regimental, brigade and divisional landings were made in weather which varied from very fine to stormy. For mountain warfare the Regiment was sent to Tahuna—hilly country south of Tripoli, in appallingly hot weather. Training in Kurdistan had already fitted us for this type of fighting and the main problem at Tahuna was to prevent men getting sick. Each day a scorching, incessant wind blew a cloud of fine sand, some eighteen inches deep, along the ground, a reminder of the summer conditions some had suffered in the desert for three years. From Tahuna the Regiment went again to Zuara, where a final divisional exercise was held—and so back to Tripoli for embarkation.

On the 2nd September a move to the marshalling area, merely a barbed-wire enclosure, was made and the next day we embarked into L.C.Is.(Landing craft infantry.) where there was sitting room only.

On the morning of the 5th we sailed in a convoy of some thirty craft. The leading echelon of transport, accompanied by the squadron of the Greys which was to fight with us, preceded the L.C.I. convoy and met us again in Salerno Bay on the 9th September. The L.C.I. convoy anchored off Termini, on the north coast of Sicily, on the morning of the 7th, our fifth day on board—and the men had a swim.

On the afternoon of the 8th the L.C.I. convoy was in sight of Capri and of a larger convoy to the north. At about 3 p.m. the convoy anchored and the first enemy aircraft flew overhead.

The Regiment's winter campaign may be divided into five phases:

- (a) The assault landing at Salerno.
- (b) The breaking out of the Salerno beach-head and pursuit of the Germans to the Volturno.
- (c) The crossing of the Volturno and advance to the German winter defence line.
- (d) The crossing of the Garigliano River.
- (e) The Anzio beach-head.

In all these actions the Regiment had the distinction, often a painful privilege, of playing a leading part, and led the brigade attack.

THE LANDING AT SALERNO

The Fifth Army, which landed at Salerno, was commanded by General Mark Clark, U.S. Army, and was composed equally of British and United States troops. The British comprised X Corps (56th London Division and 46th Division in assault, and 7th Armoured Division in reserve) and commandos. The American corps landed two divisions, Ranger battalions and airborne troops. Lieutenant-General R. McCreery commanded X Corps, having replaced Lieutenant-General B. Horrocks, who was wounded in an air raid a few days before the expedition sailed.

The U.S. divisions landed on the right, there being a gap of some six miles between them and X Corps.

The Regiment landed as the reserve battalion of the right-hand brigade (167th London Infantry Brigade) of the British army.

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The first main objective of the operation was to capture the port of Naples. In order to accomplish this the 46th Division, landing in the north, was to pivot on the town of Salerno and advance through the Molina defile towards Naples. The 56th Division and the Americans were to swing through the towns Eboli and Battipaglia and advance on the right of the 46th Division to cut communications with southern Italy.

The Germans opposed the landing with the 15th Panzer Grenadier and 16th Panzer Divisions. The 15th Panzer Division, a famous formation of the Afrika Korps, was re-formed, after the African campaign, as the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division in Sicily. The division escaped from Sicily and was opposed to the Regiment in much fighting in western Italy, from Salerno to Camino. It was transferred to the Western Front for the Ardennes offensive and after the capitulation the commander told a former commander of the 7th Battalion that he had received three clear days' warning of the Allied landing at Salerno. This accounted for the presence of the 16th Panzer Division between Eboli and the sea. The news of this division was fortunately received in Tripoli the day before the expedition sailed.

These divisions fiercely opposed the Allied landing and very heavy fighting took place on the beaches, especially on the U.S. corps' front and opposite the 46th Division.

The assault battalions of the 167th Brigade were the 8th and 9th Royal Fusiliers. It was their duty to establish the initial beach-head. The 7th Oxf. and Bucks Light Infantry, landing forty minutes later, after consolidating the initial beach-head was to advance in the direction of Eboli whilst the 9th Royal Fusiliers on the left pushed on to Battipaglia. Had this plan succeeded it would have meant that the brigade would have advanced some twelve to sixteen miles inland during the first twenty-four hours of the assault. The Regiment had under command one squadron of Royal Scots Greys and a naval forward observation officer was attached in order to direct naval gun-fire support.

In addition, Major R. K. Stevens, commanding H.Q. Company, was travelling in an L.C.G.(Landing craft, guns) for the purpose of directing naval gunners on to land targets.

During the afternoon and evening of the 8th September the Allied shipping was constantly bombed and after sunset bombing was continued by the light of flares. At about midnight the convoy of L.C.Is.(Landing craft, infantry) weighed anchor and made towards a submarine which was flashing a green light seawards from inshore.

In the main the landing of the 167th Brigade went according to plan and the 8th and 9th Royal Fusiliers fought their way to their first objective. The Regiment was called in at 0445 hrs and on disembarking from its L.C.Is. was led by Captain St. Aubyn's advanced party through a gap in the wire. The Regiment then formed up as it had often practised.

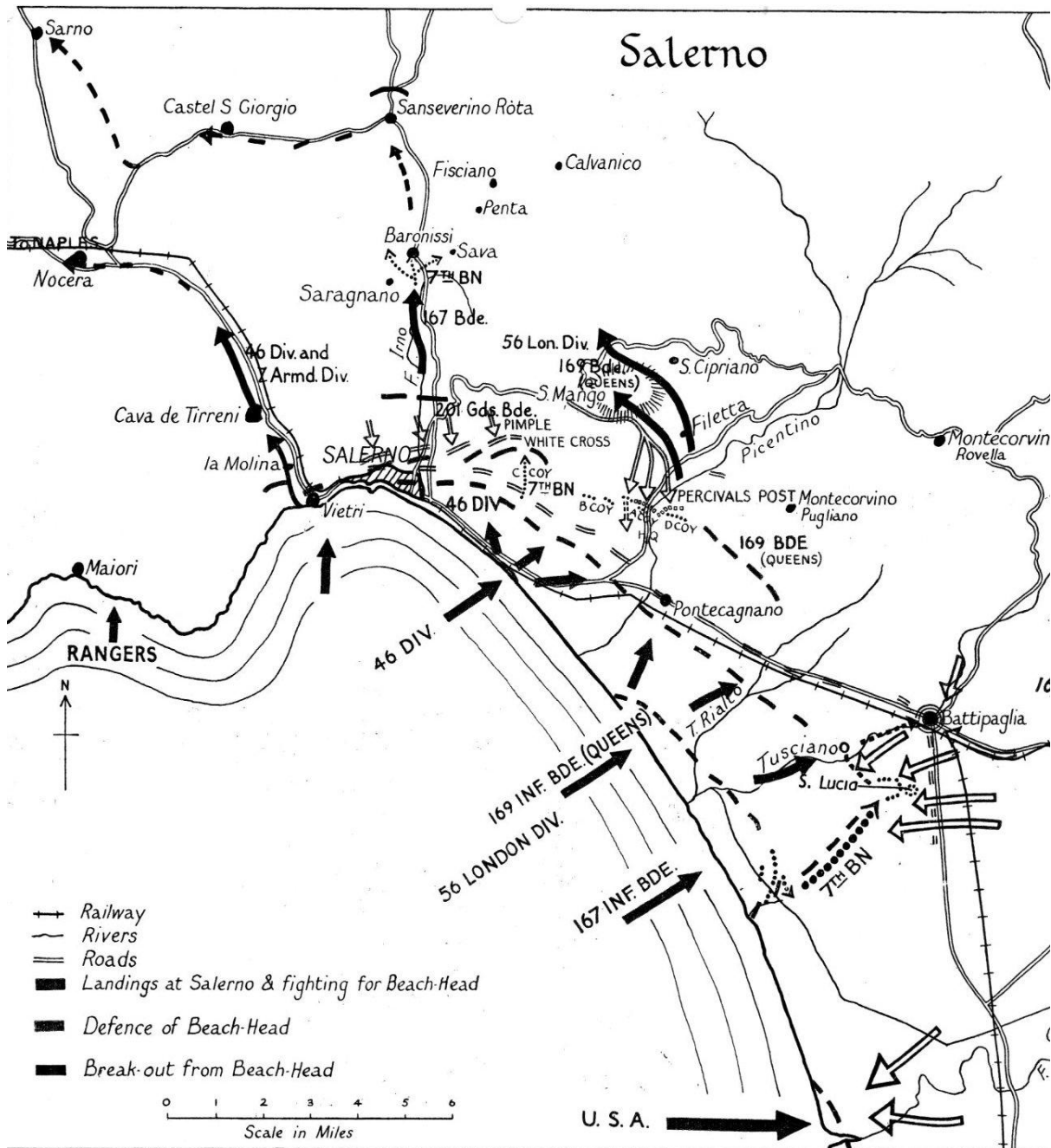
A coastal battery of 6-inch guns and a number of German Spandaus some 400 yards to the left of the Regiment opened fire, having allowed the assaulting troops to pass. The battery was silenced at point-blank range by a destroyer, but not before it had sunk some shipping, including an L.C.T.J carrying half of the Royal Scots Greys' tanks which were to support the Regiment.

C Company (Captain J. Keith) was ordered to deal with the battery position.

It was now getting light and it was obvious that the Regiment would have to fill a gap between the two assault battalions. Company objectives were pointed out and companies advanced across the marshland. Regimental headquarters moved up the coast in order to reach the road which led to our previously arranged headquarters.

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Forty Germans were seen retreating through the maize near by. The R.S.M. soon had this in hand and they were all taken prisoner. As it grew light the Regimental assault transport began to come ashore from the L.C.Ts. and anti-tank guns, carriers and mortars began to arrive in the Regimental area. Great difficulty was experienced in turning the large three-ton anti-tank portees along the narrow tracks and one was completely overturned but later recovered. In addition, the remaining tanks of the Sherman squadron came ashore and several bogged down completely in the marsh around Regimental headquarters.



B Company (Major P. Montgomery, M.C.) had been ordered to work southwards to expand the beach-head to the right. At about 1000 hrs. this company was attacked by tanks using flamethrowers, but owing to the good positions the company had managed to take up in soft ground the tanks were unable to reach it. D Company (Major D. Philips) was on the left of B Company and C Company on the left of D. A Company (Captain R. Wright) continued the line to the left.

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During the morning all efforts of B Company to advance were held up and as an example of the thoroughness with which the German intelligence discovered our plans, an enemy station was heard on the gunner wireless net calling Major Montgomery of the Oxf and Bucks Lt Infy. A Company of the 8th Royal Fusiliers, which was slightly forward of B Company, suffered heavy casualties from flame. In addition, a troop of anti-tank guns of the 8th Royal Fusiliers was moving along the road into position, and was caught by enemy tanks and completely destroyed.

In view of the possibility of more aggressive action on the part of these enemy tanks the commanding officer ordered an anti-tank-gun screen to be deployed astride the road which ran across the Regimental front, but soon after the last of the Regiment's anti-tank guns had got into position (five guns arrived at about eleven o'clock in the morning on dukws (Abbreviation for amphibious craft.) and had been brought straight into action by their American drivers), three of our own tanks succeeded in destroying three out of the four Germans. As a result of this success the initial beach-head was secured and close contact with the 8th Royal Fusiliers established. The Regiment was responsible for destroying another coastal battery a mile and a half to the south-west, and for this purpose Major R. Stevens's duty was to point out targets to naval gunners. The position of this battery was engaged at close quarters with shell and machine-gun fire to ensure that it was destroyed. In the afternoon the Regiment was ordered to advance through the village of Santa Lucia to the hills east of Battipaglia in order to outflank that important road and rail junction.

Our route would cross the main road some two miles south of the town. By this time the beach-head was becoming congested and some difficulty was experienced in forming the Regimental column owing to the movement of other troops.

It was exceedingly fortunate that the enemy was showing no reactions either from the air or with artillery fire at this stage. The order of march of the Regiment was: two sections of No. 4 Platoon (carriers) under the command of Captain W. A. Toms, B Company, carried in six three-ton portees towing Regimental anti-tank guns, with two platoons of C Company under command. This advanced guard was followed by R group, (Reconnaissance group, i.e., commanding officer, adjutant or intelligence officer or Serjeant, signal officer or serjeant, liaison officer, clerk, despatch riders and drivers as required.) the gunner liaison parties and the naval forward observation officer. The remainder of the Regiment was to advance on foot behind the mobile troops. Santa Lucia was found clear of the enemy, but a quarter of a mile beyond the village German anti-tank guns directed fire straight down the road and machine guns began firing on both flanks. Some carriers were hit and leading troops dismounted and took up positions in an orchard on the right of the road.

In order to test the strength of the enemy B Company advanced under artillery support on a broad front, and, as suspected, the Germans were found to be holding the main road in considerable strength. The commanding officer therefore decided to occupy the ground we had won, and owing to the stillness of the night and proximity of the Germans the men were enjoined to move very quietly.

The commanding officer's plan was to form two strong-points. B Company, with the two platoons of C Company and the carrier sections under command, were to fill a strong defensive position in the orchard where they had first deployed, and the six anti-tank guns with them were deployed in that area. The remainder of the Regiment halted in the village of Santa Lucia and there consolidated.

D Company was on the right just forward of a large tobacco factory. C Company was on its left and then A Company. Regimental headquarters was established in an orchard just forward of the village.

At daylight a reconnaissance in force was made to find out how far to the right the Germans extended. A and D Companies moved up to their starting line, which was at Farina Farm. When they reached Farina the companies were to turn left and right along the cross-track, thus coming into position, A Company on the right and D Company on the left. An artillery programme had been laid on to provide preliminary concentrations behind which the attack, supported by the Greys, could be made.

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As A Company approached Farina fire was opened from an enemy tank at the end of the track and machine-gun fire from a Spandau post. The companies, caught in an enfilade, immediately went to ground at the edges of the track, but several casualties occurred almost immediately. D Company also suffered from mortar fire: one man, Private Monk, was killed and about eight wounded, including Lieutenant J. A. Hill, second-in-command of the company. The company commander ordered the deployment of his company to safer positions, and since movement along the track was impossible this had to be done by swimming an irrigation ditch.

Meanwhile Corporal Haines, of No. 16 Platoon, realizing the need of moving out of the lane, himself crossed the ditch and cut a gap in a wire fence. He then returned and led his platoon to safety through heavy enemy fire. There is no doubt that this courageous and resourceful action, which won him the military medal, saved the lives of many of his comrades.

Major Philips ordered No. 17 Platoon, under Lieutenant Brandt, to create a diversion by deploying into the fields on the left and bringing fire on the houses to its front which appeared to be held by the enemy. Under cover of this fire No. 16 Platoon (Lieutenant Smerdon) and No. 18 Platoon (Serjeant Edwards) were to deploy and take Farina Farm, thereby releasing A Company. Serjeant Pullen was sent back to bring the tanks forward and, as the wireless set had been destroyed and both signallers wounded, a runner was sent by Regimental headquarters. Major Philips then returned to the head of his company to see how A Company was faring.

Meanwhile the artillery was firing on its prearranged programme and it was obvious that if an attack were to be launched fresh artillery support would have to be arranged.

Captain Wright (A Company) had himself shot with his pistol two enemy machine gunners who held up the company, and as our tanks began to move up, the enemy tank went out of sight behind Farina Farm. Private Belcher, Captain Wright's servant, was badly wounded and crawled back with the information that A Company was in the farm, which was cleared of enemy. Since D Company had carried out its arranged deployment, the company commander ordered it to halt in the ditches behind the farm whilst he went forward to make fresh plans with Captain Wright.

The leading tank of the Greys ran on to a mine and had a track blown off, but suffered no further damage beyond the loss of the tank commander's beret, which seemed to worry him more than the loss of the track. The remaining tanks moved on into the farm, but whenever they attempted to move forward an 88-mm. gun opened fire. There was also automatic firing to be heard from the direction of the coast behind. At this moment Lieutenant Vincent arrived, having been sent up by the commanding officer to find out what was happening.

The tanks said that they could not move forward and were going to withdraw to the shelter of the hedgerow some 600 yards in the rear. Since without their help and further artillery support it seemed impossible to advance, both companies withdrew with the tanks and Lieutenant Vincent returned to Regimental headquarters with all information. The platoons of D Company came under fire as they withdrew and suffered more casualties. The commanding officer sent orders to the companies to withdraw to a Santa Lucia position at dusk. D Company became right flank of the Regiment and A Company went into reserve. The operation provided valuable information of the strength of the enemy and the position on their flank. It was obvious that the Germans were still in force between the 56th London Division and the American divisions on the right.

Meanwhile all had not gone well with the remainder of the brigade. The 9th Royal Fusiliers, who had been ordered to advance into Battipaglia, had succeeded in entering the town, which had been destroyed by bombing on the night of the landing. The 9th Royal Fusiliers captured it, but were counterattacked by the 16th Panzer Division and eventually surrounded after the fiercest fighting with German infantry and tanks amongst the rubble. Lieutenant-Colonel Hillersdon, their commander, himself twice severely wounded, finally ordered the survivors to fight their way out. About 120 men succeeded in doing so and then held the important bridge over the Tusciano River.

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The 8th Royal Fusiliers had been moved into position on the right of the 9th; and in order to complete the brigade line C Company was ordered to take up a position between B Company and the right forward company of the 8th Royal Fusiliers. A troop of the Regiment's anti-tank guns was deployed in that area and one troop of 17-pounder anti-tank guns of the 302nd Battery, R. A., had also been placed in the Regimental area.

On "B" Company's front the enemy had been aggressive throughout the day. At about 2100 hrs. the movement of tracked vehicles was heard and shortly afterwards it was reported that one of the Regiment's anti-tank guns had knocked out a German troop carrier and killed several of the crew. During the night a minefield about 100 yards long was laid in front of D Company. C Company made contact with the 8th Royal Fusiliers, and the night passed quietly, save for air attacks on the beaches. Throughout the 11th the front was quiet except for occasional heavy shelling of Regimental headquarters and the factory, but in the evening the main German counter-attack began in earnest. From 1800 hrs to 2000 hrs the enemy stepped up their mortar and artillery fire along the whole front and it became apparent that a major attack was imminent.

By 2000 hrs. the enemy was attacking on all fronts and shortly afterwards it became obvious that something serious had occurred on the brigade's left flank. The 8th Royal Fusiliers appeared to have withdrawn in some disorder and stragglers began to come into the Regimental headquarters area. The Regiment had with them their old friend Major J. W. Kennedy, M.C., of the 64th Field Regiment, R.A., and heavy defensive fire was brought down. With the aid of this the situation gradually began to improve. C Company, however, reported that the enemy appeared to have broken through on the left and that the 8th Royal Fusiliers were no longer in position. C Company was ordered to send out patrols, which returned with detailed information of the enemy's dispositions.

Before daybreak the 8th Royal Fusiliers had re-established some of their positions. The Germans put in two attacks during this moonlight night and the Regiment was assaulted on three sides. The steadiness of the Regiment in this crisis, coupled with the devastating artillery fire, undoubtedly prevented a disaster to the landing operation and stopped the Germans from reaching the beaches, for, on the 167th Brigade's front, the 9th Royal Fusiliers were reduced to some 120 men and the 8th Royal Fusiliers' positions had been lost. A description of the Regiment's action was broadcast on the B.B.C. On walking over the battlefield some days later Major Kennedy counted between four and six hundred dead Germans.

The next day was the last which the Regiment spent in this position. The following evening it was relieved by a composite battalion composed of the survivors of the 9th Royal Fusiliers strengthened by a field company, R.E., fighting as infantry. The situation was by this time considered stable on this front and the Guards Brigade was reported to have captured Battipaglia.

PONTECAGNANO ACTION

The Regiment was now moved in motor transport to the opposite end of the beach-head, where it came under command of the 128th Brigade of the 46th Division. The area to which it moved was just north of the town of Pontecagnano. The country was entirely different from the coastal plain in which it had previously been fighting. Steep hills rising up to 1,300 feet were covered with small trees, amongst which the cyclamen was beginning to flower. The Regiment held between 3,000 and 4,000 yards of front, and through the position ran an important road to the coast in the valley of the Picentino River. In front of this position there was rolling country for some 3,000 yards and then rose a tremendous hill known as the Mango feature. The Regiment was disposed as follows: D Company on the hills to the right of the river, A Company astride the road and the hill to the left, and B Company on another high hill, farther to the northwest.

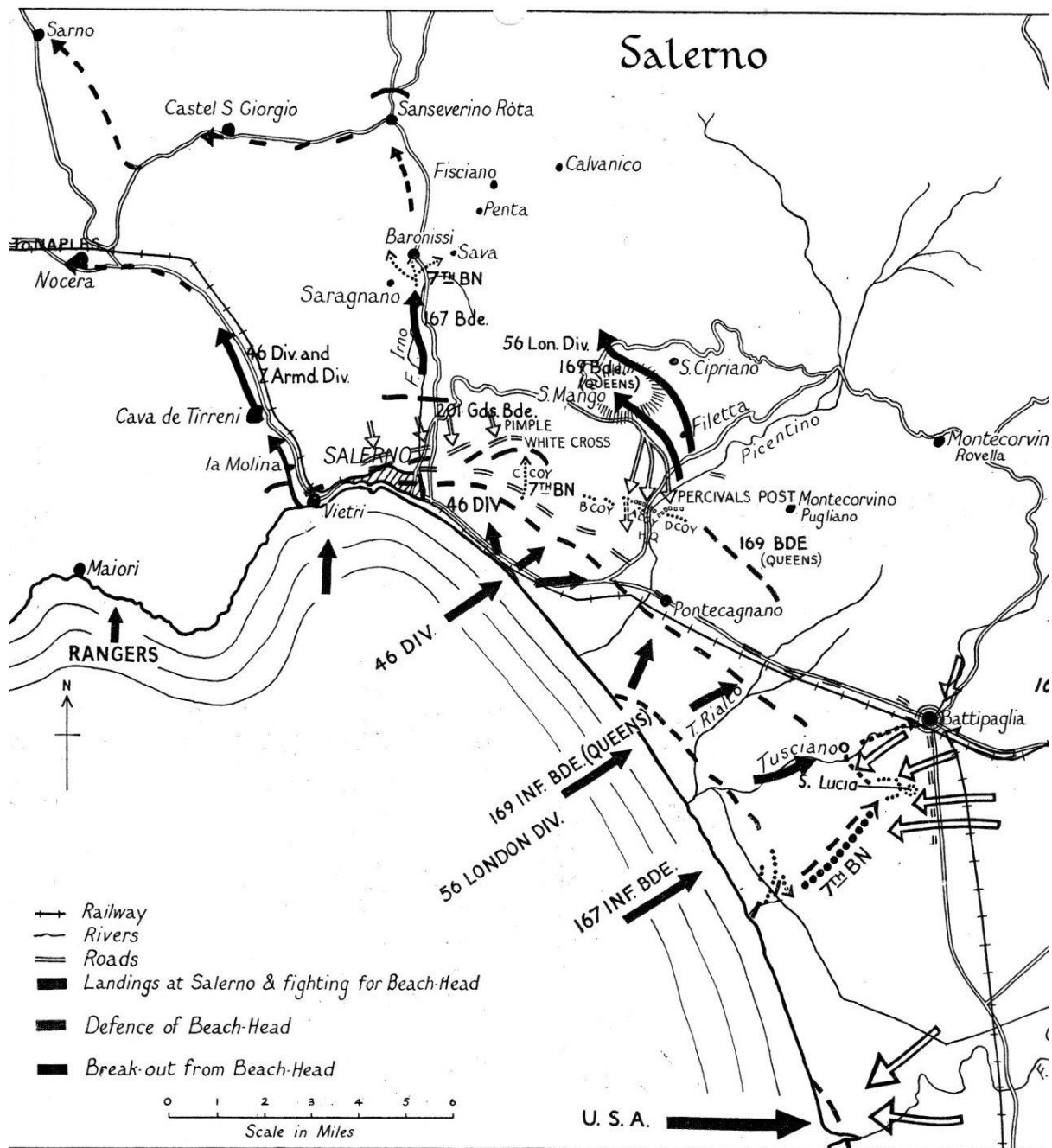
The main anti-tank defence was placed in the Picentino valley. C Company was withdrawn from the Regiment and attached to the 8th Royal Fusiliers. Our predecessors, the Hampshire Regiment, had stated that this was a quiet sector and the Regiment settled down to enjoy the brief rest. The rest lasted approximately half an hour, for soon after arrival German aircraft began a heavy and concentrated attack on the beaches just behind. Things were not going well on the left of the Regiment, where the 1st/4th Hampshires were pushed off their position on Whitecross Hill, and the enemy once more had full view on to the town of Salerno and the landing beaches. It was not until the 15th September, however, that the Regiment was attacked with such ferocity that had it broken the beach-head would once more have been in jeopardy.

On the morning of the 15th September reports came in from the reconnaissance regiment that the Germans were moving down the Mango valley in preparation for an attack on our position. These reports were later confirmed by B Company, who said that some fifteen to twenty tanks and considerable numbers of infantry were moving towards our positions. It was obvious that the attack would focus on the main road below A Company's position. In order to anticipate such a threat a section of the Regiment's anti-tank guns, covered by a platoon of A Company, had been sited in a vineyard forward of the main position. Early in the afternoon the remains of the reconnaissance squadron withdrew through this outpost and soon afterwards A Company, and to a lesser extent D Company, were subjected to heavy mortar and machine-gun fire.

At about 1600 hrs. tanks and infantry appeared in front of the two forward companies. Unfortunately the artillery forward observation officer with A Company had been wounded and Captain J. R. B. Wright took over fire control. Through his accurate corrections shells were soon observed falling amongst the advancing columns and many of the infantry were seen to dismount in some haste and deploy into the fields. Some of the tanks also halted and turned off the road, but they continued to fire high-velocity shells and machine guns at the castle on A Company's hill, which they probably assumed to be an observation post. Soon afterwards Serjeant Percival, who was in charge of the anti-tank guns, was attacked by enemy infantry who had infiltrated through the vineyards on either side of the road. They now began an action which won Serjeant Percival a well-merited D.C.M.

Serjeant Percival appreciated that in order to stop the advance he must hold off the infantry until he could get a shot at the leading tank, and his difficulties were increased by the fact that owing to the closeness of the country his gun had a very short and narrow shoot of not much more than fifty yards. The gun crews engaged the German infantry with small-arms fire at point-blank range and succeeded in holding them off until two enemy tanks appeared in their sights. The guns and the tanks opened fire simultaneously, and, although the layer of one gun was knocked off his feet by the blast of an armour-piercing shell, each gun managed to fire about three rounds into its respective tank.

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By this time several members of the gun crews had become casualties and Serjeant Percival was performing superhuman feats, sniping Germans with his rifle, loading shells into the guns and throwing grenades. As a result of this effort the two leading tanks were knocked out, completely blocking the road to further advance. Serjeant Percival, by this time completely overrun, succeeded in withdrawing nearly all his men into the main position, covered by the platoon of A Company under Serjeant Allen, who was later awarded the M.M. for his part in this action.

At about the same time, seven or eight tanks and two or three companies of infantry disappeared into the woods below D Company. A 17-pounder in D Company's position opened fire at the leading tank and was immediately brought under heavy machine-gun fire. Two other anti-tank-gun crews, R.A., in No. 18 Platoon's area were not made of such stout stuff and when two tanks crossed the ford and started to come up the track towards them they decided that discretion was the better part of valour and retired in some disorder.

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As these two tanks, carrying the usual load of infantry, approached the track junction, Serjeant Phipps opened fire on them and later two dead Germans were found at this spot. The tanks turned along Serjeant Phipps's path, and since he had no anti-tank gun he withdrew his section without loss to Lieutenant Tuckey's troop of anti-tank guns. Serjeant Edwards (No. 18 Platoon) now reported enemy near him and the artillery were asked to do some close shooting.

The risk was justified and although our men said afterwards that the 25-pounder shelling was terrifying we suffered no loss and the enemy withdrew across the river.

Meanwhile the Germans continued to press home their attack against A Company's position and infantry began to infiltrate through the dense scrub. Captain Wright continued to direct divisional artillery fire and in addition he was controlling by wireless the cross-fire of our mortars which were located in D Company's position. This fire had the effect of limiting the German penetrations to very small numbers. There was much activity at this time in the Regimental headquarters area. A troop of tanks of the Royal Tank Regiment was sent forward up the road to engage enemy tanks knocked out by Serjeant Percival. Two additional troops of 6-pounder anti-tank guns from a gunner regiment were rushed up the road and deployed behind Serjeant Percival's position. Had the German tanks succeeded in penetrating the positions they would have met 6-pounder guns every fifty yards for over a quarter of a mile.

At 2100 hrs. a signaller from A Company arrived at Regimental headquarters stating that enemy tanks were on the road just below the position and there was digging so close to A Company's headquarters that communication other than by orderly was impossible. As talking would expose its position to the enemy, the company asked that its telephone should not be rung, for the noise of the bell would be heard by the Germans.

During the afternoon some Germans had succeeded in infiltrating between A and B Companies and were able to fire their machine guns straight down into Regimental headquarters' positions. That evening the commanding officer took command of all supporting troops in the area and ordered the reconnaissance regiment to take up ground positions astride the Picentino River valley behind D Company. The object of this was to prevent further infiltration by the Germans during the night. In addition, Major Stevens (H.Q. Company) was ordered to carry out a sweep over the hill and up to A Company headquarters. For this purpose he had to muster a mixed force of cooks, drivers and servants.

It became apparent that the Germans were digging into the side of the hill, just below A Company headquarters and parties of our men got above this position and rolled No. 36 grenades down the slope. Serjeant Percival had taken command of the remainder of his anti-tank-gun crews and No. 7 Platoon (Serjeant Allen), and also the troop of tanks, whose officer placed himself under command of this infantry N.C.O. Additional Bren groups were sent up to this force from the carrier platoon. Throughout the hours of darkness the Germans attempted to recover their knocked-out tanks on the road beyond the position; and on Serjeant Percival's instructions our own tanks fired armour-piercing shots down the road and probably destroyed another tank. In the ravine below Serjeant Percival's post German patrols were frequently heard and greeted with showers of grenades by Serjeant Percival. During the night A Company reported that the enemy tanks had withdrawn in the direction of Mango.

The next day considerable changes were made in our dispositions in order to strengthen the position against the recurrence of the previous day's experiences. A Company was strengthened by the addition of two platoons of a beach group (Queen's Royal Regiment). Another platoon of the same beach group was placed under the command of D Company and sited between company headquarters and No. 18 Platoon's wood. A troop of Shermans and two self-propelled guns were also placed in D Company's area. Major Stevens and his force were sent out to occupy a hill to the rear of B Company, covering the gap between A and B Companies and the direct route to Regimental headquarters.

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At about 1500 hrs on the 16th the Germans attacked again after some extremely heavy shelling on both A and B Companies. The volume of fire was considerably heavier than on the preceding day and the two platoons of the Queen's Royal Regiment, who were taking part in their first battle, behaved extremely well, although suffering heavy casualties. Enemy infantry again began to infiltrate around A Company's positions, but in spite of all their efforts Captain Wright's A Company stood firm. Those enemy infantry who attempted to advance towards D Company were engaged with heavy machine-gun fire by Shermans and driven back. Throughout the whole of the day Captain Wright continued to direct artillery fire and several enemy tanks were probably destroyed in the Mango valley.

By 1930 hrs. the position was stabilized again and A Company carried out an offensive sweep to ensure that no German infantry remained within its area. During the night further attempts on the part of the enemy to salvage the knocked-out tanks in front of Serjeant Percival's post were frustrated and another tracked vehicle was knocked out.

During the night of the 17th wire was sent up and A Company began to wire in its position. The night passed quietly with patrol activity. Towards morning slight enemy movement was heard on A Company's front, but there were no further attacks. At first light three enemy tanks and some transport were discovered slightly forward of A Company and were engaged by two troops from the 40th Royal Tank Regiment. It became apparent now that the enemy had withdrawn towards Filetta and tanks and reconnaissance cars began to pass up the road beyond Serjeant Percival's post to make contact with the enemy. Patrols from the Regiment moved forward and recovered the two, anti-tank guns which Serjeant Percival had had to abandon. The Germans had made a futile attempt to destroy them by placing grenades in the muzzles and wrecking the telescopes. Apart from their slightly pitted barrels, these two guns were in action again within twenty-four hours. A mystery of the previous night was also cleared up. D Company had sent two men, Corporal Hussey and Private Perry, to make contact with Lieutenant Vincent, who was laying mines by the river's edge between Serjeant Percival's post and D Company. Owing to a misunderstanding they had gone beyond our line and eventually reached a road some 200 yards behind the German front line. Seeing some men standing by a wrecked vehicle, Corporal Hussey had approached and spoken to them. He was immediately fired on and his body was discovered near the wrecked anti-tank guns the next day.

Contact had been so close during this battle that we were not the only people to blunder into the other side's lines by mistake. Among the numerous prisoners captured by the Regiment was a German pay clerk who had driven down the road to pay the men and was captured complete with money.

This second great action on the part of the Regiment was now virtually over. The 46th and 56th divisional commanders and the corps commander visited Regimental headquarters to congratulate the Regiment on the second saving of the beach-head. Apart from the steadfast bearing of all ranks engaged in close contact with the enemy, excellent work was done by the signal platoon. It was largely owing to its magnificent efforts and foresight in retaining all captured German signal equipment that permitted Captain Wright and Regimental headquarters to control the fire of artillery, mortars and tanks. The regimental serjeant-major and the men who worked with him also did excellent work in keeping the companies supplied with ammunition.

As a result of these actions, the commanding officer received a bar to his D.S.O. Captain Wright received the D.S.O. and Serjeant Percival the D.C.M.

The following also received awards:

Military Cross - Captain P. R. Hayter.

Military Medal - R.S.M. G. Futter. Serjeant A. Allen. Lance-Serjeant A. Yates. Corporal A. Haynes. Lance-Corporal H. Mulford. Private F. Bint. Private H. Taylor. Private H. Wise. Private J. Hopkins. Private J. S. Scrafton.

Above Salerno

Meanwhile more bitter fighting had been taking place on the precipitous hills above Salerno where the Germans had been strongly attacking in order to retain observation over the town of Salerno and the landing beaches. The Hampshire brigade of the 46th Division had suffered heavy casualties during the landing and the higher command had replaced it battalion by battalion by the 167th Brigade. C Company of the Regiment had already moved to this area on the night of the 15th and when the 8th Royal Fusiliers moved into the line on the 17th C Company came under their command. They were engaged in the very heavy fighting for two hills known as the Pimple and White Cross. Captain Michael St. Aubyn, in conjunction with a commando, carried out a night attack on the village below the Pimple and 150 prisoners were captured.

On another night they attacked a number of German machine guns and captured thirty-two prisoners, all of whom were either officers or N.C.Os. who had volunteered to stay there at all costs. The Pimple changed hands many times, but was finally made untenable by a company of American 4.2-inch mortars, which fired phosphorous bombs on to the hill for five and a half hours.

The Regiment moved to the area on the left of C Company's old position and took over from the 2nd Hampshires on the 18th. Only a certain amount of transport could be taken up the steep road out of the town and this had to be done in darkness, since the road was under fire from German machine guns and mortars. The carriers and anti-tank guns were not required and were left back in the B Echelon area for a rest and refit. Each night rations were brought up by transport and then had to be carried from Regimental headquarters onwards by porters. For this purpose about forty Basutos were attached to the Regiment and, although they scattered once or twice under fire, on the whole they worked well. Apart from occasional shelling which caused some casualties, this sector proved to be fairly quiet and the men were able to enjoy some rest. Patrols were sent out into the Mango valley and brought back valuable information.

On the higher level the crisis was passed and the operation was beginning to gather momentum and proceed much more according to plan. Had the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division succeeded in reaching Pontecagnano the whole of the 46th Division and a proportion of the 56th Division would have been cut off from the supply beaches to the south. On the right of the Regiment the 169th Brigade made good progress up the Picentino valley and began to swing to the left, across the 167th Brigade's front towards San Mango. On the left the 201st Guards Brigade was attempting to force its way through the village of Ponte Fratte towards Baronissi.

The Regiment also had a grandstand view of the beginning of the 46th Division's attack to break through the Molina defile towards Naples. As usual during such a state of flux, the Regiment received many provisional orders to move—first to the right in support of the 169th Brigade; then for an advance across the Mango valley; and so on.

On the 21st the adjutant, Captain P. R. Hayter, M.C., was admitted to hospital and Captain O. C. Loader took over his duties. The next day the Regiment suffered a further loss. Captains W. A. Toms and J. R. B. Wright also fell sick. Finally, on the 27th, the commanding officer himself was removed to hospital and the Regiment came under the command of the second-in-command, Major Pentreath, M.C. There was also a high rate of sickness among the soldiers. This was a direct result of the Regiment's first week of fighting in the marshes around the beach-head, where, in spite of mepacrin tablets, mosquito veils, gloves and ointment, mosquitoes, considerably larger than any we had experienced in Bombay, Iraq or the desert, had feasted on our blood and done their worst.

Until the Regiment moved from above Salerno town the Royal Navy gave us continuous support, and from the last position the Regiment had a panoramic view of the fleets in action and also of the beaches to the south, where all stores and reinforcements were landed. Salerno harbour was under direct fire for over a fortnight and no ship could enter it. Daily at 9 a.m. precisely a flight of German fighters attacked the beaches and few survived the prodigious anti-aircraft fire which met them from ship and shore. Whilst watching this heartening sight a cannon shell grazed R.Q.M.S. Gill's forehead.

The battle for the initial beach-head was now over. The Regiment had fought extremely well over a long and trying period of continuous action. It had suffered casualties, but in return must have destroyed a far greater number of the enemy.

A few days after these actions a corporal and eleven men reported to the Regiment. These men were wounded or sick in Africa and on recovery were ordered to a depot in Tripoli. Hearing that the Regiment had gone to Salerno, they went to the harbour to find a ship. The Royal Navy, willing as always to help, gave them passage in a destroyer and put them ashore in Salerno Bay. Here they went to a reinforcement camp, where they were ordered to join the 46th Division. This was not at all the intention of their journey: they were light infantrymen on the way to their regiment and no other. It so happened that the commander of the 56th Division was at the camp. The corporal, recognizing General Graham, asked to be allowed to explain his story to him, with the result that the twelve men were soon back with the 7th Battalion.

THE BREAK-OUT FROM THE BEACH-HEAD

The combat at Baronissi

On the night of the 26th/27th September it became apparent that with the progress of the 46th Division in the Molina defile and of the 169th Brigade on the right an advance up the Salerno — Avellino road, Highway 88, might be necessary in order to clear the strongly held area of the cemetery at Ponte Fratte and the high ground on the left. The 201st Guards Brigade was given this initial task and suffered very heavy casualties before it gained these objectives. The final plan of divisional and brigade action was decided on the 27th. In broad outline it consisted of an advance by the 167th Brigade up Highway 88 as far as Sanseverino Rota, where it would swing left through Castel St. Gorgio and head for the plain of Naples. At Sanseverino a mixed force, consisting of a squadron of tanks, a battery of anti-tank guns, two batteries of field artillery and two independent companies, was to go north to block any enemy flank attack down Highway 88 from the direction of Avellino. The 7th Oxf and Bucks Lt. Infy was to lead the advance, supported by a squadron of tanks. In the commanding officer's absence Major Pentreath, M.C., commanded the Regiment. His plan consisted of an advance through the 201st Guards Brigade headed by two sections of carriers, followed by C Company, R group, No. 5 Platoon and the remainder of the Regiment in lorries. It was not known when the final O group (Order group, i.e., those subordinate commanders needed to receive orders from the commanding officer after his reconnaissance.) was held on the afternoon of the 27th whether the squadron of tanks would be available early enough in the morning to head the advance, or whether a squadron of the divisional reconnaissance regiment would be taking part.

The Regiment left its old area at about 0300 hrs. and embussed in its troop-carrying lorries at the bottom of the mountain road. Fortunately the tanks were available and took their place behind the carrier platoon, which took on the normal reconnaissance role. In addition, a squadron of the divisional reconnaissance regiment began to catch up soon after the column began to move, and the road became as congested as any arterial road into London at the end of a bank holiday. The drive was quiet and pleasant for about a mile and a half until the leading troops reached the small town of Baronissi. Here, fortunately for the Regimental carriers and unfortunately for the leading reconnaissance troop, the reconnaissance regiment decided to move to the front in spite of the agitated warnings of Italian civilians standing in the streets. The leading cars vanished round a bend and received direct hits from a German anti-tank gun firing down a side-road.

C Company immediately debussed and worked forward into the outskirts of the town. The Bren groups of the carrier section also dismounted. The infantry very quickly came under fire and it became apparent that the Germans held a position in some strength. A section of the Regimental mortars was ordered forward to help, but C Company made no headway and it soon became apparent that a more concentrated effort would be required to dislodge the enemy and continue the advance. Major Pentreath therefore sent back for B Company, which was ordered to work round to the right towards the hamlet of Sava. Two troops of the 64th Field Regiment, R.A., were ordered to find a gun area and prepare to give artillery support. This they succeeded in doing and their guns were quickly in position around a convent on the left of Highway 88.

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In addition, the leading troop of tanks was ordered to make what headway it could in support of the infantry. Meanwhile the rest of the column had come to a standstill and owing to the narrowness of the road, built-up areas, and the movement of field guns and lorried infantry to the front there was considerable congestion. The enemy began to make full use of this fact and brought down very heavy and concentrated defensive fire all along the line of advance. Besides the leading companies and the mortar platoon, which suffered heavy casualties from enemy mortar fire, the rear of the column also suffered from long-range guns. One anti-tank-gun portee of the rear troop received a direct hit, causing several fatal casualties. In spite of all efforts to advance, the enemy held on and the leading tank, which had gone up to support C Company, was knocked out by a mine. The brigade and divisional commanders came forward to tactical headquarters. It was decided to send D Company of the Regiment round to the left and if possible to take the high ground above Baronissi, whilst the 9th Royal Fusiliers made a still wider sweep.

It was now late in the afternoon. B Company reported that it could not get into Sava and the troops of the field regiment, which had deployed round the convent, had suffered such heavy casualties that only one gun remained in action. It was decided that at all costs the Regiment must hold the ground it had gained and an anti-tank-gun screen was deployed as soon as it was dusk. A troop of the 302nd Battery took the right of the road and two troops of the Regiment took Highway 88 and the left. The troop which took the left had expected to find D Company in the hamlet of Saragnano, but, not finding any infantry, it entered the place and took possession and prepared for an all-round defence as best it could. Enemy shelling continued intermittently and at three in the morning it was decided to carry out a naval bombardment on Baronissi.

C Company made a short withdrawal and the leading anti-tank gun was about 100 yards from the outskirts of the village. It says a great deal for the accuracy of the naval gunners' shooting that none of our troops suffered any casualties. At dawn the next day the 8th Royal Fusiliers passed through our lines and the Regiment came into reserve. It was discovered that the enemy had withdrawn shortly before first light. The Regiment's rest was of short duration, for B Company, the anti-tank platoon and the carriers were soon ordered to move to the right through the villages of Penta and Fisciano to protect the right flank of the brigade's advance.

At Penta the bridge across the stream had been prepared for demolition, but the German engineers responsible for blowing the charge were discovered hiding in the church. It was realized that it would take a considerable time to remove all the charges and so a chance was taken and a carrier drove across the bridge. Although there were teller mines on the bridge they had fortunately been incorrectly fused. The advance then reached Fisciano, where the Regiment was enthusiastically received.

Meanwhile the main column of the brigade had reached San-severino Rota, where extensive demolitions had been carried out. The Regiment was ordered to hold Fisciano and Penta and prepare to advance at first light. During the night the Royal Fusiliers succeeded in finding a cross-country route round San-severino and the brigade reached Castel St. Giorgio by daylight. The Regiment retained B Company and a troop of anti-tank guns in Fisciano and moved up to Castel St. Giorgio to concentrate. The 169th Brigade now passed through towards Sarno and Nola.

The Regiment spent three days in its new area and during this time reinforcements arrived, but even with these it was found necessary to disband D Company. This last battle was not a very successful performance in view of the nature of the operation and the high casualties suffered. It became obvious that the brigade as a whole required more practice and an improved technique for dealing with enemy rearguards in a mechanized advance. Lieutenant-Colonel Cruddas and the adjutant rejoined the Regiment on the 1st October from hospital.