

***BASED ON EXTRACTS FROM THE REGIMENTAL WAR CHRONICLE OF THE
OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY VOL4 1944/1945***

Commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel D. J. B. Houchin, D.S.O., M.C., 58th Regiment of Foot until disbandment at the end of September.

JUNE, 1944 EGYPT AND ITALY

On the 8th June the Regiment took part in the King's Birthday parade, when the division marched through the streets of Cairo. Old members of the Regiment insisted hotly that the light infantry pace should be maintained throughout the march. As this meant that the Regiment would pass all others before reaching the saluting base, and reach home before the others had completed the march, a compromise was reached. However, the old members did not approve. On the day the Regiment broke into the light infantry pace just before the saluting base, and created thereby quite a sensation. The Regiment was congratulated on its bearing and smartness.

Owing, principally, to the enthusiasm of Major Gillespie, the Regiment produced sixteen men with silver bugle horns. On the 13th June they demonstrated their skill at a luncheon held in the officers' mess which was attended by General Paget. Many old members of the Regiment also attended, including Colonel Hurt-Smith and Majors Tillotson and Montgomery. The Cairo military band played tunes connected with the Regiment and the buglers gave obvious pleasure to the commander-in-chief.

The Regiment embarked at Port Said on the M.V. Britannic on the 11th July. Disembarkation took place at Taranto on the 17th July and all were concentrated near Rome on the 23rd July. Here, in addition to training, all ranks had an opportunity to visit Rome. The Pope gave special audience to all soldiers and one particular audience to Roman Catholics. On the 23rd July His Majesty The King inspected the division.

A further move was made on the 4th August to Assisi, where some useful training was carried out, and on the 13th August we moved to Pallenza.

At Pallenza a Regimental exercise took place which, though crowded into a very short period, proved of outstanding value and the improvement shown was remarkable. Some excellent practice was obtained in tank co-operation, and everyone got to know the members of the Tank Regiment. When it came to battle, the Regiment had to work with a different regiment; probably an unavoidable but certainly a most unfortunate plan. Much attention had been paid to physical fitness, and the Regiment at this time must have been one of the fittest in Italy. The men were made to walk across country on all occasions, even if going to their baths, and this training proved of the greatest value in battle.

Future plans were now disclosed and very soon the spirit of the Regiment rose to an amazing pitch of enthusiasm and keenness. It was a wonderful and friendly team. On the 27th August the division moved to battle filled with the wildest hopes of ending the war.

During the spring and summer of 1944 the Allied forces had advanced rapidly from Rome until delayed by stiff resistance about Lake Trasimene and the River Arno. At this time four fresh German divisions were rushed into Italy, remnants reorganized and the line of defences along the heights of the Apennines from Spezia to Pesaro took shape. Those fortifications which covered the main passes over the mountains and the Adriatic corridor to Pesaro had been sited and work had begun during the secure days of Cassino. Now the Germans were striving to gain time for the completion of this the Gothic Line. Time was also important, as the summer was rapidly passing and the autumn rains would do much to halt our advance.

Two main plans were evolved to cross this final barrier to the plains of Northern Italy. The first was to advance beyond Florence by the several passes that led towards Bologna. It was considered that the enemy had insufficient reserves both to provide a rearguard and to man the Gothic Line and so could be outmanoeuvred and rushed from his defences.

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The formidable mountain position, the stubborn resistance of the enemy and the withdrawal of American and French forces for the landing in Southern France made the Allied commander switch to a second plan. This was to attack along the Adriatic coast by the historic entrance to Northern Italy. The success of the II Polish Corps and the use the Poles had been able to make of their tanks in the capture of Ancona greatly helped to persuade the army commander to adopt this course. The Eighth Army was beginning to gain tank superiority and the only place to use that was on the east coast.

The final plan provided for the Eighth Army to be switched secretly to the Adriatic coast, where only the Polish Corps and the Corps Italiano di Liberazione were operating, and for an attack with three corps, II Polish Corps, I Canadian Corps and V Corps. The Fifth U.S. Army, meanwhile, was to remain as a threat in the Florence sector and deceive the enemy. Then after the German reserves had been switched to meet the Eighth Army's attack the Fifth Army was to join in, and both armies were to break out from the mountains and cross the River Po. The war in Europe was going well, the end was in sight, and with hopes of reaching Venice and Vienna there was wild enthusiasm which turned later into bitter recriminations.

The army plan fell into three phases. The first was to be a full-scale attack on the Gothic Line, with the Polish Corps on the right, I Canadian Corps in the centre and V Corps on the left. In phase two, after the capture of Pesaro, the Polish Corps was to go into reserve, the Canadian was to strike towards the coast, while V Corps continued the advance to the Marecchia. Finally, V Corps was to advance on Ferrara and Bologna.

At the start of the operation the Eighth Army had nine divisions, of which two were armoured, and two armoured and two tank brigades besides. To oppose these, the Germans disposed initially only three divisions. Could the enemy reinforce in time? By dawn on the 26th August V Corps had made good progress with the 46th Division on the right and the 4th Indian Division on the left in the foothills. One brigade group of the 56th Division, the Queen's, was ordered to follow up the advance of the 46th Division and to assist if required, while the remainder of the 56th Division was to be ready to move two days after the attack started. The 1st Armoured Division was to be ready from the 1st September.

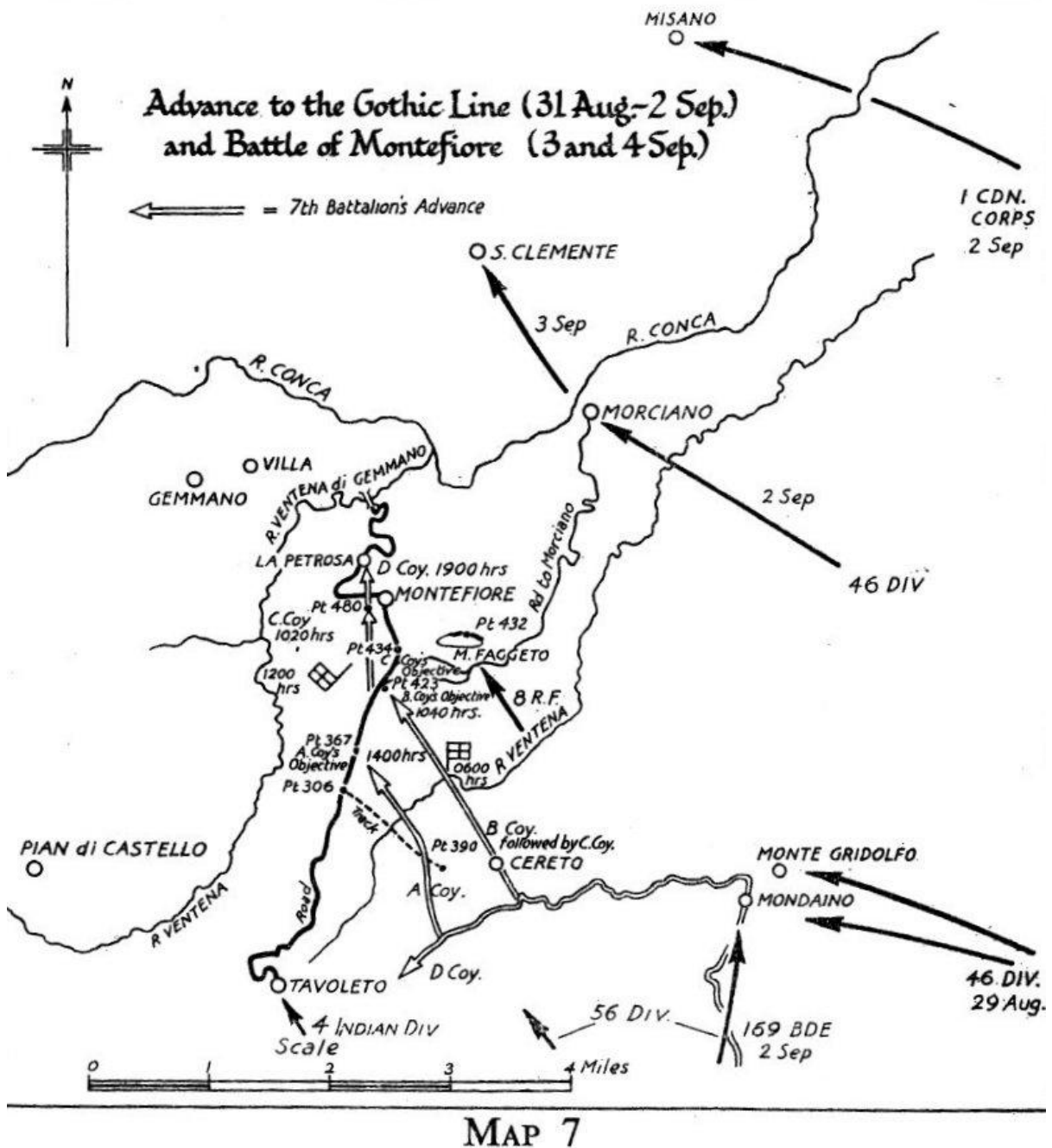
The advance by the 46th Division was rapid until the morning of the 29th August, when opposition stiffened. The enemy withdrew into his Gothic Line position, and the division reached the line of the River Foglia.

As it became evident that the Germans had been surprised and confused it was decided to press home our advantages without allowing them respite and without waiting for our artillery support to be built up. In spite of the arrival of fresh German divisions, the Gothic Line defences were breached.

The 46th Division encountered heavy opposition and were counter-attacked by fresh enemy divisions in the Monte Gridolfo area (9375). On the 2nd September numbers of the Regiment had an excellent and instructive view of the battle from a viewpoint near Urbino (9060). The 4th Indian Division could be seen fighting for Tavoleto (8673), the 46th Division about Mondaino (9374), and to the right to the sea the smoke and dust of battle were visible.

The 4th Indian Division had encountered stiff opposition and was lagging behind. It was therefore decided to commit the 56th Division between the Indians and the 46th Division. On the night of the 31st August/1st September the 169th Brigade passed through, followed by the 7th Armoured Brigade, and on the 2nd September the 167th Brigade was moved up behind the 169th Brigade. The 7th Battalion was moved to a concentration area (916573) in the minefields of the Gothic Line in the valley of the River Foglia. Such a concentration area was probably unavoidable but proved most inconvenient, and the pioneer officer and three pioneers became casualties while clearing the area.

THE GOTHIC LINE BATTLES



On the morning of the 2nd September the Queen's Brigade was in action against strong opposition about Mondaino (9374) and during the day made some progress north of that town. The road leading up to Mondaino was crowded with vehicles which could not get off the mountain road, and accurate German harassing fire found targets. The left flank was unprotected, Tavoleto (8673) still in enemy hands, and the road from Mondaino to Tavoleto in full view of the enemy.

The 167th Brigade was ordered to attack Montefiore (8878) and preparation was made for an attack on the night of the 2nd/3rd September. At 2100 hrs, as the Regiment was moving up, the attack was cancelled and the Regiment placed at one hour's notice to move.

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On the night of the 1st/2nd September the enemy had withdrawn in front of I Canadian Corps and the 46th Division. The next day the Canadians gained a bridgehead over the River Conca and the 46th Division reached the River Ventena opposite Morciano (9181). So rapid were the advances that, although opposition to the 56th Division was considerable, a breakthrough seemed imminent. The forward move of the 1st Armoured Division was therefore accelerated to a forward concentration area. The belief in a break-through increased when the Canadians broke out of their bridgehead over the Conca and advanced with little trouble to the area of Misano (9286). The 46th Division captured the bridge at Morciano intact and during the 3rd September extended their bridgehead to include San Clemente (8983) in spite of considerable opposition.

During the 3rd September the Regiment's battle patrol under Lieutenant Loubser was sent out on a brigade reconnaissance to discover whether Montefiore was occupied or not. The patrol had a long way to go, communication with it was uncertain and its progress difficult to follow, though the ground was in view of the Regiment's observation post. Late in the afternoon it was well on the way to its objective, having met no serious opposition.

At 1630 hrs the Regiment was ordered to stand down and all settled down to rest. At 2000 hrs orders arrived to attack Montefiore that night. Although no firm plan had been previously arranged for this attack the recent reconnaissance naturally helped. There was now no time or light for the normal night attack preparations.

Montefiore was a small village perched up on a pinnacle-shaped feature. To the south and west was a high and dominating hill feature containing two spot heights, Point 434 to the south and Point 480 to the west of Montefiore. This area was the Regiment's objective. To the east of Point 434 was Monte Faggeto (8978), containing Point 432, which was the objective of the 8th Royal Fusiliers. The River Ventena, with numerous tributaries, flowed from about Tavoleto north-eastwards across the front. On the right this had been reached by the Queen's Brigade, and 8th Royal Fusiliers could form up by the river and then make a short approach to their objective. The Ventena had to be crossed by 0300 hrs. on the 4th September.

On the left none of our own troops was west of Mondaino and the left flank was unprotected.

The Regiment's plan was for a move to Mondaino by transport, followed by an hour's march along the main road to within one and a half miles of Tavoleto, held by the enemy. Essential transport followed the marching troops. D Company, under Major Close-Brooks, was to prevent any interference from Tavoleto. A Company, under Major Harbottle, was to turn north down a track to Point 390 and then make its way across country to some high ground about Point 367 (878767) on the main Tavoleto—Montefiore road. Its task was to protect the left flank and prevent any interference with the main attack. B Company, under Major Louw, was to turn north through the small village of Cereto (8978), and make its way across country to some dominating ground at Point 423 on the main road north of A Company. C Company, under Major Tresawna, was to follow B Company and capture the vital Point 434 feature. Orders for this were to be issued from Regimental headquarters when the situation was considered favourable. As the companies moved across country D Company was to be drawn in to follow A Company and held in reserve with Regimental headquarters in the valley of the Ventena. Later it was to complete the capture of the Montefiore feature. Mortars and machine guns were to be ready to support the attack at first light.

The farthest limit of the attack entailed an advance of three miles as the crow flies with a drop to the Ventena of 100 metres and a climb the other side of over 200 metres. Few tracks existed and the night was very dark.

Lieutenant Loubser returned with his patrol at 0130 hrs having collected one prisoner. He had met little opposition but had not had time to reach Montefiore. However, noises showed that at least C Company's objective was held. As the route for B Company was most difficult, Lieutenant Loubser now set out to guide that company to its objective.

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The preliminary moves worked well and D Company captured two prisoners, who came in from Tavoleto. Regimental headquarters followed A Company, using a track marked on the map which was to become the divisional axis. The track became most difficult and finally disappeared. In following one passage through the trees the jeep with the Regiment's rear link turned over into a stream bed, fortunately without damaging the wireless set.

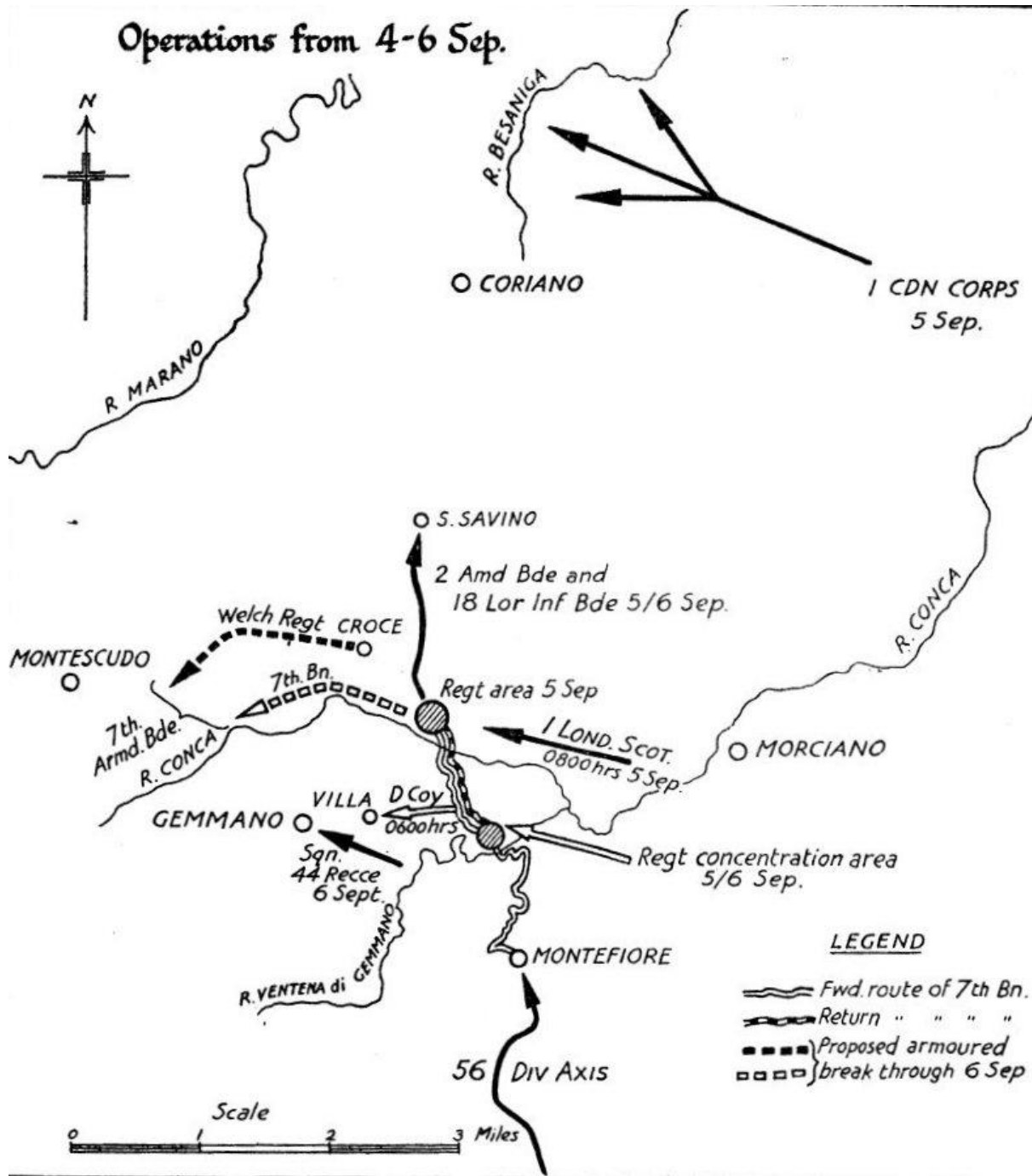
At dawn firing broke out in the direction of A Company's objective, Regimental headquarters was established in a bend of the Ventena, and D Company moved on to some high ground to the east. It soon became apparent, and was later proved, that the enemy had reinforced his position. Montefiore was a vital feature. A Company was soon held up and tank support could not shift the Germans from their positions in some strong stone buildings. Tanks, called forward to give close support, were frustrated by the ground, and only after a very long delay were some able to find a way round and join in at the end of the action. Regimental headquarters and D Company also received attention from the Germans, and Major Close-Brooks was wounded. In the meantime B Company, delayed by the difficulties of the ground, came under heavy fire from its objective and from its northern flank as it grew light. One platoon cleared the flank in fine style, but while reorganizing the platoon commander, Lieutenant Hurley, was killed. The Regiment had lost one of its finest officers, a brave and able leader, admired and respected by everyone.

Things did not look well and in particular the enemy on B Company's objective were a menace. It was decided, however, not to wait but to send C Company off to Point 434. This company, commanded by Major Tresawna and composed almost entirely of anti-aircraft gunners, advanced up the steep slopes in most magnificent fashion and hounded the German from every position he held. By 1000 hrs the objective was captured and the company had exploited to Point 480. B Company's success soon followed, but A Company could not report the capture of its objective until 1400 hrs. Not waiting for A Company, Regimental headquarters and D Company climbed the slopes and the Montefiore position was consolidated. A steep track with many right-angled bends was found and carriers with the supporting arms slowly forced their way up to assist in consolidation. It was, however, impossible to get anti-tank guns up the slopes. On the right the 8th Royal Fusiliers had reached their objective about the same time as C Company. Counterattacks were easily dealt with, but enemy shell fire continued to be a real nuisance until dark.

This action was a most useful and encouraging introduction to battle for the Regiment. In spite of the many difficulties, all companies had found their objectives and routed what proved to be a strong enemy. Casualties were light and a large number of prisoners were taken.

At 1500 hrs D Company was ordered to clear the small village of La Petrosa (8879), whence the enemy continually harassed our positions. This was successfully accomplished by 1900 hrs. Lieutenant Hamilton was sent out with a platoon of C Company at 1530 hrs. to patrol the River Ventena di Gemmano and report whether it was held or not. This platoon was not heard of again until it reported back on the 5th September, having been held up by enemy while house-clearing on the Gemmano feature.

At 1900 hrs on the 4th September orders were received for a brigade attack that night, with the Regiment on the right directed on to Villa (8680) and the 9th Royal Fusiliers on the left on Gemmano (8580). This meant an advance across the River Ventena di Gemmano with no time for reconnaissance before dark. In a straight line the distance was two miles. This was cancelled soon after and the commanding officer ordered to report to brigade headquarters and the intelligence officer to reconnoitre the Ventena di Gemmano where it was crossed by the road from Montefiore to the north.



MAP 8

By now the situation was suitable for a break-through. The 1st Armoured Division was ordered to pass through to the right of the 46th Division in the afternoon of the 4th September. The 56th Division was to continue the advance immediately, directed on Croce (8682), and thence to continue westwards towards the River Marano. The 7th Armoured Brigade, with the Welch Regiment, which had been trained as motorized infantry, was to break through during the 5th September. Gemmano was to be ignored.

As Tavoleto was still held by the enemy the 56th Division had no road communication to Montefiore. The few tracks marked on the map were narrow, easily blocked, often impossible to find, and dangerous to use in places on a dark night. The journey for the commanding officer back to brigade headquarters was a slow and fatiguing nightmare and the return journey was worse (see Map 8).

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The brigade was to advance at 2200 hrs. past Montefiore, with the 9th Royal Fusiliers leading, followed by the 7th Battalion, directed on to Croce and San Savino (8784) on the Coriano (8787) Ridge. Supporting arms were allotted to each battalion. The divisional axis was to be the track used by Regimental headquarters the previous night and then along the road through A Company's position. This track had not been found by 2100 hrs., and it seemed quite impossible to get any supporting arms or transport into the order of march or units off to time. The brigade commander could only give directions and hope for the best, leaving everything to battalion commanders and to fate.

By day the road beyond A Company was in full view of the enemy and in the days to come was under effective and accurate fire.

Owing to its position the Regiment was ready on time, but it was not until 2330 hrs. that the 9th Royal Fusiliers appeared. Supporting arms could not move forward into the columns, but some transport got forward.

The intelligence officer returned from his reconnaissance, reporting the bridge over the Ventena di Gemmano blown and the narrow stream impassable to traffic. Transport soon blocked the road and the 9th Royal Fusiliers continued their advance with marching troops only. The commanding officer found a crossing place which was improved by a bulldozer, but soon it became impassable and all transport had to wait for a bridge to be constructed.

The Regiment continued the advance with one or two vehicles and crossed the Conca, but after reaching the main Morciano road at 0300 hrs. on the 5th September bumped into the 9th Royal Fusiliers. Contact had been made with the enemy east of Croce, and no progress could be made. Soon the 9th Royal Fusiliers were committed to what proved to be a long and bitter battle. As the sky lightened with the false dawn on the 5th September Gemmano stood out, a huge feature dominating the scene in a most sinister way. After a quick conference with the brigade commander D Company was sent up to occupy the Villa feature, detailed as the Regiment's objective only a few hours before. The remainder of the Regiment settled into houses or dug in about the cross-roads, always an unenviable position.

The whole day the Regiment was subjected to accurate and often intense shell fire, and casualties trickled in continuously. D Company occupied Villa with little difficulty and reported activity on Gemmano, and later the company was attacked a number of times, but held its own.

At about 0800 hrs. carriers of the London Scottish arrived during a lull at the cross-roads. They formed the advanced guard of that battalion, and refused to believe the position a dangerous one, or that no progress could be made through Croce. They were part of the break-through force. A heavy enemy gun changed the outlook and soon burnt-out vehicles of the London Scottish at regular intervals told a sorry story on the road to Morciano.

In the afternoon the commanding officer had to return across country to brigade headquarters, which was situated on the banks of the Ventena di Gemmano.

On arrival he was warned that on the 6th September the 7th Armoured Brigade would break through the enemy front about Croce, advancing on two routes. The Welch Regiment was to act as motorized infantry on the right route, and the 7th Battalion on the left route. The 7th Battalion would be concentrated that night about brigade headquarters with its transport, including the troop carriers. At first light it was to join the tanks coming from Morciano at the cross-roads where the Regiment now lay. The area of brigade headquarters was overlooked by Gemmano and Villa dominated it completely.

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The commanding officer travelled back to receive orders from Brigadier Prior-Palmer, commanding the 7th Armoured Brigade. The brigade was just moving into its area south of Morciano and traffic congestion in the dark was bad. The journey back to the Regiment was slow and exhausting, columns of traffic in both directions making it impossible to move quickly even in a jeep. The rest of the night was spent making arrangements for the morrow and concentrating the Regiment.

Congestion on the roads delayed the 1st Armoured Division during its approach march on the night of the 3rd/4th September. When it arrived on the 4th September to attack the Coriano Ridge, the first tanks were greeted with such heavy fire that, in spite of their persistent attacks, the planned start line itself was never reached. The end of this momentous day, which marked the turn of the tide from the exhilarating success of a quick advance to the hard battle of attack and counter-attack, found the depleted 2nd Armoured Brigade behind its start line and Coriano still in enemy hands.

Although the chance of a break-through had probably vanished with the arrival of fresh German tank and infantry reinforcements, the hope of reaching the Po Valley before the winter and the prospect of large-scale armoured action were not abandoned.

The Canadians had continued to advance and on the 5th September had reached the River Besaniga on a narrow front, but were held up by fire from across the River Marano and from Coriano.

The commander of the 2nd Armoured Brigade modified his original plan and on the morning of the 5th September, with the remaining tanks of one of his regiments, he advanced on a narrow front. His forward troops entered the outskirts of San Savino, but the squadron following was held up by determined infantry. Repeated attacks with tank reinforcements proved useless and no progress was made until, in the evening, the leading battalion of the 18th Lorried Infantry Brigade took over.

On the night of the 5th/6th September the 18th Brigade surprised the enemy and held a position hard by San Savino against repeated counter-attacks.

During the morning of the 5th September it had become apparent that the Coriano Ridge must be turned by the capture of Montescudo (8282), a hill feature to the south-west, or taken by strong frontal assault. The way to Montescudo was barred by two hill features, Croce to the north and Gemmano to the south.

The task of driving a wedge through the enemy line with the object of capturing Montescudo was given to the 56th Division. Two brigades were to attack on the night of the 5th/6th September and secure the start line San Savino to Croce, and on the morning of the 6th September the 7th Armoured Brigade, supported by two battalions, of which the 7th Battalion was one, was to capture Montescudo. No plan to capture Gemmano was included, as it was intended at this time to by-pass the enemy on this formidable feature. Unfortunately the enemy was equally aware of the danger to the flank of his Coriano position, and as the 56th Division moved towards Croce strong enemy reinforcements were moving to oppose them.

Dawn on the 6th September found the 7th Battalion concentrated with its transport and troop carriers underneath Gemmano. At 0600 hrs. the advance platoon set off to join the tanks beyond the Conca, but no tanks arrived. At 0700 hrs. the operation was postponed. During the morning enemy guns reached the area of the Regiment and brigade headquarters, destroying some vehicles and annoying some wasps, which retaliated by a personal attack on the commanding officer. A patrol of D Company which had gone out the previous day returned, reporting enemy with mortars on Gemmano.

At 1100 hrs. orders came for the Regiment to attack with tanks through Croce. The commanding officer in a tank fortunately made contact with the tank regimental commander on the Morciano road. The problem was difficult and most unsatisfactory. Tanks and infantry could not marry up, and it was proposed that the tanks should advance westwards from Croce and that the Regiment should join them en route.

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As it was obviously essential to join in the Croce battle quickly a plan was finally agreed by which the Regiment would form up and advance to the high ground on the north of the Conca, turn left and then wait for the tanks. The tanks were to lead the attack. While the commanding officer was giving out his orders the brigade major arrived with orders for an immediate attack on Gemmano.

Throughout the night of the 5th/6th and the following day there was confused fighting, attack and counter-attack, in the battle for Croce. Our troops found themselves severely hampered by the enemy's observation from the ridge which came to be known as Gemmano, although that name referred to the village at its western end. The 56th Divisional commander was forced to alter his plan and the 7th Armoured Brigade group was broken up, a part of the armour being sent to assist the main attack on Croce while the 7th Battalion was sent to Gemmano.

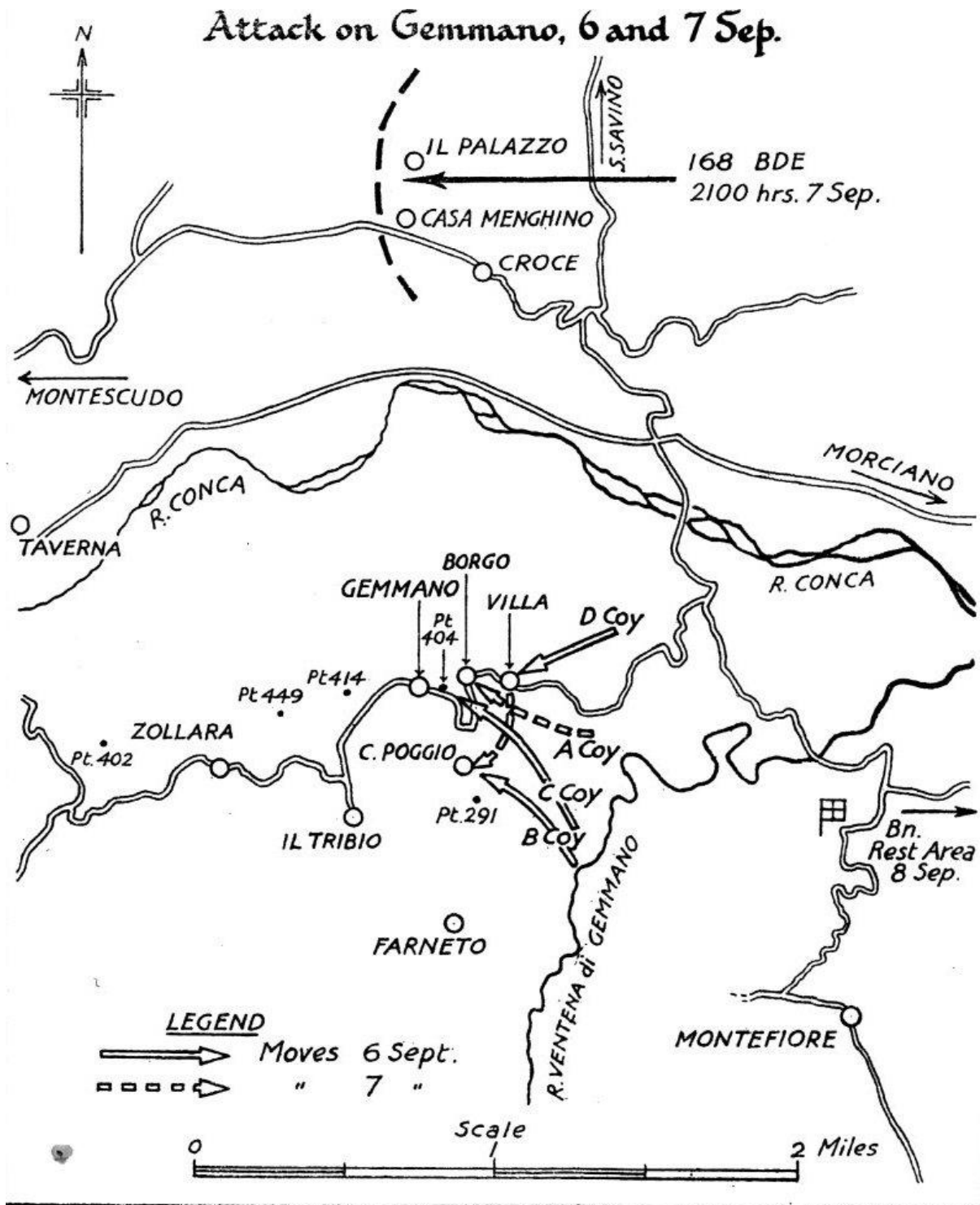
A squadron of the 44th Reconnaissance Regiment had been sent on the 6th September to Gemmano. The Germans allowed the vehicles nearly to reach the top before reducing them to wrecks, and the squadron, leaving its remaining vehicles on the road below Villa, took up a position on the Villa feature.

After collecting information from the reconnaissance regiment and from D Company, the commanding officer went to an excellent viewpoint off the Montefiore road, which remained tactical headquarters until the end of the battle. The road itself was in view of the enemy in places and received constant attention from him, as did the road to Croce, particularly at the junction leading up to Gemmano.

The Gemmano Ridge consists of four principal heights; at the eastern end the village of Gemmano stands on Point 404; in the centre, topped by a single house, 500 yards to the west of the village, Point 414; 300 yards farther west the peak surmounted by a wooden cross, Point 449; 1,000 yards away at the western end, Point 402. The big feature known as Villa lay to the east of Gemmano, the name really referring to a village on its western end. A road runs slightly below the top of the ridge, past Villa and Gemmano, through the adjoining hamlet of Borgo and thence south of the crest to the tiny village of Zollara.

Three ridges ran up from the Ventena di Gemmano, a small but difficult stream which after rain became a torrent. The right-hand ridge crossed the road near Gemmano connecting to a narrow ridge between that village and Villa. The centre ridge ran up to the west end of Gemmano and thence to Borgo. The left ridge led up to the cross on Point 449.

The only entry into Gemmano was from the west or enemy side. To the east the final slopes were very steep, covered with scrub and led to a twenty-foot wall surmounted by battlements. In the slopes were caves and, in the village, cellars protected the defenders. A tunnel led down to a position on the centre spur and the exit was protected by part of the foundation wall. A church tower dominated the scene.



MAP 9

Information of the enemy was scanty, but it was known that he occupied Villa, had troops on the right and centre ridges, and was in the church tower in very large numbers. The task looked most formidable. If the enemy fought so hard for Croce, surely he would fight hard for this dominating key feature. Yet as the task had been set for one battalion, presumably it was considered to be lightly held. The Regimental plan was an attack in two phases. In the first phase D Company was to capture Villa from the north-east. In the second phase C Company was to advance up the right-hand ridge and capture Gemmano village, outflanking it from the Villa direction. B Company was to advance up the centre ridge, thus protecting C Company's left, and capture Point 449 on which was the cross.

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A Company was in reserve, and if C and B Companies were successful it was to move up and give depth to the final position. The divisional artillery, a medium regiment and a heavy battery were to support the attack, together with a heavy mortar platoon, a machine-gun company and 17-pdr anti-tank guns, except for concentrations by the field artillery in support of D Company, the whole of the supporting fire was directed on to Gemmano village in support of C Company. The Regiment's 6-pdr. anti-tank guns were to fire in support of B and C Companies while advancing up the ridges, concentrating hi particular on various occupied houses. Tanks which were to support the attack did not in fact arrive.

Viewed from the Regiment's observation post, the size of the objective, the length of the approach and the steepness and difficulty of the climb were liable to be underestimated. D Company set out at 1530 hrs. It was soon realized that if B and C Companies waited for the capture of Villa they would not be able to attack in daylight. These companies were therefore sent off without waiting for D Company's success.

Enemy defensive fire fell as soon as the advance began? Fortunately the possible defensive-fire areas had been successfully estimated when making the plan and no company suffered during the advance.

D Company, under command of Captain Penney, was established on the Villa feature by 1825 hrs, though the houses of the small village took some time to clear after this. The enemy subjected Villa to continuous fire throughout the rest of the battle and mounted a number of counter-attacks from the west, all of which were repulsed. The position on Villa was not finally secure until 2215 hrs.

B and C Companies, deployed, could be seen advancing up their ridges, looking like so many ants on this huge area. The 6-pdr. guns cleared their path most impressively. The village of Gemmano became as much of a ruin as it was possible to make it, the church tower being in due course completely destroyed. Even part of the foundation wall was ruined, but to destroy it was impossible.

By 1900 hrs. C Company had established itself between Villa and Gemmano after some stiff fighting, particularly in the steep, scrubby slopes below the village. Two platoons were close to the walls, but every attempt to assault the village was repulsed. A move right-handed could not be given direct-fire support, as the ground was hidden from the observation posts. The artillery representative with C Company was killed early in the operation, and attempts to use observation posts on Croce were unsuccessful. When the leading platoon commanders later went forward together to reconnoitre they met a German counterattack and were captured. The enemy used phosphorous grenades against the platoons.

B Company had been seen making good progress, but communications with it were bad and the situation therefore obscure. By nightfall it was established just below Gemmano in the small hamlet of Casa Poggio. It was under fire from a tank and infantry on the flank of Gemmano, from the cross and from enemy who had disclosed their position on the left-hand ridge. Unfortunately the company commander had mistaken his objective and, thinking he had arrived in position, did not press an attack. However, the enemy dispositions on his front and flank made any advance a most hazardous operation at this stage.

A Company was moved forward to the area of a pink house on the road leading up to C Company together with the Regiment's mortars at 1930 hrs. The platoon which had gone off at 0600 hrs to join the tanks did not rejoin until after dark, having spent an unpleasant day under fire.

Night closed on a situation which was disappointing, though not unsatisfactory. The enemy had been forced to disclose his strength and dispositions, he had obviously suffered heavy casualties, and the Regiment was well placed for further attacks with A Company not committed.

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C Company commander, Major Tresawna, requested that a night attack be made on his front and perhaps such an attack would have brought success, or at least the capture of Gemmano village. However, touch had been lost with B Company; A Company had only two platoons; and D Company reported enemy opposition. The enemy was obviously in great strength, and without careful reconnaissance and preparation a night attack seemed doomed to failure. C Company could easily have been disorganized and used up in Gemmano, and counter-attacks were certain to develop from Borgo and continue against D Company. The Regiment was tired, having had no rest day or night since the 2nd September, and the administrative side needed organizing. There was also at least a hope that larger forces would now be used to capture what was a key feature strongly held.

In the meantime the battle had raged furiously north of the Conca and by 1600 hrs the 167th Brigade had completed the capture of Croce and the 168th Brigade repulsed all counterattacks. It was now decided to complete the firm base westwards from Croce so as to include the II Palazzo Ridge and then pass the 169th Brigade through on to Montescudo. Early on the night of the 6th/7th September, before the 167th and 168th Brigades could resume the offensive, the Germans launched a furious counter-attack which by the morning of the 7th had recaptured Croce, and at dawn German tanks moved in. The 168th Brigade established itself on the II Palazzo Ridge at 1500 hrs and captured Casa Menghino without opposition. By 2100 hrs Croce was recaptured.

In the early years of the war the second-in-command often accompanied the commanding officer into battle, with the result that both often became casualties at the same time. This led in some formations to an order that the second-in-command would remain at B Echelon. By this rule he was not only out of touch with the battle, and therefore not really prepared to take over during battle, but also unable to relieve the commanding officer to allow him to rest, and unable to supervise the administration. The second-in-command must be at A Echelon; particularly is this necessary if a battalion is inexperienced.

At midnight on the 6th/7th September the quartermaster arrived with the rations. It had been difficult to get ammunition to companies; to get food to them (especially as it was cooked food) presented a still more difficult problem. Without mules or carriers, which were unobtainable, it was impossible to reach B Company. Rain fell during the night, making movement slow across the steep slopes.

Soon after midnight the enemy put in a counter-attack against C Company and pushed back the leading platoons. This, together with a more intensive firing by the enemy on his defensive area, further complicated the administrative plan.

The Regiment was ordered to continue its attacks on the 7th September. The plan was for C Company at least to regain its lost position, and for A Company to clear the area between C and B Companies. A Company was then to attack Gemmano right-handed, supported by fire from C Company. A heavy artillery programme was to support the advance.

A Company was slow and did not make touch with C Company until 1000 hrs Major Harbottle then reported that his weapons needed preparing for battle and he must delay his attack.

B Company now reported the capture of its objective. This was obviously incorrect, and on being questioned agreed that the cross was still in enemy hands, but confirmed that the company was in Borgo. This led to a postponement of a great part of the A Company fire-support programme and an effort by C Company to advance. No success was gained, as the B Company report was completely wrong, and the company was still in Casa Poggio.

A Company's attack eventually was launched well supported by fire at 1300 hrs. A little rain fell during the attack, making the task of climbing the steep slopes most difficult. At no time was there much drive in the attack, and it came to a standstill about 1400 hrs in line with C Company, Major Harbottle having been wounded.

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Orders now came from brigade for Gemmano, including Point 402, to be captured by 1700 hrs. A bulldozer was placed under command in order to clear all rubble from the road to Gemmano and thus allow free passage to the Queen's Brigade, which was to pass through in troop-carrying vehicles making for Montescudo.

At 1500 hrs. an order group was held at Regimental headquarters with representatives from all companies. With the failure of the A Company attack the situation was serious, and any further attack would have to be made with B and D Companies. The right flank had failed and therefore it was decided to attack on the left. This meant moving D Company across the enemy's front to join B Company, and leaving Villa rather bare of troops. A and C Companies were to make what progress they could and contain the enemy on that flank. Covering fire had to be dispersed to keep the enemy quiet on the left ridge and the cross area, and to cover the move of D Company across the front. Enemy artillery and mortar fire had by this time become such a menace that a proportion of the artillery had to be allotted to a counter-mortar programme. As the troops approached their objectives all artillery was to be switched on to counter-mortar tasks. Seventeen-pdr. ammunition was running so short that these guns could support the attack for only a limited time. Tanks had at last arrived, but could find no means of giving really close support, as the ground was quite unsuitable for them. They gave support therefore from the Montefiore road.

The commanding officer now reported to brigade that he did not consider the attack could succeed and should not take place. The brigade commander immediately came to tactical headquarters and discussed the whole situation. The commanding officer agreed to carry out the attack, as obviously success was of the utmost urgency for the main operation.

Rain fell heavily, making movement on the steep slopes slow and exhausting. Clouds continually covered Gemmano, obscuring the view from observation posts, but probably saving D Company from heavy casualties as they carried out the dangerous move across the front. Time passed and darkness drew near before B and D Company commanders met. About this time the clouds lifted and the sun shone. It was the last opportunity and the order was given to attack.

Unfortunately at this time the leading platoon of D Company had only just arrived, and Major Louw ordered it into an immediate attack. Led by its very able and gallant commander, Lieutenant Cotton, the platoon charged up the last 100 yards to the walls of Gemmano. From Regimental headquarters the enemy could be seen running out to repel the charge, and 17-pdrs and machine guns were fired to stop him. Meanwhile, on the right flank, A and C Companies attacked and charged the final height. Rain fell, the clouds descended once again and darkness enveloped the scene. Brigade headquarters reported that C Company had been seen fighting at the top of the slopes and entering Gemmano. Regimental tactical headquarters was ordered immediately up to the village with a feeling of great relief and enthusiasm.

On passing Villa the commanding officer became suspicious at the lack of activity. He therefore halted the forward move and advanced up the slope with Major Thompson. All was silent and not a soldier could be found. From Gemmano came only a challenge in German; from B and D Companies silence. There seemed to be no Regiment left. After making some quick dispositions with Regimental headquarters for the holding of Villa, the commanding officer went to brigade headquarters, but the commander was at division planning on the assumed success at Gemmano, and it was some time before he could be found.

A squadron of the 44th Reconnaissance Regiment was now placed under command of the Regiment and orders given to hold Villa at all costs. By 0100 hrs on the 8th September a number of C Company and some of D Company assembled at Villa, completely exhausted. Dispositions were made, but the main defence was left to the squadron of the 44th Reconnaissance Regiment. At first light contact was made with B Company in its original position. The D Company charge had led only to the deaths of the platoon commander and several of his men.

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It was now evident that the enemy defence was anchored on Gemmano, which must be captured by direct assault. As the forces deployed were obviously insufficient, the 46th Division was brought back from its brief rest and took over Croce. The Queen's Brigade (169th) of the 56th Division was diverted to attack Gemmano.

Early on the 8th September the commanding officer accompanied the commander of the Queen's Brigade on his reconnaissance, and advised a left-handed attack. Major Tresawna also gave advice regarding the right flank and volunteered to accompany a battalion of the Queen's. He stayed with this battalion for two days, commanding at one time a company and at another time a platoon.

B Company was withdrawn to allow of air and artillery preparation for the Queen's attack, and during the morning the Regiment was concentrated in its old area. Losses were serious, but not as severe as at one time seemed likely. Major Vincent took command of A Company and Major Morgan of D Company. The Regiment rested and the commanding officer was admitted to the field ambulance.

The Queen's Brigade captured Gemmano village after a three-hour attack in which severe losses were incurred. Except for the capture of Farneto (8679) at the bottom of the left ridge, no further progress could be made, even to Point 414. Later Gemmano was lost in a counter-attack. During the night of the 9th/10th September the 46th Division took over from the Queen's Brigade and captured Point 449, only to be driven back to Borgo. On the 13th September the 4th Indian Division relieved the 46th Division. The feature was not cleared until the 15th September, by which time the enemy had withdrawn owing to developments on the flanks. The total casualties on Gemmano were severe and seriously affected the regiments which took part in what had become one of the most-talked-of battles of the Italian campaign.

After the war senior German officers stated that the attack on the coast was not a complete surprise. The concentrations of the 46th and 56th Divisions had been discovered and German reinforcements had been moved towards the coastal sector before the battle.

The Gothic Line consisted, in fact, of two lines, called by the Germans the First and Second Green Lines. The main defence was based on the Second Green Line and was anchored on Gemmano, from which feature it ran through San Savino, down the Coriano Ridge to the sea. This position had been carefully reconnoitred and prepared, as at Gemmano, with deep dug-outs from which tunnels led to the rear of would-be attackers. Montefiore was considered an essential outpost to Gemmano, and in the opinion of the German commander it should not have been lost, as it exposed the vital Gemmano to attack.

Gemmano was prepared and held by the 100th Mountain Regiment, recruited from the Graz area in Austria. It was a very fit and well-trained formation with high morale. Before the battle this regiment was in course of being moved to the Franco-Italian frontier because of the Allied landings in the South of France.

It returned in ample time to occupy its previous positions on Gemmano. The regiment was composed of four battalions, including a reconnaissance battalion, and each battalion had four companies, each of a minimum of 125 men. It was well supported by artillery, mortars and tanks. The reconnaissance battalion held the Farneto or left-hand ridge, one battalion Point 402, another Point 449, and a third Gemmano village and Villa. During the battle the battalion in Gemmano had to be relieved by the one at Point 402. Both these suffered enormous casualties. It is possible that this relief took place during the period of the 7th Battalion's attacks.

On the 10th September the commanding officer returned to the Regiment, which was concentrated a short distance east of its original position. Major Gillespie, the second-in-command, was in the process of moving B Echelon to a more convenient position south of Morciano, and had concentrated there all the Regiment's weapons for a quick overhaul by the armourers. The move of B Echelon into this area was seen by the enemy, who promptly brought down artillery fire which damaged several vehicles and some of the weapons and seriously wounded Major Gillespie. Major Tresawna was appointed second-in-command.

The brigade now moved back a short distance to rest, the 7th Battalion and the 8th Royal Fusiliers being placed at two hours' notice to move in a counter-attack role in case Croce fell. Some further reorganization took place. Captain Penney became intelligence officer in place of Lieutenant Edwards, who went to A Company as second-in-command, and Captain Hamilton took command of C Company. Casualties among the more experienced officers had seriously affected the strength.

Message received after Gemmano

"From eighth army commander.

"Personal to Lt. Col. Houchin, Commanding 7 Oxf Bucks.

"My congratulations to you and all ranks of your Bn on your hard fighting at Gemmano. The Regt may be proud of its part in a great and hard fought victory. With my thanks and best wishes to you all."

ATTACK ON SENSOLI RIDGE, UNDER COMMAND OF THE 7TH ARMoured BRIGADE; BATTLE FOR THE CERIANO RIDGE, UNDER COMMAND OF THE 169th BRIGADE—SUSPENDED ANIMATION

In view of the events of the 8th September the army commander decided to maintain a co-ordinated attack along the whole army front. The plan to capture Montescudo was modified and the main effort directed into the coastal plain. The more formidable obstruction to this plan was the Rimini (8598) Line, which hinged on the San Fortunato (8294) position; but the immediate problem was the capture of Coriano (8787).

The new plan was divided into three phases and was, briefly, as follows. In phase one V Corps was to operate against Gemmano and Montescudo with two of its infantry divisions, while its armoured division and I Canadian Corps assaulted the Coriano Ridge. Phase two consisted of the advance to and crossing of the River Marano. In phase three I Canadian Corps was to break through the Rimini Line; V Corps was to secure the left flank and capture Monte Fagiolo (7289). Thus both corps would be in a position to force the crossing of the River Marrechia.

After the heavy fighting of the 9th September the 56th Division was exhausted and the 46th Division had to be employed against Gemmano. The attack was originally due to begin on the night of the 10th/11th September and the Montescudo operation on the night before. This was now altered; the main attack was to begin on the night of the 12th/ 13th September and the Montescudo operation at the same time or shortly after.

On the 12th September the 167th Brigade prepared to move forward to a position west of Morciano. The Regiment was in brigade reserve and was to be the last to move. At 1500 hrs on the 13th September the commanding officer was told that the 168th Brigade had the previous night made some progress beyond Croce. In view of this, and to protect the left of the armour, it had been decided to attack the Sensoli (8484) Ridge that night with the 8th Royal Fusiliers on the right and the Regiment on the left. The 9th Royal Fusiliers were to carry out a preliminary movement on the flank of the 168th Brigade.

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The Regiment moved up and debussed just east of Morciano. From there it had to cross the Conca by a ford and march to Cevolabbate (8882). Beyond this the only line of advance was down a steep track into an area which was a confusing maze of tracks, well mined, and under continuous and heavy enemy fire. A possible concentration area was occupied by the 9th Royal Fusiliers. The Regiment's reconnaissance party was given a hostile reception by the enemy when moving down into the area, and when viewing the ground from a road junction south of San Savino (8784). It was therefore decided to halt the Regiment east of Cevolabbate and move up to a start line on the main road by San Savino cemetery by night. The Regiment did not reach its concentration area until after dark and company commanders only had a view of the ground in the fading light at 1900 hrs. However, a view by full daylight would not have added much to their knowledge, as ridges hid the view, and the objective was merely a line on the horizon.

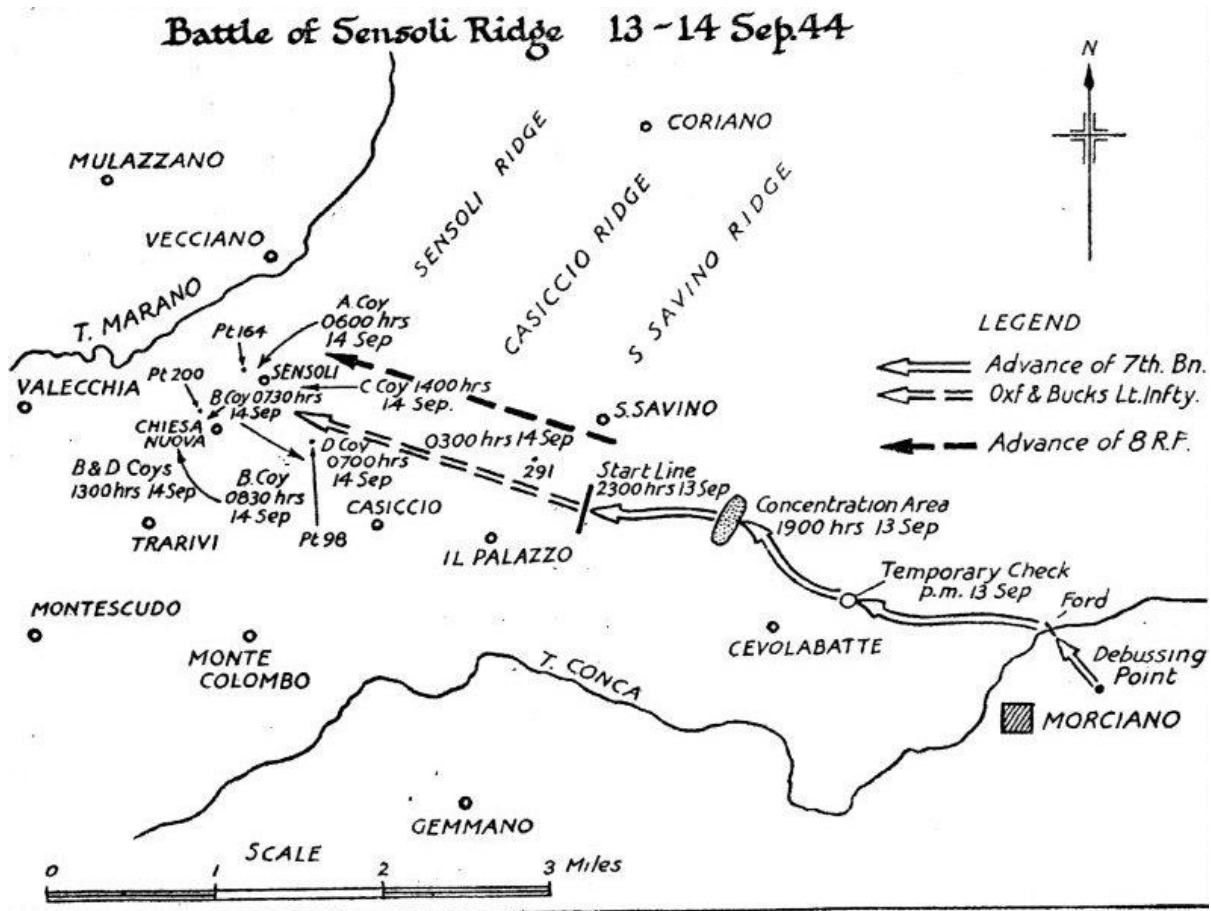
The plan of attack meant that the Regiment would have an approach march of about two miles to its start line on the San Savino Ridge, and then an advance of 4,000 yards to the Sensoli Ridge. On the way it had to pass over the H Palazzo and Casiccio Ridges (8583). No tracks or landmarks could assist and the move had therefore to be done on a compass bearing as far as a road junction before the Sensoli Ridge from where companies could branch off to their objectives.

The plan was for an advance on a bearing of 291 degrees with two companies leading in close formation in line. The intelligence section guided from the centre. Regimental headquarters was to follow closely behind the centre. Owing to the obstacles to be encountered and the inexperience of the Regiment, it was felt best to control the remaining companies by making them follow in file behind Regimental headquarters. A halt for reorganization was to be made on each ridge and at the final road junction. Objectives were, for A Company, Sensoli and Point 164, and, for B Company, Chiesa Nuova and Point 200. C Company and Regimental headquarters were to establish themselves on a hill to the east of Sensoli, while D Company occupied a hill, Point 98 (8484), on a road leading up to Chiesa Nuova. No transport could accompany the Regiment. Supporting arms were to move up at first light. During the night artillery was to harass the Sensoli Ridge.

H hour was 2200 hrs, but the Regiment could not get off until 2300 hrs. Though isolated enemy posts could be seen firing to flank and rear, no opposition was met. Progress was slow owing to the many obstacles and the need for careful control. On reaching the Casiccio Ridge at 0300 hrs on the 14th September it was discovered that D and C Companies were missing. Some stretcher-bearers of Regimental headquarters had fallen asleep during one of the halts and thus broken the chain. So as to reach the objective before light it was decided to continue the advance with A and B Companies only and to establish Regimental headquarters on the Casiccio Ridge while search was made for the missing companies. Wireless contact was made with D Company, who reported that Major Morgan had gone off alone to find the Regiment. By 0500 hrs Major Morgan and all but two platoons of C Company had been found, and D Company was sent off to its objective. No opposition had been met.

The advance achieved complete surprise and by 0615 hrs A Company was established at Sensoli and had captured about fifty prisoners. B Company had a more difficult task, establishing itself at Chiesa Nuova, and was unable to clear the reverse slopes of the ridge. It is not clear why B Company had more fighting than A Company, but possibly it was owing to the fact that the company commander fired a success signal instead of using his wireless before reaching his objective. About 0800 hrs the Germans put in a vicious counter-attack supported by tanks. B Company was forced back on to D Company, where the position was stabilized. Major Louw was seriously wounded and had to be ordered to leave his company.

Supporting weapons, including tanks, began to arrive soon after first light. Enemy reaction became very lively and tanks on the right flank not only made life at Regimental headquarters uncomfortable but also caused casualties to our own supporting tanks. The enemy had obviously moved many more guns to this front and concentrations of fire were very heavy indeed.



MAP 10

At 1200 hrs. B and D Companies, under command of Major Morgan, put in an attack against Chiesa Nuova and by 1300 hrs were firmly established, but still could not clear the reverse slopes. C Company, now complete, was moved up behind A Company to give depth to the position.

Throughout the day the whole area was heavily shelled and mortared.

B and D Companies' area, in which snipers were a continual nuisance, was the most unpleasant.

The operation had produced over 300 prisoners beside equipment, including one 75-mm. with truck and nine 81-cm. mortars.

Under the fire of 700 guns the Coriano Ridge had at last been captured. The first phase of the army plan had gone well, but from now on the stubborn resistance of the enemy and the heavy shelling, assisted by the excellent observation from the flanks, delayed operations. On the 14th September the 46th Division advanced behind the 56th Division and captured Monte Colombo (8382). The enemy thinned out on Gemmano, which was captured by dawn on the 15th September.

The 15th September marked the opening of the second phase of the army plan, which was the crossing of the River Marano. In the 167th Brigade sector the 9th Royal Fusiliers were to cross the Marano and capture Mulazzano (8286).

At 1600 hrs on the 14th September a patrol was sent out from the Regiment under Lieutenant Pollard to find a crossing place over the Marano for the attack of the 9th Royal Fusiliers. He returned at 1730 hrs, after an excellent patrol, with ten prisoners and an enemy map. At 2315 hrs, at the request of brigade, he went out again, with the tasks of covering a sapper reconnaissance party at the Marano and discovering the enemy's strength and dispositions on the slopes of the Mulazzano Ridge. He returned at 0400 hrs with two more prisoners, having carried out an excellent patrol.

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On the 15th September the 9th Royal Fusiliers moved forward to the Regimental area to prepare for their attack, which had been postponed from the previous night. On the capture of Mulazzano the Regiment was to advance on the 16th September about three or four miles and capture Monte Olivo (8087).

On the Regiments' left flank was Trarivi (8283), a straggling village on a ridge which was an extension of the Montescudo feature. This was within the 46th Division's boundary, but from it the enemy had good observation of the Regiment's area and the line of advance to Monte Olivo. It did not appear to be strongly held, but on the evening of the 15th September activity was seen as if an attack were developing. B Company was again attacked, but nothing serious developed, and by 1930 hrs. all was normal.

In preparation for our advance B Company was ordered to patrol forward and dominate the ground between the company and the river. This it was unable to do. The plan therefore for the 16th September was to overrun this area before light. C Company was to lead on to Vallecchia (8184), followed by A and B Companies, and lastly by D Company. After this the advance was to be by bounds astride the road, with C Company as advanced guard. Trarivi was to be ignored, but the 46th Division was to clear it.

During the afternoon of the 15th September it unfortunately became necessary to send Lieutenant Pollard on patrol again. Down at the Marano, while examining a prisoner, he was fired at from an enemy post, wounded in the leg and captured. His was a loss the Regiment could ill afford.

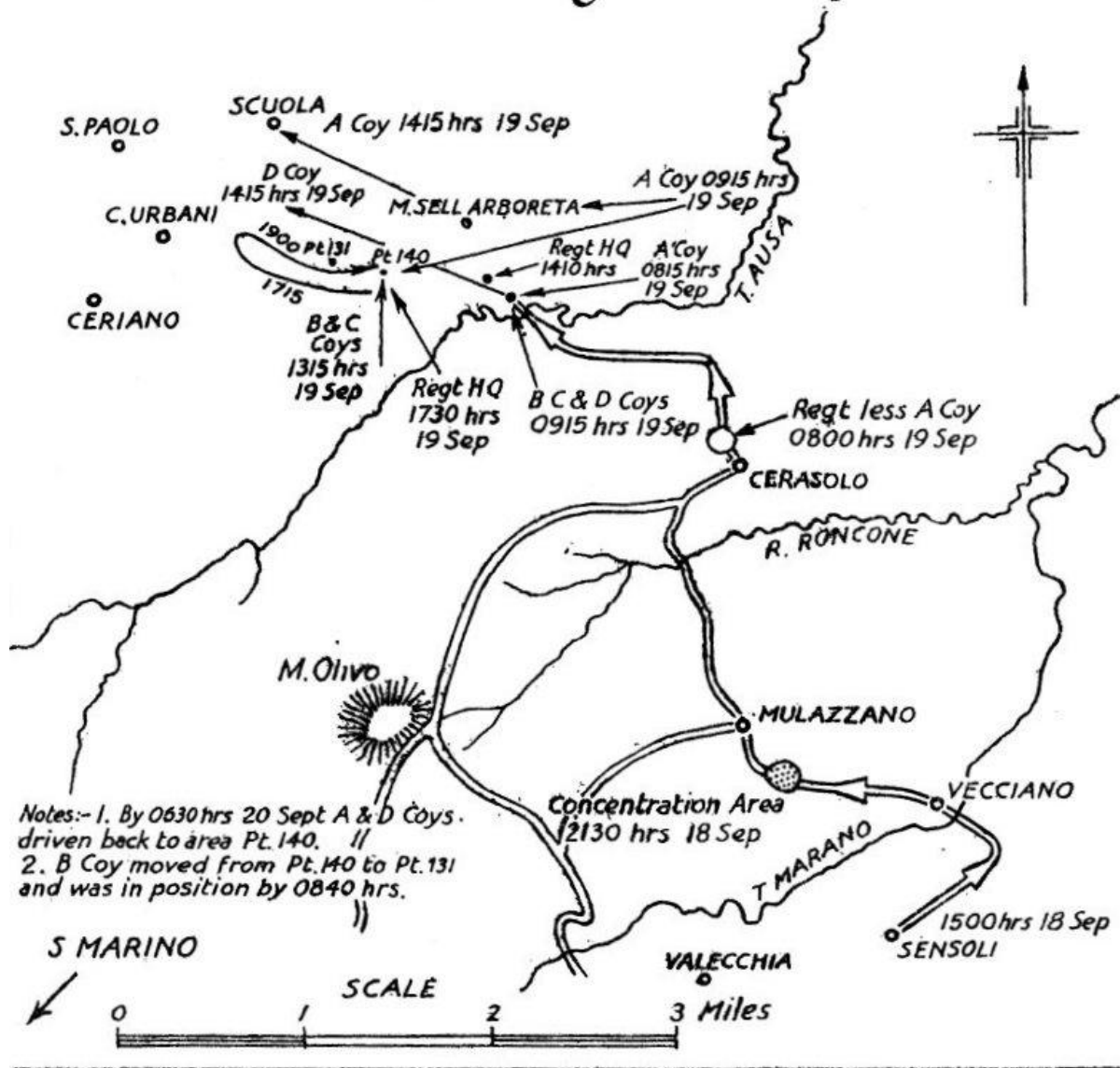
The attack of the 9th Royal Fusiliers during the night of the 15th/16th September was successful, and the Regiment began its advance before light. However, events on the flanks had not encouraged the enemy to retire and he showed every sign of not doing so. The reverse slopes of Chiesa Nuova could still not be cleared, and heavy enemy fire caused many casualties, reducing C Company to one officer and forty soldiers.

The best way to turn the enemy out was by the capture of Trarivi. This would also prevent his observing all movement in the Regiment's area. The commanding officer decided not to wait for the 46th Division, and after the pioneers had removed some mines from the road the carrier platoon advanced on Trarivi. After some initial success, during which the 150th Mountain Regiment from Gemmano was identified, the carriers were forced to withdraw. Preparations were now made to attack Trarivi with A Company, but the 46th Division put in a strongly supported attack and captured the ridge. Under cover of darkness the enemy on the Regiment's front withdrew. The Regiment was then ordered to stand fast, and except for patrols spent the 17th September reorganizing and resting.

After this action of the Sensoli Ridge the officer and N.C.O. situation was acute. A most grievous loss was the death of Lieutenant Harris, who was shot by the enemy from Trarivi. Companies were now commanded by inexperienced officers, and had not the backing of experienced N.C.Os. They were very reduced in numbers, and everyone was in need of a good rest. The situation was fully realized by Brigadier Scott-Elliot when he chose the Regiment for a further though limited role. After the new task he was determined to give the Regiment a proper rest.

Early on the 18th September the Regiment was placed under command of the 7th Armoured Brigade at two hours' notice to move. The role was to protect the left flank of the main thrust in phase three of the army plan. The Regiment's objective was some high ground close to Ceriano (7790). A Company was to advance in carriers under command of the leading squadron, while the Regiment followed in troop-carrying vehicles.

Battle of Ceriano Ridge 18-20 Sep. 44



MAP 11

At 1500 hrs the advance started, passing through Vecciano (8486) north-west towards Mulazzano, near where Brigadier Prior-Palmer, commanding the 7th Armoured Brigade, had his headquarters. Here the column came under shell fire and was halted. By 2130 hrs. it appeared, according to Brigadier Prior-Palmer, that the operation would be cancelled and the Regiment was placed at two hours' notice to move, although one platoon of A Company stood by from 2200 hrs. to cover a sapper reconnaissance party.

This delay allowed the commanding officer to meet the staff of the 7th Armoured Brigade and discuss details of the operation. These details were vague, even regarding administration. Regimental commanders could not be met, nor was it possible to marry up with the tanks. No tanks or additional wireless communications were available for use by the Regiment. However, it was made perfectly clear by Brigadier Prior-Palmer that the tanks would fight the battle and the infantry had only to take over the ground captured. The weak state of the Regiment was fully realized.

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At 0200 hrs on the 19th September the Regiment was placed at fifteen minutes' notice to move. At 0215 hrs A Company was ordered forward to come under command of a squadron of the 8th Royal Tank Regiment about a road junction (8090) north of the Ausa. The remainder of the Regiment was to rendezvous south of Cerasolo, where the road crossed the River Roncone (8188), and come under the command of the 8th Royal Tank Regiment. A tank liaison officer was to meet the Regiment at the rendezvous. No information about the situation could be obtained and Brigadier Prior-Palmer refused to give any assistance about a debussing area.

The commanding officer went forward to obtain more detailed information, and on arrival at the Roncone found the area mined and the sappers in course of preparing crossing places. The reconnaissance party managed to cross the river and reach the rendezvous by first light. The area was in view of the enemy and came under heavy shell fire. It was impossible as a harbour for troop-carrying vehicles. Fortunately the Regiment had taken a wrong turning in Mulazzano and so was sufficiently delayed to allow arrangements to be made for debussing south of the Roncone.

It was not until 0800 hrs that contact was made with the tank liaison officer after some slightly heated wireless talks with the armoured brigade headquarters. The armoured regimental headquarters and our regimental headquarters were then established together in a farm west of Cerasolo.

By 0815 hrs A Company was in contact with its tank squadron and with some of the London Scottish on the Ausa. The situation was so vague that Captain Vincent returned to regimental headquarters to try to get more information. He had to return to his company in a hurry, as at 0845 hrs it was ordered to advance as soon as he rejoined it. Meanwhile the other companies had moved forward across country and in order to save time should they be required later they were ordered forward to the A Company rendezvous.

The 7th Armoured Brigade commander came forward at 0845 hrs and stayed a short while at the combined headquarters. He suggested that an advance be made across the Ausa up to Scuola (7891), a road junction north-east of C. Urbani (7790), followed by a move south-west to Ceriano (7690). He asked the commanding officer if he considered such an advance practicable. This was difficult to answer, as the attack was an armoured one, no reconnaissance could be made, and the enemy dispositions were unknown. The move south-west up to Ceriano did not appear to be a sound proposition, as it was across the enemy's front. It was quite obvious that the tank commander wanted to be left alone to fight his own battle in accordance with the development of the situation and not be influenced by his brigade commander.

The enemy could view the whole area of action from the high hills to the west, particularly from the independent State of San Marino, where rocky pinnacles rose up like some castle in fairyland. A fantastic suggestion was made that all this ground be smoked by use of the whole corps artillery. This was resisted and the artillery used in close support in the battle.

The enemy had at this time managed to bring up fresh troops and carry out some urgent reliefs. More important still, he had concentrated a heavy weight of artillery to stop our advance and prevent our capture of the last ridge before the Po Valley.

By 0915 hrs A Company had crossed the Ausa and with the armoured squadron captured Point 140 and the Monte Sell Arboreta (7990) and taken some prisoners. Shell fire was very heavy, particularly against the reserves moving forward. B, C and D Companies moved into A Company's previous area and suffered casualties continuously.

From Regimental headquarters it was possible to get a good view of the battle and enemy could be seen on the Ceriano Ridge who were not engaged by the artillery under armoured control. The Regiment's artillery representative therefore got his own regiment to engage targets independently.

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The 7th Armoured Brigade commander now ordered an advance by one squadron with A Company on to Scuola. Another squadron and rifle company were to take over the ground gained so far and be prepared to advance on to Ceriano. Orders were therefore given to D Company to move up to Point 140, where contact was to be made with A Company and the second squadron.

It was represented that some delay would occur before D Company could be ready. Brigadier Prior-Palmer, speaking on the wireless from his headquarters in rear, refused to accept any delay. He stated that the Ceriano Ridge was unoccupied, no enemy could be seen from the air, and ordered both companies to go forward riding on top of the tanks of their respective squadrons. Not only did this lead to immediate friction and disagreement between the brigadier and the commanding officer but the order was impossible to execute. The brigadier did not appear to appreciate the time a company takes to walk across country.

An agreement was reached with the tank commander to attack at 1130 hrs. Major Morgan (D Company) made touch with A Company at 1055 hrs, but at 1130 hrs he was not ready with his company and the tanks advanced without him.

A Company, obeying the direct order of the brigade commander, advanced riding on the tanks, and by 1200 hrs had reached its objective, but was very disorganized. Enemy reactions were violent and the area was soon a tank graveyard. It was not until 1400 hrs that A Company commander was able to reorganize and consolidate his position.

In the meantime the tank commander had decided to move forward over the AUSA and Regimental headquarters followed in vehicles. The enemy put down intense fire on the line of approach, but there were no casualties except one medium machine-gun carrier, which hit a mine on arrival in the new area. A further move was soon made to Point 140. The situation was most confused. The Regimental wireless nets were completely drowned by the tanks and no touch could be made with D Company. The tank medical arrangements did not function and the Regimental aid post did some wonderful work in assisting them. At 1315 hrs B and C Companies were ordered forward to Point 140.

The tank commander asked for more infantry to assist him. At 1400 hrs. contact was made with D Company, which advanced with a squadron of tanks in support of A Company to gain the high ground about Ceriano.

Enemy shell fire continued to be intense over the whole area, making movement hazardous. Tanks shut down, thus giving their crews some protection, but the Regiment suffered heavily. By 1700 hrs C Company was reduced to one officer and eighteen men and B Company to three officers and thirty-five men.

D Company could make little progress through the houses towards Ceriano, but managed to relieve the left flank of A Company. On the right the 1st Armoured Division was having an equally tough fight. The Queen's Bays of this division moved over behind A Company during the battle and opened fire on some houses occupied by D Company. This was, to say the least of it, a most unfortunate accident. Their war memorial now stands on the site of A Company's objective.

At 1715 hrs, at the request of the tanks for further infantry support, B and C Companies were combined and sent forward to San Paola (7791) on the left of A and D Companies. Little progress was made, the company commander was wounded, and by 1900 hrs the remnants of the company were withdrawn to the area of Regimental headquarters at Point 140.

The battle died down at night and the tanks withdrew slightly to form a laager. They were protected closely by A and D Companies. The commanding officer, however, objected to this "desert" formation and moved the companies out into proper defensive positions.

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At 2200 hrs a patrol which had been out under Captain Lambert, the signal officer, reported that they had heard a German patrol on the road to C. Urbani, but gained the impression that the high ground was unoccupied. D Company was ordered to investigate and in doing so met opposition and Major Morgan was seriously wounded.

At 0230 hrs on the 20th September the Regiment passed under command of the 169th Brigade (Queen's), which was to continue the attack on this front. The enemy defensive fire, rain and the lack of communications delayed the brigade in its approach and it did not arrive that night. Battalion commanders of the Queen's Brigade had managed to come forward to plan and spent an uncomfortable time at Regimental headquarters. At first light on the 20th September the enemy counterattacked A and D Companies. Both companies were forced back and had to combine under command of Major Vincent. The situation was now so critical that the commanding officer went forward with the battery commander to restore the situation. It was soon apparent that the Regiment was too weak to retake the ground lost, A Company was only twenty strong. B Company was therefore ordered to occupy a defensive position about Point 131. It was in this action that Lieutenant M. C. Edmunds, commanding a platoon of A Company, was killed.

Later in the day the Queen's Brigade attacked the old D Company position, but met stiff opposition and could make little progress, being counter-attacked off the high ground. Farther to the east the San Fortunato feature had been captured by the 4th British Division, thus giving entry to the Po Valley.

Intelligence sources reported the arrival of the 90th Light Division on the front with orders to counter-attack our position. All troops were therefore put into defensive positions covering Points 131 and 140. Active patrolling had to take place all night. Heavy rain began to fall before dark and continued to pour down throughout the night. All transport was bogged down and orders for an attack by the 1st Armoured Division on the 21st September had to be cancelled. No supplies could be brought forward, even by man-pack.

Intelligence reports proved wrong. Far from counter-attacking, the enemy withdrew during the night. On the 21st September the Queen's Brigade continued the advance. The Regiment was ordered to follow. The commanding officer, however, made representations direct to Brigadier Scott-Elliot for a return to the 167th Brigade and this was agreed during the morning of the 21st September. The Regiment had fought an armoured battle under circumstances unsuited to armoured action. An infantry battle might have succeeded.

By this time the Fifth U.S. Army had attacked from the Florence area and was progressing well. It was essential for the Eighth Army to assist by engaging the enemy closely on its front. The Po Valley had been reached, but it was not the happy hunting ground for tanks that the optimists had predicted. All battalions and regiments were in great need of reinforcements, but there was an acute shortage of man power and only by disbanding some battalions and regiments could others be made up to fighting strength. As a result, the 1st Armoured Division and the strength of one brigade of the 56th Division, consisting of the 1st Battalion The Welch Regiment, 8th Battalion The Royal Fusiliers and the 7th Battalion The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, were placed in suspended animation on the 22nd September.

The following message was later received from the army commander:

"TOPSEC (.)

Personal to Lt Col HOUCHIN commanding 7 OXF BUCKS from LEESE (.)

I much regret the reduction of your bn to a cadre on account of the reinforcement situation (.)

Your bn has a distinguished record in this war (.)

Its battles include ENFIDAVILLE SALERNO the VOLTURNO CAMINO and GARIGLIANO ANZIO and recently MONTE-FIORE GEMMANO SENSOLI and the CERIANO ridge (.)

My thanks and best wishes to you all."

RECORD OF THE 7TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY
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The divisional commander addressed the remnants of the Regiment on the 23rd September and the same day drafts left to reinforce the Queen's Brigade. It was a very sad period, but those who carried on the fight did so loyally to their new regiments, gaining many Words of praise and maintaining the high standards and traditions of the Regiment. Most survived the last days of the Gothic Line battles, but that fine and selfless officer Major Vincent was seriously wounded and died only seven days later while serving with the 2nd/7th Queen's.

The Regimental cadre moved out of the battle area and on the 30th September settled down into billets at Potenza Picena on the Adriatic coast until finally disbanded on the 18th January, 1945.

During this period training was continued and preparations made in case the Regiment was re-formed. Much discussion took place regarding the Regiment's future, and twice it seemed that it would be re-formed. Great efforts were made by the divisional commander, but reinforcements were not available.

The Regiment had acquitted itself well. The battle had lasted only just over one month, but it had been a hard, continuous fight with no rest. The Regiment had been set some most difficult tasks, but its inexperienced men had gained the highest praise. Never was a battalion so full of pride and enthusiasm or more attached to its regiment.

The Order of Battle of 56th (London) Division is given in Appendix XI, page 598.

APPENDIX XI
ORDER OF BATTLE, 56TH (LONDON) DIVISION

167th Infantry Brigade

8th Battalion The Royal Fusiliers.

9th Battalion The Royal Fusiliers.

7th Battalion The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

168th Infantry Brigade

1st Battalion The London Scottish.

1st Battalion The London Irish Rifles.

10th Battalion The Royal Berkshire Regiment.

169th Infantry Brigade

2nd/5th Battalion The Queen's Regiment.

2nd/6th Battalion The Queen's Regiment.

2nd/7th Battalion The Queen's Regiment.