

ONWARD: THE KING'S OWN CALGARY REGIMENT IN PEACE AND WAR, 1910-1960

Patrick H. Brennan

ISBN 978-1-77385-602-5

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

**UNDER THE CREATIVE
COMMONS LICENCE YOU
MAY:**

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

**UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU
MAY NOT:**

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



Acknowledgement: We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher, **re.press**, and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy <http://www.re-press.org>

From the Gari to the Arno

Onward

The spring of 1944 would see the Calgary Regiment shift west to the Gari River/Cassino area south of Rome, where in May they would play a key role in breaking the Gustav and Adolf Hitler Lines—Operation Honker. This operation would be the regiment's singular achievement of the war. At the same time they would leave I Canadian Corps and pass under British and Indian Army command, and in the process all but disappear from Canadian military history.¹ After Honker and the follow-up Liri Valley operations, the regiment, along with the rest of 1st Army Tank Brigade, continued their relentless pursuit of the retreating German forces until by mid-summer they had reached the Arno River. Never had the Calgary Regiment's motto—*Onward*—seemed more appropriate.

Where the Allies Stood

The Ortona operations brought an end to the Eighth Army's winter offensive. While German losses had been heavy, the Allies had suffered too. Unforgiving terrain and foul weather had limited opportunities for their superior tank and air forces to intervene, forcing the infantry, artillery and engineers to bear the brunt of the fighting. Every Canadian rifle company had suffered at least 50 percent casualties in these operations, and it was especially worrying that almost half of the wounded were "battle exhaustion" cases. Logistics were fraying, especially the vital supply of artillery ammunition, and German defences, though badly battered, remained formidable. To make matters worse, the Italian front was suffering (and would continue to suffer) from the diversion of all manner of resources to Britain as part of the build-up for D-Day. Clearly a period of rest and consolidation was in order.

Ironically, when Canadian forces had been assigned to the Sicilian invasion it had been (naively) assumed they would take their combat experience back to First Canadian Army in time to participate in the Normandy invasion

and subsequent North West European Campaign. But they stayed put, to be joined, ironically, by a further 40,000 Canadian soldiers who would replace British units that had been withdrawn for D-Day.² It was now likely the Calgary Regiment would spend most—and perhaps all—of the remainder of the war in Italy.

A New Year

The regiment welcomed in the New Year shivering in sodden blankets, having been battered by the worst storm they'd yet experienced in "Sunny Italy." They were at least at full strength (thirty-four officers and 670 other ranks), with an additional three officers and forty-one other ranks attached. Tank strength stood at fifty-one machines.³ During an inspection on January 7, General Crerar, soon to depart for the Normandy build-up himself, praised the officers and men for the fighting prowess they'd displayed so far and predicted "more good hunting" and victory in 1944.⁴ For now, however, the Eighth Army mostly assumed a static role along its entire front. The only military activities were periodic holding actions where they were called on to provide fire support for small-scale probing attacks, the purpose of which was to prevent German withdrawals to more threatened sectors. Soldiers roundly disliked these, the gains always seeming less apparent than the casualties. The loss of Lt. G. A. Richardson during a two-day action by three troops from B Squadron in support of a Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment foray made the point only too tragically.⁵ January's highlight undoubtedly occurred on the 19th when, one squadron at a time, all personnel were trucked to San Leonardo to enjoy the rare luxury of a hot shower.

A New Brigadier

Toward the end of the February, word filtered down that Brig. R. A. Wyman was joining the exodus for England. As a fellow Albertan, and a superior officer who had fought doggedly for their interests, the regiment held him in high regard. His replacement was Brig. W. C. "Spud" Murphy, a former infantry officer but most recently the senior staff officer of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division.⁶ Like a great many commanders of Canadian armoured units at the time, Murphy lacked hands-on tank experience but he was bright and seemed to get along well with everybody, which was no small asset. The lack of hands-on experience hardly mattered since in the British system copied by Canadians an army tank brigade was primarily involved in infantry support, where it fought as individual regiments and even squadrons—and to all intents directly under the control of the infantry division or brigade to which these were temporarily attached. This left the army tank brigade commander a much-reduced

operational role save for transmitting orders and consulting. His normal responsibilities were largely confined to training and administration, which was certainly vital work. Only the British employed this awkward system; the others, whether Allied or enemy, had concluded it offered no advantage. About the same time, Maj. R. R. Taylor returned from a long stint in hospital, where he had been recovering from his injuries in Sicily, and took over as A Squadron's CO from the departing Maj. Amy.⁷

As the seemingly endless Italian winter dragged on into March, morale was clearly suffering. The men were getting bored, and in danger of losing their fighting edge. Even in leave areas the decline in discipline among Canadian soldiers was showing. But the weather gradually began to improve in the second half of the month, and with it everything else.⁸

Into the Caldron

At a brigade conference on March 23, Neroutsos received word that his regiment would be relieved in a matter of days, and shortly thereafter men, tanks and other vehicles would entrain for the Cassino area where fierce fighting was already raging. As incomprehensible as it might seem to civilians, nothing raised soldiers' morale like the prospect of action. Their immediate destination was the Venafrò area in the Volturno Valley, which served as the Eighth Army's principal mountain warfare training site.⁹ And there was also some other welcome news from brigade—all three regiments would be re-equipping their reconnaissance units with American M5 Stuart light tanks, a long overdue upgrade.¹⁰

Kriegsgefangene

Nineteen months had passed since the Dieppe raid, during which the regiment had been rebuilt, deployed to the Mediterranean Theatre, where they engaged and outfought a determined enemy. During those same nineteen months nearly 200 members of the regiment captured at Dieppe had endured punishments, hunger, cold, boredom, loneliness and for all too many, depression. They remained proud soldiers, but their war was the war of the *Kriegsgefangene*—prisoners of war.

A New Home, Far from Home

When their Churchill lumbered onto the fire-swept beach at Dieppe, Tpr. J. D. White turned to his crewmate Elmer Cole and uttered the memorable lines, "Elmer, I don't think we'll be home for dinner tonight!"¹¹ He could have hardly imagined the truth of it. Thirteen days later, as the exhausted column of soldiers captured that day passed through the gates of Stalag VIII-B, British

POWs saluted them as they walked by. The Dieppe men were immediately rushed through delousing and showering stations, which reminded many of the arrangements for cattle back home, and then given perfunctory medicals. The showers may have been rude, but after two weeks without bathing, no one complained. Three weeks crammed into the quarantine compound followed, with the neediest receiving some Red Cross clothing or a blanket. Their quarantine over, they marched under armed guard into their permanent accommodations, where other prisoners besieged them with queries about the war, showered them with cigarettes, and shared soup they'd saved from Red Cross parcels—the first decent meal any of the Dieppe captives had eaten since they'd left England.¹²

Stalag VIII-B was a sprawling affair with a prisoner population, including absent work parties, of about 30,000, all of them other ranks from the army. The Dieppe prisoners were assigned to a group of barracks comprising the Canadian section, an area of about 180 m by 135 m which held about 2,000 men, including the new arrivals. Each of the barracks consisted of two long, narrow huts built of brick and straw and plastered on the inside. Beds and tables each occupied half the hut. In theory these quarters could be heated, but shortages of coal and peat meant they rarely were, even during the coldest months. The pair of huts were connected by a combination laundry and shower facility, with urinals and wash basins. There was no pretence of heating this area and having any hot water for laundry was a cause for celebration. Each barracks initially held ninety men but eventually 120 were crammed in. The latrine building—home of the forty-holer—was separate, and shared by all the prisoners, its permanent stench hanging over the compound.¹³

Prisoners appointed two of their number, usually NCOs, as the hut commander and his assistant. They interacted with the Germans, but also ensured the prisoners remained an organized group, distributing rations and administering discipline for things like the theft of food. It was a thankless (but necessary) job—as Tpr. Denis Scott noted, it was not easy to divide a loaf of bread among twelve hungry men and have it appear fair.¹⁴ While roll calls defined the prisoners' day, the guards otherwise besieged the men with innumerable rules, most of which seemed little more than harassment. Regardless, they were strictly enforced, with often-arbitrary punishments imposed on the entire barracks (one of the cruellest being forcing prisoners to open all the containers in their food parcels so most of the contents would spoil before they could be consumed).¹⁵ Searches were random but frequent. Among the "goons," as prisoners disparagingly referred to the guards, some showed more enthusiasm for their work than others. A few, like Stalag VIII-B's "Spitfire," were downright sadistic. As for the surroundings, they were meant to be intimidating—a

goal they attained with much barbed wire and machine-gun-equipped guard towers. Each compound was demarcated by less ominous fencing, but between 0800 and 1900 men were allowed to circulate between them and socialize with the other POWs, unless of course they were under lockdown.¹⁶

The biggest concern for prisoners was always food. Mornings began with roll call at 0600, followed an hour later by breakfast—ersatz coffee (burned barley) laced with chicory or a sort of mint tea which, as one wag put it, was best used for shaving—and one-sixth of a normal-sized loaf of almost indigestible black bread, whose true contents became the subject of endless speculation. In addition to this, prisoners received 30 g of spread (typically margarine, plain fat or some sort of “jam”). Lunch followed at noon—a half-litre of vegetable soup, mostly cabbage with lumps of turnip, and any leftover black bread. At 1700, supper offered the most surprises, but was usually some variation on vegetable stew, three or four potatoes and occasionally pieces of horse meat or fish. The notorious “fish cheese” was also frequent fare. Constant hunger pangs ensured the prisoners ate everything they were given, except the “fish cheese,” which was hard to keep down.¹⁷

The Germans placed officers and men in different camps. The handful of captured Calgary officers were first sent to Oflag VII-B near Eichstadt in Bavaria. From individual space to the food, camp conditions for officers, while still austere, were definitely superior.¹⁸

POWs, the Third Reich, and the Geneva Convention

The International Committee of the Red Cross handled the affairs of British and Commonwealth POWs, and by 1941 was interacting with the Canadian government directly and not just through London. With prisoners of the Western Allies, Berlin broadly adhered to the Geneva Convention and other international agreements spelling out expected standards of treatment, and the swelling numbers of German POWs guaranteed it would remain so. This ensured officers would not be made to work, that other ranks would not have to work at tasks directly benefiting the German war effort, and that both would be fed a diet approximating what German civilians in the same locale enjoyed. Within Canada, responsibility for prisoner of war matters overlapped between government and various volunteer organizations, but among the latter the Canadian Red Cross came to dominate, Ottawa having given it close to total control over food parcels—a responsibility it carried out impressively.¹⁹

God Bless the Red Cross ... And the Ladies Auxiliary

Had they depended entirely on German rations, Allied prisoners of war would have starved. “We owe our lives to the Red Cross,” Trooper Archie Anderson

offered years later, and he spoke for every Canadian POW.²⁰ The five-kilogram parcels were supposed to reach the prisoners weekly and provide the recipient with 2,070 calories per day. The standard fare included whole milk powder, butter, cheese, corned beef, pork luncheon meat, salmon, sardines, dried apples, dried prunes, sugar, jam, biscuits and chocolate, along with some tea and salt.²¹ Problematic wartime transportation, especially within Germany, combined with the periodic withholding of the parcels as punishment, meant the weekly schedule was rarely met. But when they did arrive, well, “who wouldn’t be a *gefangener* on parcel days,” Tpr. Tom Pinder quipped in his diary.²² Parcels were invariably shared so that every prisoner got something, making them the morale booster *par excellence*.

The Red Cross efforts were sustained by public donations supplemented by Ottawa, and all the packing was done by women’s groups.²³ The Canadian Prisoner of War Relatives Association were permitted to send large food parcels quarterly as well as one-time “relief” shipments, but families were prevented from mailing food to their POW loved ones (though this could be circumvented by routing them through the United States). Families in Canada could send clothing, books and like goods, and the Calgary men were particularly fortunate because the Ladies Auxiliary faithfully sent knitted items, cookies, “and most blessed of all, cigarettes” by the thousands.²⁴ Both the Women’s Auxiliary and the reserve regiment channelled money from their fundraisers to any next of kin who couldn’t otherwise have afforded to send their own parcels.²⁵ Finally, other volunteer groups and organizations like the YMCA made sure hockey and baseball gear, musical instruments, and reading material reached the camps.

Settling in for the Long Haul

As the months became years, prison camp life exacted a toll. Apart from food, boredom was the overriding problem, and depression was common, especially, it seemed, among married men with families. It was critically important to keep busy—at practically anything. Reading, classes on virtually every subject including correspondence courses offered by British and later Canadian universities, musical and drama performances, and sports helped keep spirits up. Card playing offered the added attraction of gambling. And there was certainly plenty of time to walk circuits around their own compound, or others when it was permitted.²⁶ The entrepreneurial hawked items from personal or Red Cross parcels while others carried on a stealthy trade (cigarettes for food) with guards.²⁷

Kriegsgelangenpost

If food was the top morale booster, writing letters and even more so receiving them was close behind. “First letter from home,” Tpr. Tom Pinder enthused when a letter finally reached him after three months, and “feel 100% better.”²⁸ *Kriegsgelangenpost*—the postal service for prisoners of war—allowed men to send brief letters or cards once a week at best, and they knew even remotely interesting content would be censored.²⁹ Early letters invariably followed the “I am fine, and X and Y are alive, too” template, but were eagerly circulated among prisoners’ loved ones back home.³⁰ Canadian and German authorities strictly vetted the responses, too, sometimes leaving the disappointed prisoners with little more than redactions.³¹ Most prisoner correspondence in 1943 and 1944 focused on reassuring the recipient that they were healthy, well fed and contented with their lot, or requests for cigarettes (the currency of camps), pictures of loved ones (everything had been left in England), and personal items. And of course inquiries about how family, friends and neighbours back home were doing.³² Delivery times both ways were usually measured in months, but it was tangible contact with places and people they longed to return to.

Shackling

Certainly the most notorious aspect of the Dieppe prisoners’ treatment was their shackling, which the Germans commenced with self-righteous fanfare in October 1942 and terminated quietly thirteen months later. Although much of the shackling was perfunctory, at other times the Canadian POWs suffered harshly. The Germans had captured a copy of the Dieppe operational plan in which it was recommended that “whenever possible the hands of the [German] prisoners are to be bound, so that they may not destroy their papers.” In early October, hoping to score some diplomatic points and embarrass Britain, Berlin ordered the hands of the Dieppe prisoners bound.³³ Initially this was strictly enforced from 0800 till 2000. Even going to the bathroom was humiliating, and having their wrists tightly secured behind their backs with binder twine for hours on end caused painful chafing sores. When mail and Red Cross parcels were withheld as well, morale plummeted (though regular delivery of both were soon resumed). Shackling was temporarily suspended for Christmas, the camp commandant even issuing some beer to fuel the spirit of the season. In January 1943, Red Cross officials told the Germans to use a more humane method, which led to the introduction of handcuff shackles linked by foot-long chains. Ingenious prisoners learned to pick the locks and doff the new hardware, which was followed by a mad scramble to put it on again if lookouts spotted a guard approaching the barracks.³⁴ As the months passed, all but the most fanatic

guards simply turned the other way, and by November 1943, when Berlin let the shackling affair drop, wearing them was only being required during roll calls.³⁵

Work Parties

Enlisted prisoners could volunteer for work details that took them outside the camp confines, and many did so. The food was generally better (or at least there was more of it), there was the chance to get some exercise, and it kept one occupied. Tpr. J. D. White worked with about twenty other POWs on farms where they slept in the barns until they returned to the main camp for Sundays. It was hard work and the food certainly failed to live up to the promises—a bowl of soup a day, a loaf of black bread shared seven ways, and potatoes they dug from the fields supplemented by their carefully rationed Red Cross supplies. The six-day work week was eventually raised to six-and-a-half “for the good of the German people.” White and his comrades thought the extra half day violated the Geneva Convention but an officer grimly informed them they’d be shot if they refused. As White observed, “the Geneva Convention is a long ways away when you are a prisoner of war.”³⁶ Along with forty others, Don Craigie worked on the same farm for a year, starting in the summer of 1943, thereafter unloading food from trains.³⁷ Vern Richardson did forestry work, everything from felling to reforestation, as well as rail line, bridge, and tunnel repairs.³⁸ Lunch breaks created plenty of opportunities to barter with their German co-workers or the guards, the ready access to cigarettes lubricating commerce.

Escapes

Escapes have long been standard fare in war movies, but in reality there was no military requirement or expectation that prisoners would try to escape (even though most POWs believed there was). Of course in all camps, including the Canadian section of Stalag VIII-B, escape committees were soon established, and serious plans hatched. But few got beyond that stage, not least because the Germans were every bit as ingenious in thwarting escapes as prisoners were in trying to pull them off. The vast majority could see that the odds of successfully escaping, unless you were German-speaking or could at least pass yourself off as a foreign labourer, were slim—and next to hopeless from a camp only 200 kms closer to London than Moscow. After the tragic “Great Escape” from Stalag Luft III in late March 1944, where fifty of the seventy-six escapees were executed after their recapture, Allied POWs were no longer deemed exempt from the Bullet Decree, all but putting paid to group escape attempts.³⁹

Despite the formidable obstacles, some escapes—at least, the spur of the moment variety—were successful. Having volunteered for a work party, the Calgary Regiment’s Cpl. Gus Nelson made a dash for freedom with a friend

from the Camerons, Sgt. Red McMullen. The two of them somehow managed to reach the port of Stettin, fortuitously entering during the chaos of an air raid, where they slipped into a French work detail in the midst of changing shifts and managed to reach the docks. There, with the help of a sympathetic Swedish sailor (Nelson spoke Swedish), they stowed away on a badly damaged freighter that was set to depart under tow for Sweden. To avoid detection by the German troops and their dogs sweeping the ship, the two hid in a fuel bunker, then spent the rest of their sixteen-day crossing secreted in the engine room and expecting the vessel to founder at any time. But miraculously it stayed afloat, appropriately arriving in neutral Sweden on Dominion Day. Nelson snuck ashore and phoned the British consul, who promptly collected them. Four months later he was flown back to England, debriefed, and awarded a MM.⁴⁰

The Beginning of the End

During January and February 1944 most of the Dieppe prisoners had been moved from Lamsdorf to Stalag II-D just outside the town of Stargard, about 30 km east of Stettin (now Szczecin, Poland). Prisoners sensed a more congenial live-and-let-live attitude on the part of their guards, though officially there was no moderation of harsh policies. Travelling to and from their workplaces allowed them to witness some appalling sights, the most shocking being slave labourers of every nationality, both male and female. Among them were wraith-like Soviet POWs, their ribs showing, limbs like sticks, dressed in rags. Still, every new wave of arrivals—American other ranks captured during the Battle of the Bulge were the last to do so—brought news of Allied advances, and most nights there was the drone of bomber engines or the distant crump of Red Army artillery to confirm that news. What turned out to be the last Christmas of the war was celebrated with enthusiasm in Stalag II-D. They had been scrupulously saving items from food parcels to ensure an appetizing dinner, and decorated their barracks with whatever could be improvised or else scrounged from the guards. On December 25, a blustery, cold day, the commandant even cancelled morning roll call. Just before supper was served, one of the guards came into Roy Johnston's barracks to take the usual head count. As he departed, he waved his hand and offered a cheery *Froehliche Weihnachten zu alles*.⁴¹

Returning to camp from a work detail on 2 February 1945, Tpr. Archie Anderson was handed a letter from his wife. It was more poetry than prose, and captured beautifully what the couple both wanted from their war:

Two letters lie before me, many times I've read them through—
They bring me hope for future days, when our dreams will all
come true—Fleecy clouds will go a-sailing in a sky of clearest

blue, on that day when I'll wade again—Through autumn leaves
with you.⁴²

Having barely recovered from a botched hernia surgery that kept him in hospital for half a year, Anderson had survived almost thirty months of German captivity. Now, on the very cusp of freedom, the next few weeks would bring by far the worst conditions he and his comrades endured as prisoners of war. In the midst of a frigid winter and the dying paroxysms of Hitler's regime, tens of thousands of Allied POWs would be force-marched west to keep them as negotiating pawns and prevent their liberation by rapidly advancing Soviet forces.

Allied Plans for a Spring Offensive

Initial plans for 1944 were predicated on simultaneous landings in Normandy (Overlord) and Southern France (Anvil) in May, with the Italian Campaign, having succeeded in pushing the Germans well north of Rome, merely conducting holding operations. But the Germans were still entrenched south of Rome in early 1944. There was no choice but to postpone Anvil and mount an all-out offensive to capture Rome and compel the German Army to withdraw northward. To accomplish this, the weight of the British Eighth Army would shift from the Adriatic Coast to the immediate right of the American Fifth Army. Once having broken through the Cassino area, the valley of the Liri River offered a corridor to press on to Rome. Eighth Army's XIII British Corps would occupy a key portion of the front abutting the Liri River and Cassino, with about half of its armour support coming from the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade. The attack—Operation Honker—was tentatively set for May 10. As was so often the case during the Italian Campaign, the German high command failed to divine Allied intentions. Nonetheless, their defences were formidable, starting with the Gustav Line dominated by mountains (including Monte Cassino itself) and protected to the south and east by fast flowing rivers, including the Gari. Beyond it lay a second stretch of defences, the Adolf Hitler Line. Even achieving surprise would not guarantee victory here.⁴³

Preparing for Battle

With the greater part of Eighth Army in motion, the regiment's move to its new encampment area near Presenzano in the XIII British Corps zone was time-consuming, but they were in place and their base up and running before the end of the first week of April.⁴⁴ Given their brigade would likely stay put for the remainder of the month, there was an opportunity to carry out further tank-infantry training. This was a high priority for Lt.-Gen. S. C. Kirkman, XIII British Corps' commander, who at a meeting with all his senior officers,

including Lt.-Cols. Neroutsos, Purves, Caron and Brig. Murphy, emphasized that they would be facing an opposed river crossing for the first time.⁴⁵ The infantry would have to secure bridgeheads for the tanks and neutralize the anti-tank defences, while the tanks would be indispensable in suppressing the machine-gun defences and keeping infantry casualties manageable. Close co-operation between the two arms was going to be essential. Once they'd broken through, armour would be best employed in the close support and mopping-up roles where "their presence is most detrimental to enemy morale" rather than being assigned "impossible tasks." The general wrapped up by emphasizing that every step in the assault, including the time allotted for securing objectives, must accommodate the speed of the infantry's advance and the defenders' determination to hold on. In plain English, slow and successful was to be preferred over fast and failed. At the same time, he didn't expect slavish adherence to the plan—plans invariably unravelled in battle, and his tank commanders still needed to seize any opportunities to deal a fatal blow to the enemy.⁴⁶ It was a sound assessment.

During this period, two of Murphy's regiments did participate in an intensive regimen of infantry-armour training with the 8th Indian Division to bring everyone up to speed and build familiarity and confidence between units which would be fighting alongside one other.⁴⁷ There had been off-and-on co-operation between the Indians and Canadians since January, and the 8th's CO, Maj.-Gen. Dudley Russell, had specifically requested that his men again be paired with Murphy's tanks.⁴⁸ When drawing up a training plan, Kirkman had sought input from his Canadian officers, and the resultant syllabus was very much a joint product. The practical exercises, which culminated in a mock attack with live ammunition, were followed by debriefings among the infantry and tank officers where they could grasp one another's problems and settle on workable solutions. Battlefield communication was probably the most critical problem. Infantry-tank radio networks invariably frayed in action, and it was agreed that the most foolproof method was for infantry to point their weapons in the direction of the enemy fire or, at least when they were English-speaking, use the telephone sets being installed on the rear of the Shermans.⁴⁹ The four-day training programs were repeated with several of the Indian battalions. As much as the Canadian tankers liked to joke that they found it every bit as hard to fathom the brogue of the highlanders as they did the mysteries of Urdu, the language barrier was a serious complication for the Indian soldiers in both training and in action.⁵⁰ Everyone just coped as best they could. The benefits of their training with the 19th Indian Brigade in particular, abbreviated though it was, would soon be evident.

The training was brief because the 8th Indian Division battalions, which were still taking their turns in the line, had to concentrate on mastering opposed river crossings.⁵¹ Although forcing the river was planned as a joint operation, Maj.-Gen. Russell rightly argued that “the success of the whole operation is ... dependent on getting tanks forward early.”⁵² Yet inexplicably none of the Canadian tank units participated in any of this training, an absence that troubled at least one of the 8th Indian Division’s brigadiers.

By month’s end, with the attack less than two weeks away, tension was clearly mounting. Lt.-Col. Neroutsos and Maj. Richardson were attending meetings discussing this or that aspect of Honker with other senior officers almost daily. A preliminary reconnaissance of the likely area of their assault along the Gari had been completed by Lts. J. S. Hunter and J. L. Whitton, the regiment’s intelligence and recce officers, respectively. And XIII British Corps had begun dispensing unit call signs, always a harbinger of imminent action.⁵³

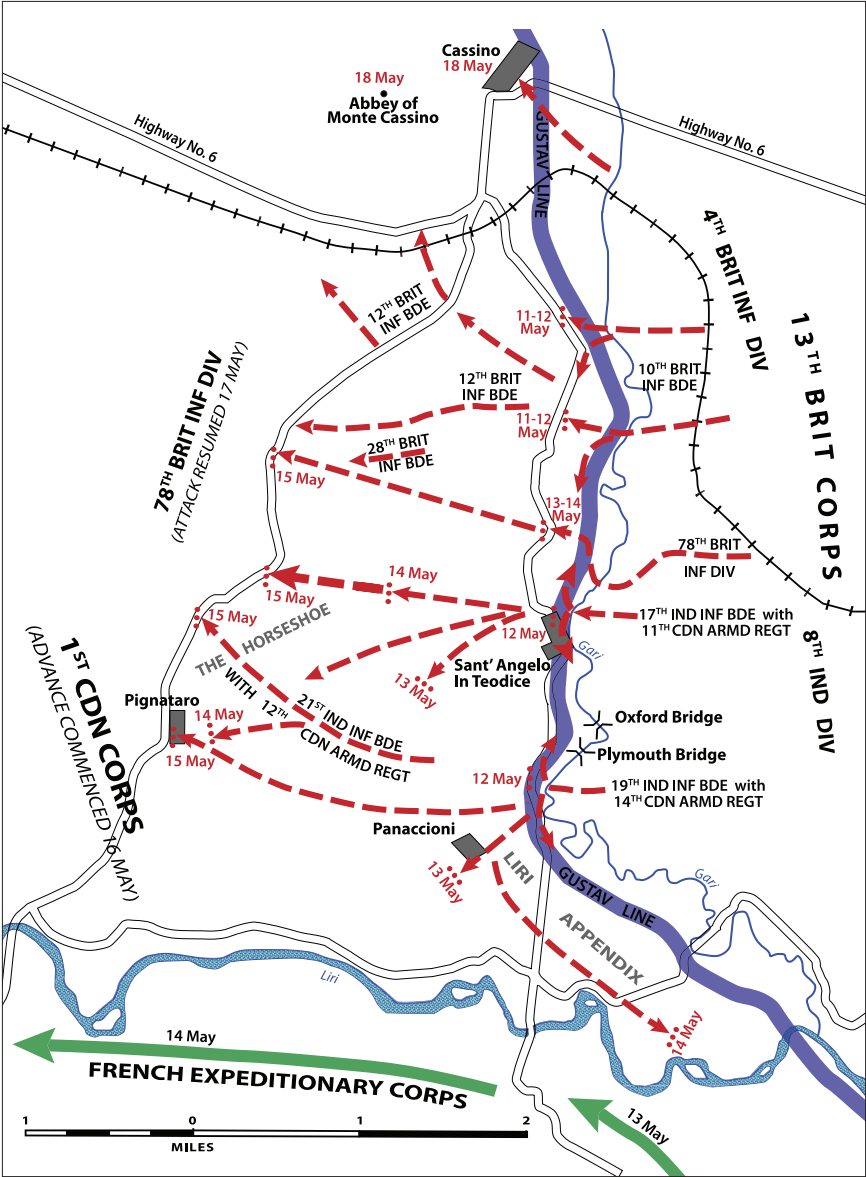
As the calendar rolled over, the pace of meetings and other preparations only increased.⁵⁴ Finally, on the morning of May 7, Neroutsos gathered his squadron commanders and other senior officers to outline the operation in full detail, with tank crews briefed in turn the following day.⁵⁵ After darkness fell on the 9th, the Shermans moved up to their jumping-off positions. The same night the last of the boats that would ferry the 19th Indian Brigade’s two assault battalions were transported to their staging area a few hundred metres from the river. Once in place, the tank crews were excused from their duties to give them a chance to rest. A 1st Armoured Brigade war diary entry summed things up: “last minute details ... were very few, all matters having been so completely covered at planning conferences and during order groups.”⁵⁶ There was nothing to do but wait. “Everyone is all keyed-up anticipating the action to come very shortly ... and the morale is very high,” the regiment’s own war diary calmly recorded.⁵⁷ The penultimate day dawned warm and sunny. The tanks were well camouflaged and no tents had been pitched in an attempt to mask the build-up from *Luftwaffe* reconnaissance flights, which were purposely left alone so as not to alert the enemy.⁵⁸ Officers briefed their men on a few last-minute changes, and the commanding officer held a final orders group late in the afternoon. That evening Lt. Hunter attended a last intelligence briefing while Lt.-Col. Neroutsos ate supper at Brig. Murphy’s headquarters with Lt.-Cols. Caron and Purves, returning around 2230.⁵⁹

An Awful Lesson Remembered

Three months earlier, the American Army had attempted to attack across the Garigliano River in the same general area that Canadian and Indian troops were now planning to assault. On January 20, two regiments (equivalent to Anglo-Canadian brigades) of the 36th Infantry Division managed to cross what Americans called the Rapido River in boats but were repelled.⁶⁰ A follow-up assault the next day gained a tenuous foothold, but German shelling prevented the construction of pontoon bridges. Reinforcement was thus impossible, most critically by tanks. Under continual shelling and facing repeated counterattacks, the bridgehead was soon abandoned. The Texans suffered over 1,300 killed and wounded, with another 800-odd taken prisoner. The failed assault naturally loomed large in British planning for Honker.⁶¹

The Attack Plan

The Eighth Army would rely on XIII British Corps to cross the Gari south of Cassino and by frontal attack breach first the Gustav and then the Hitler Line. On its right flank, II Polish Corps would sweep around Cassino and its dominating namesake mountain before joining XIII Corps' advance further up the Liri. The *Corps Expéditionnaire Française* of the Free French forces, made up primarily of North and West African colonial units, would protect the left flank. While I Canadian Corps would start in reserve, it would be used to reinforce XIII British Corps' breakthrough.⁶² 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade fell under the command of Lt.-Gen. Kirkman and so would be involved in the attack from the outset, supporting the 8th Indian Division's assault across the Gari, its far bank constituting the forward zone of the Gustav Line defences. The Calgary Regiment would serve alongside Brig. T. S. Dobree's 19th Indian Infantry Brigade, helping them consolidate their bridgeheads before rolling up the remaining forward German defences.⁶³ Intelligence on the defence the Canadian tankers would face was hardly reassuring. Enemy doctrine relied on towed and self-propelled anti-tank weapons—not tanks—to neutralize attacking armour, so no one expected much tank-on-tank action. There was every expectation that the anti-tank defences would be sited to cover the roads and tracks the British and Canadian tanks would likely have to use. The Sherman's only advantage was the propensity of nervous German crews to engage at long range, revealing their positions and leaving them vulnerable to well-placed high explosive rounds.⁶⁴ In the event, the biggest danger the tanks confronted was bogging down in the muddy flats that extended along the Gari's western bank. In hindsight, the enemy had relied on the river to block tanks, and never established a proper anti-tank gun defence.⁶⁵



MAP 10:
Breaking the Gustav Line, 11-15 May 1944.

Battle Engaged, May 12

A half hour after Neroutsos had returned from his dinner, a deafening crash shattered the quiet all along the front. Over 1,000 guns of the XIII British and II Polish Corps—400 on the 8th Indian Division's frontage alone—lit up the sky and shook the ground through early morning, obliterating all known German mortar and artillery emplacements. Honker had commenced. Struggling to convey the barrage's ferocity, CBC war correspondent Peter Stursberg breathlessly spoke of "sheets of flame and balls of fire ... leaping back and forth across the valley as battery after battery fire salvoes. It's an amazing and terrifying sight yet thrilling."⁶⁶ Then he turned his microphone to the sky and recorded the deafening symphony. A Squadron was hidden close to several British heavy batteries, and the guns' rhythmic roar "ensured we were awake and our adrenalin going," Capt. Jim Quinn recalled.⁶⁷ At 0100, the Shermans of C and the HQ Squadrons roared to life and headed out along Speedy Express, the track assigned to the Indians. They reached their forward assembly area about 2 kms from the east bank of the Gari in just 45 minutes, with the others moving to their assembly points in turn.

Their immediate obstacle was the Gari and getting across it. It was in full spring flood and flowing fast. As much as 20 m wide in places and 3 m deep, it was impossible for tanks to ford. The flats on the east side were extensive, about 700 m deep, but much shallower on the German side, extending at most 250 m away from the water. Beyond that the terrain rose to a false ridgeline about a kilometre distant and then to a main ridge, with lateral roads about 500 m further on. The river flats on both sides were boggy and thick with tall marsh grass. Beyond, as the ground rose on the enemy side, extensive groves of olive and fig trees had been shattered during previous fighting or cut down by the Germans to make clear fields for fire and observation.⁶⁸ So as not to alert the enemy, there had been no patrolling on the enemy side at all. It may have preserved tactical surprise, but it left the attackers ignorant of critical features of the terrain and the nature of the defences. For the tank units, the extent of the swathe of muddy ground they'd need to traverse in order to reach higher (and drier) ground beyond the river would come as a cruel surprise.⁶⁹

The initial assault by the 8th Indian Division would fall to two battalions from each of the 17th and 19th Indian Brigades, supported by the 11th and 14th Armoured Regiments, respectively.⁷⁰ The infantry would be on their own until the tanks could get across, and that depended on when the bridges were in place (the expectation/hope being 0400). The tank crews knew it was crucial to join up with their infantry as soon as possible. Unfortunately circumstances prevented that, and the rifle companies paid dearly.

Rapido Redux?

The main German defensive position stretching back (and gradually upward) from the river several hundred metres consisted of minefields (anti-personnel and anti-tank) covered by numerous machine guns and mortars, together with a screen of anti-tank guns, thickets of barbed wire to channel infantry into killing zones, and deep bunkers to protect the weapons' crews from the inevitable bombardment. The enemy were understandably confident that any attack would meet the Americans' fate, and indeed the whole area along the river was strewn with the decomposing corpses of GIs, a grisly warning to the Canadian, Indian and British soldiers.⁷¹

The assault infantry of the 8th Indian Division—the 3/8 Punjabs and 1/Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders—and to the north of them, from the 4th British Division, began crossing at 2345. It was clear from the initial German reaction, or lack of it, that surprise had been achieved. But it was about all that went right. Between the darkness and dense smokescreen, tracer had to be used to guide the boats to their landing zones.⁷² Having made it across, the first wave found little immediate cover and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders suffered the added misfortune of debouching into a minefield.⁷³ Casualties rapidly mounted, breaking the companies up into isolated groups struggling to reorganize and press on. As succeeding platoons were ferried across, more and more boats were sunk or swept away in the current. By 0230 both battalions had only been able to put two companies ashore. The 3/8 Punjabs managed to advance between 200 to 300 m from the riverbank before being pinned down by intact German strong points and wire. Poor communications rendered artillery support only marginally effective. During the course of the night, one company was all but wiped out, with the remnant surrendering at dawn, their ammunition exhausted. A second managed to gain its initial objectives but was reduced to thirty men. The third was continually pinned down by machine-gun nests that had to be silenced by heroic individual actions like that of nineteen-year-old Sepoy Kamal Ram, who won a VC in his first action. Russell's battle log rightly noted that the infantry had been left on their own because of the painfully slow progress getting the bridges operating and the tanks across. By 0600, when sunlight had begun to filter through the murk, the Punjabs managed to ferry their last men across and more critically, a 6-pounder anti-tank gun and a jeep to pull it, which was quickly followed by several more, soon putting paid to the German pill boxes.

The 1/Argyll and Sutherlands endured an even worse time of it. Only one company and two platoons from a second had managed to get over before all their boats and rafts had been lost. After three hours of heavy fighting, the

commanding officer had assembled fewer than half of his shattered force. Chaos and the tenuous bridgehead meant only a feeble stream of reinforcements had reached them. With Russell's approval, around 1500 Dobree finally decided to abandon the bridgehead (though isolated pockets of men remained) and attempt to recross later in the day closer to where the Punjabs were enjoying at least some success.⁷⁴ That the Indian and British infantry managed to hold on, and in the case of the former consolidate their fragile bridgehead, before Canadian armour finally reached them in the afternoon was a tribute to their remarkable tenacity and enterprise.⁷⁵

A King of a Bridge

Normally, engineers could not throw a bridge across a river like the Gari without the infantry first securing a sufficient bridgehead on the far side. Lt.-Col. Neroutsos had become convinced that only an extra bridge could reasonably guarantee their getting two regiments of tanks across as quickly as required.⁷⁶ Maj.-Gen. Russell agreed, but it took persistence by him, his staff, and Neroutsos to persuade the corps commander. Once authorized, the Calgary Regiment's CO chose a site for *Plymouth* about 500 m south of *Oxford*. It fell to the regiment's engineering officer, Capt. Tony Kingsmill, to conjure up a way of doing it.⁷⁷

He soon came up with a novel solution that would make it possible to lay a conventional prefabricated Bailey bridge structure in a fraction of the normal time. It was tried out a few times at the Volturno training area—with irregular success, but the results were promising enough to proceed. Kingsmill's brainstorm involved placing a 30m length of bridge atop two tanks, the lead one having had its turret removed and rollers attached to the top of the hull so the bridge could move forward, while the rear end of the bridge sat on a bracket mounted on the front of the second tank's hull. The lead tank would drive a short distance into the water while the rear tank pushed the bridge forward until it grounded on the far bank. Three hours after the infantry had launched their assault, while Indian sappers were wrestling with the construction of *Oxford* (the Ontario Regiment's bridge) under heavy fire, the bridging tanks reported that they were making their way forward with *Plymouth*, and by 0500, work on Kingsmill's gamble had commenced, with an estimate it would be operational by 0800.

Dawn broke around 0530, with a heavy mist thickened by all the smoke from the barrage reducing visibility to 45 m. C Squadron and the other tanks could only cool their heels. Just before 0900 word came that *Oxford* was finally open and the Ontarios had gotten one of their squadrons across. Maj.-Gen.

Russell's had earlier instructed that if *Oxford* was ready first, part of the Calgary Regiment force should make for it and double back to their planned marrying-up point with the 3/8 Punjabs. Traffic congestion slowed C Squadron but it still managed to reach *Oxford*, and once across, tanks that avoided bogging down in the mud or hitting mines hastened to try to find their infantry and link-up.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, in the face of heavy machine-gun and mortar fire, *Plymouth* was finally being pushed into place. So far the luck had all been bad. The carrier tank had drifted off line and had bogged down, and it took nearly three hours to free it, assemble the bridge components, hoist them onto the carrier, and then get the ungainly contraption ready to move out from cover toward the river. By the time they were ready to go it was light. But go they did, though excruciatingly slowly, Kingsmill walking alongside with a telephone connection to the two-man carrier crew, Tprs. George McLean and Ian Seymour, whose jobs Neroutsos considered suicidal given their turretless Sherman was bound to drown. It was several hundred metres to the Gari's eastern bank, where Kingsmill paused his creation to ensure it was precisely lined up with the far bank. Then, at 0930, he gave the signal for the pusher tank to proceed. Once it was certain the end of the bridge had extended a safe distance beyond the far bank, he ordered the carrier tank into the river to lower *Plymouth* into its final position. MacLean and Seymour managed to bob to the surface and swim ashore after decoupling from their load. An overjoyed Tony Kingsmill messaged the good news to regimental headquarters.⁷⁹ After all the delays, the critical emplacement had only taken 15 minutes.

Lined up nose-to-tail awaiting orders, the tankers had been in their forward assembly areas for hours, and sensed things were not going well. Kingsmill's message was enough for Lt.-Col. Neroutsos, who ordered A Squadron to get across on *Plymouth* and rescue what was left of 19th Brigade's assault force. Of course the bridge itself was vulnerable, and Kingsmill pressed for an annihilating barrage on the far shore perimeter and more smoke. The howitzers of the British 98th Field Regiment (Self-Propelled) happily obliged.⁸⁰ The lead unit of Maj. Bob Taylor's A Squadron, Lt. Al Wells' troop, arrived first and wasted no time crossing, with Lt. Jim Quinn's Sherman right behind. But as soon as Quinn crossed, a German shell shattered the far ramp and caved in the supporting bank, rendering *Plymouth* temporarily unusable.⁸¹ At least the four A Squadron tanks that had made it were able to rake everything in sight with 75-mm and machine-gun fire, finally securing a safe perimeter for bridge repairs to proceed. Meanwhile, the remainder of A Squadron had no choice but to divert to *Oxford*, costing them more time.⁸²

Tanks to the Rescue

The first troop from C Squadron to reach *Oxford* had been Lt. Al Cawsey's. Cpl. Bill McWithy's lead Sherman had bogged down just short of the ramp, blocking the narrow approach, forcing Cawsey to navigate around him over unswept ground so he could extricate McWithy from the mire.⁸³ With visibility near zero and the area under heavy machine-gun and mortar fire, one of the crew walked in front trying to pick out any mines. They were lucky, as they had straddled three mines but failed to detonate any of them. As it turned out, the ground on the far side was too soft to support the 30-ton Shermans, and most crossing that morning bogged down in the mud—from the first wave, Cawsey's and McWithy's were actually the only ones to get clear.⁸⁴ Only minutes later they encountered a small party of Punjabs whose wounded officer informed Cawsey the tanks would have to proceed on their own. When Cawsey managed to contact his CO, Maj. Don Taylor,⁸⁵ whose own tank was among those stuck back at the river, Taylor told him to use his judgment—music to any troop commander's ears. He and McWithy decided to press on to the village of Panaccioni, one of the squadron's first-day objectives, and see what happened. They had hardly got moving when McWithy glimpsed a *StuG* assault gun manoeuvring to get a shot away. Cawsey's gunner knocked it out with his first round, McWithy machine-gunning the crew when they bailed out. Over the next few hours, as they traversed the countryside in search of the main force of the 3/8 Punjabs, they destroyed a Panzer Mk. III, a second *StuG*, and a 75-mm anti-tank gun, as well as blew up several stone farm buildings they suspected were strong points or headquarters. When they finally reached a crossroads just north of Panaccioni, Taylor radioed Cawsey to conserve his ammunition and instead direct the fire from field artillery batteries across the river, which he did for several hours, until the first tanks from A Squadron finally appeared.⁸⁶

As Cawsey's and McWithy's adventure was unfolding, Lt. Jim Quinn was advancing parallel to the river trying to cause mayhem and hoping to make contact with the Argyll and Sutherlands. The only infantry he and his men caught sight of were counterattacking units from the 115th *Panzergranadier* Regiment seeking to plug (the many) gaps in the German line. Wisely concluding it was far too risky to continue marauding without infantry support, Quinn headed inland, finally reaching a rise just east of Panaccioni not far from their C Squadron mates. Carefully camouflaging the tanks alongside a hedgerow, they, too, hunkered down to observe enemy activity and call in artillery shoots. A German patrol eventually passed close by, first waving at the Canadian tanks but then opening fire. Quinn's small force responded with everything they had, and German artillery and mortars soon had their range. Without infantry for

perimeter defence, they and their tanks were living on borrowed time. Finally around 1700, the separate groups of Shermans, along with a few more that had joined them, were ordered to fall back to the main lateral road west of the river where they joined up with some sepoy and hunkered down in an improvised harbour. Fearing that tank-killing teams of German infantry would try to infiltrate their position during the night, they arranged to call in artillery fire on their own position, though fortunately this didn't prove necessary. Instead, the only visitors were more small groups of Indian soldiers and Recce Squadron Stuarts bringing badly needed fuel and ammunition. Still, it was the only night during the war Al Cawsey slept inside his tank.⁸⁷ Jim Quinn probably summed it up best: "On reflection it was probably just as well that we did not know ... how very exposed we were that first day and night!"⁸⁸

The persistent difficulties the armour encountered in marrying up with their infantry until well into the afternoon left the fate of the attack in jeopardy.⁸⁹ However, Lt.-Gen. Kirkman's instructions had made it clear that "the tankers had to be prepared to push forward without the infantry ... in order to prevent the reeling Germans from reorganizing, and to maintain contact [with them]."⁹⁰ That's precisely what the two groups had done. By late afternoon, A Squadron's remaining troops had taken up positions just southwest of Panaccioni, while two depleted companies of the 3/8 Punjabs had finally managed to link up with Taylor's tanks. The bridgehead was now deemed reasonably secure. Still, it was obvious that opportunities for tactical exploitation were lost throughout the day as the tanks fruitlessly searched for their infantry. Brig. Murphy's conclusion—that in future opposed river crossings tanks should break out of the bridgehead with fresh infantry rather than those engaged in the initial assault—certainly had merit.⁹¹ Nevertheless, marauding tanks in their rear areas had unbalanced the enemy, causing him to husband his few armoured reserves instead of throwing them into immediate counterattacks against Brig. Dobree's fragile enclaves.⁹²

Assessing the First Day

It would be easy to say that in the 8th Indian Division's sector, the results had fallen well short of the plan, with the infantry being very badly cut up.⁹³ On the other hand, facing bitter resistance from both the enemy and the terrain, two infantry brigades and five armoured squadrons had managed to cross the Gari and secure a firm, if still discontinuous, bridgehead on its far side, giving the enemy a hard whack from which he was unable to recover.⁹⁴ By day's end the 4th British Infantry Division's bridgehead to the north was only precariously held, and II Polish Corps had been unable to penetrate the defences north of Cassino. As the Indian Army official history proudly claimed, "it was the initial

success gained by the 8th Indian Division in seizing and holding a firm bridgehead at Sant' Angelo [immediately north of 19th Indian Brigade's sector] which paved the way for the final victory."⁹⁵ And, one might add, an operation carried out with the notable assistance of the Ontario Regiment of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade.⁹⁶ While matters had not gone nearly as well for the 19th Brigade and Calgary Regiment, it had been no Rapido, either. Only a few days earlier, Maj.-Gen. Russell had enjoined his command that "full advantage can only be reaped from success or surprise if calculated risks are taken and action is speedy."⁹⁷ The tankers of the Calgary Regiment had done their best to carry out those instructions.

Battle Resumed, May 13

The tanks that had gotten across the Gari on the first day encountered a landscape they would face during the remainder of the battle. Mostly it was gently rolling farmland interspersed with vineyards and fig and olive groves and crossed with numerous gullies— perfect country for masking defensive positions, and by 1944 the Germans had become masters of that art. Moving cross-country was seldom realistic, so both the Indian and British infantry and the Canadian tankers supporting them mostly stuck to the roads and tracks linking the scattered communities.⁹⁸

The 13th dawned with very good news—during the night Indian and Canadian sappers had managed to repair *Plymouth* bridge and recovery crews had been successful in getting most of the Shermans stuck in the mud flats along the Gari moving again. At 0700, as their crews ate breakfast, squadron leaders were given the day's objectives. With the fresh 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles supported by two troops of B Squadron protecting their right flank, the 3/8 Punjabs, supported by C Squadron, would take the crossroads near Panaccioni. Then the flanking force would clear the village. Finally, the remainder of B Squadron and a batch of reinforcement tanks would cross *Plymouth* and hold a blocking position along the Sant' Angelo road. With the 1/Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders finally across the river to stay during the night, A Squadron (in reserve) finally had their own infantry. It would fall to the Ontario Regiment and 17th Indian Brigade infantry to eject the Germans from Sant' Angelo itself, which in Maj.-Gen. Russell's mind was the key to cracking open his division's section of the Gustav Line.

Although German artillery now enjoyed better visibility, they were unable to knock out either *Plymouth* or *Oxford*, their principal goal.⁹⁹ By mid-morning, the various advances were underway, and by 1400 C Squadron and the Punjabs were pressing into the crossroads area against stiff resistance. Tank fire had already killed two *StuGs* when a lethal round from another slammed into Lt. Al

Abram's lead Sherman, killing him and Tpr. A. A. Coloumbe. The remainder of the force manoeuvred onto high ground immediately north of the village. Meanwhile around 1600 two of the companies from the 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles and the two troops of B Squadron Shermans with the welcome support of a ten-minute barrage from seventy-two 25-pounders, commenced their attack on Panaccioni. By 1730 the village had been cleared. It proved the last stand of the 2/576 *Panzergradiers*, which the 19th Brigade and Calgary Regiment had wiped out over the past two days.¹⁰⁰ A scratch German force that was assembling in Pignataro for a counterattack was shattered by calling in another barrage. The arrival of more tanks (from A Squadron) scattered the remnants of the assembling force.

Everywhere along the 8th Indian Division's sector on May 13 attacks had been crowned with success. Most of the engagements were textbook demonstrations of thorough infantry-armour training, and a tribute to Murphy's and Russell's commitment to same during the preceding weeks.¹⁰¹ The successes pointed to the enemy's growing weakness, too, for the Germans had few reserves remaining. Those were being thrown in piecemeal to deal with local crises, usually with little armour support, and they had no answer for the tanks that accompanied every attack. In essence, the Germans had been shocked by the sheer weight and speed of the offensive, and never recovered.¹⁰² That evening, with his forces having driven back the enemy line some 1,500 m on a 2,700 m front, Russell proudly declared the Gari bridgehead secure. The night was spent carrying out needed resupply while the tank crews completed pressing maintenance and then sought what rest they could.¹⁰³ Morale was high, for everyone grasped that the enemy had lost the day and likely the battle.

The Battle Won, May 14–16

Plans for May 14 called for the fresh 21st Indian Brigade, supported by the Three Rivers Regiment's tanks, to pass through the Calgary Regiment's and 19th Indian Brigade's position and press on toward Pignataro, about 4 km northwest of Panaccioni. Only A Squadron would be in action, assisting the 1/Argyll and Sutherlands in clearing the Liri Appendix, a wedge-shaped feature bounded by the Liri and Gari Rivers. Supported by the combined fire of a regiment each of medium and field artillery, this modest infantry-tank force completed the task by noon. By now, even intermittent German shelling had practically ceased, enabling officers and men to bed down early and enjoy their first good sleep in days.¹⁰⁴

The forecast for May 15 promised fine weather. Later that morning Brig. Murphy paid a visit to Lt.-Col. Neroutsos, praising the performance of the latter's men and passing on the hearty congratulations of Gen. Oliver Leese, the

Eighth Army commander. Shortly after noon, Neroutsos returned from Brig. Dobree's headquarters with plans they had jointly drawn up for the assault on Pignataro, plans that called for B Squadron to support the 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles, with A Squadron and the 1/Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders providing flank protection.¹⁰⁵ Setting out around 1330, the combined force found the going easy until they neared their objective. First machine-gun fire pinned down a company of the Scots, which Lt. Quinn's troop quickly silenced. In short order, a second company was forced to ground and as Lt. Wells manoeuvred his three Shermans to deal with the problem, a shell fired from a well-camouflaged *StuG* sliced through his turret, killing both Wells and his loader, Cpl. Lauzon, and seriously wounding the gunner, Tpr. Tony Szeler. Almost immediately, Sgt. Rolly Marchant's tank was hit by the same self-propelled gun, mortally wounding him. When Lt. Quinn's Sherman then bogged down, the situation became "very serious," forcing the infantry to hunker down around the tanks, as it turned out, for the night.

Meanwhile, the assault force bound for Pignataro slowly made its way toward its objective. By late afternoon, the 6/13 RFFRs had approached within 200 m of the outskirts when they came under sharp mortar and machine-gun fire from inside the village. Field artillery and the guns of B Squadron's Shermans firing high explosive rounds soon obliterated these positions. At last light, with the aid of a smoke screen also provided by the tanks, two rifle companies infiltrated Pignataro, and in the deepening gloom, overran the German garrison house by house, taking very few prisoners. By midnight, the village was deemed clear. A counterattack three hours later was obliterated by yet another artillery shoot called in by radio.¹⁰⁶ In their own assessment of the last few days' fighting, German commanders had drawn one pre-eminent lesson—the tanks supporting infantry, if not dealt with at the outset, rendered those infantry advances unstoppable.¹⁰⁷

Out of the Line

The series of assaults by the 8th Indian Division in conjunction with the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade had torn a gaping hole in the Gustav Line. While that success was not quite matched by the assaults of the British and Polish forces further north, the Germans had no choice but to order a staged withdrawal to the prepared defences of the Adolf Hitler (or Dora) Line. To keep up pressure on the enemy, Gen. Leese ordered the fresh I Canadian Corps to relieve the Russell's weary force and continue the attack. The relief commenced overnight and by late afternoon on May 16, the Calgary Regiment was safely in harbour 15 kms to the rear.¹⁰⁸

The Adolf Hitler Line

During the next week, the Allied advance continued until the Canadian, British, Polish and Free French forces were within sight of the Adolf Hitler Line. Respite for the Calgary Regiment was all too brief. Brig. Murphy almost immediately informed both the 14th and 11th Armoured Regiments that they would be adding some punch to the 78th British Division's assault on Aquino which, if successful, would open the way for a breakout by British armour. The decision to rush the attack was rooted in faulty British reconnaissance indicating that the area around Aquino and adjacent sections of the Adolf Hitler Line were thinly held and that the defenders were on the verge of withdrawing.¹⁰⁹ On the 18th, the first British attack was stopped cold. The two Canadian armoured regiments were to join up with the British infantry and try again the following day, which necessitated their moving overland during the night to jumping-off points near the Aquino airport. Unfortunately numerous other units were making the same trek. Amidst a warren of what were more tracks than roads—narrow, twisting, heavily cratered in places and boggy everywhere, and with most of them incorrectly plotted on maps—traffic control broke down. During the 8-hour ordeal the two tank regiments at least managed to avoid stumbling into any mine fields.¹¹⁰

The Canadian armour now faced having to assault the Adolf Hitler Line head-on. Less formidable than the Gustav Line, not the least because it didn't incorporate a river, it was still a significant obstacle. The anti-tank defences (*Pantherturn*) comprised a number of turrets stripped from Panther tanks and mounted on concrete pill boxes. Their long-barrelled 75-mm guns proved lethal against Shermans at even medium ranges. Each of these positions was covered by several *StuGs* in well-camouflaged positions. This group of defensive nodes was protected by an extensive anti-tank ditch and approaches thickly sown with both anti-tank and anti-personnel mines—the intent being to separate the tanks from their infantry, to the detriment of both. There were plenty of machine guns and mortars, too, and the whole area was extensively wired. Fortunately, there had been neither the time nor labour to complete everything, so there was little depth to the defences. Even the Germans felt their handiwork would merely delay, not stop, a serious attack.¹¹¹

Aquino

The 19th dawned foggy, with visibility reduced to 100 m. Both armoured regiments were told they would attack as soon as the British infantry brigades they were accompanying ordered them to do so. Ominously, when he consulted with British officers, A Squadron's Jim Quinn found the tactical situation “to

say the least very confused.”¹¹² Word came down to prepare to advance by 1000. But due to confusion at the various British headquarters, only the Ontario Regiment received the order to move out. By noon, as pre-emptive German shelling intensified, the Calgary squadrons still had received no formal attack order, so they waited. Around 1500 they received news that the Ontarios’ attack had been crushed. Forced to go ahead of their infantry, which had been pinned down by withering machine-gun and mortar fire, the tankers had made good progress until, as the protective morning mist lifted, they fell under the sights of an anti-tank screen consisting of several of the aforementioned *Panther* strongpoints and some towed anti-tank guns. In short order, German gunners coolly picked off thirteen Shermans. “This cooled the ardour for our [own] effort,” Quinn noted caustically.¹¹³ Murphy spent the evening consulting with the Maj.-Gen. Keightley’s staff and brigade commanders about the 78th’s plans for an immediate follow-up. After waiting all the next day for the go-ahead, around 1830 Murphy personally delivered the word to Lt.-Col. Neroutsos that the Eighth Army had vetoed the operation, Leese having wisely concluded that the Aquino defences were too strong for brigade-sized assaults supported by a few dozen tanks to have any chance. No doubt Neroutsos and his squadron commanders heaved a collective sigh of relief.¹¹⁴

Late the following day the high command hatched another scheme, this time a diversionary attack on Aquino employing elements of A and B Squadrons in support of two British infantry battalions. The purpose was to draw attention away from I Canadian Corps’ push immediately to the south, which now constituted Eighth Army’s principal effort.¹¹⁵ If it turned out the Aquino garrison had withdrawn, the modest force would occupy the town, which British artillery had already reduced to little more than a rubble pile. Maj. Bob Taylor and Capt. Fred Ritchie spent much of the day discussing operational details with their infantry opposite numbers. The go-ahead order reached the regiment during the night of May 23–24. At first light, two troops from A Squadron crept forward with two companies of the 2/Lancashires to ascertain enemy strength. As they neared the outskirts of Aquino, heavy machine-gun fire pinned down the infantry who had mistakenly gone past their stop line. Lt. Beresford selflessly led his troop forward to relieve the pressure—and into the sights of four anti-tank guns. His tank and Sgt. Allison’s were immediately hit, killing both men. The guns’ attention immediately shifted to Lt. Lamb’s troop, knocking out his Sherman and taking his life. During the entire action, which had lasted only two minutes, six Calgary tanks suffered at least two penetrating hits, with four of them brewing up.¹¹⁶ Both lieutenants had only just been made troop commanders.¹¹⁷ At least the enemy now had every reason to believe a full-scale attack was intended, which greatly assisted the 5th Canadian Armoured

Division's attack that carried them to the banks of the Melfa River by day's end. But the Calgary Regiment had paid an awful price for a diversion—seventeen casualties—and no men who witnessed the Germans repeatedly firing on the ambulance jeeps attempting to evacuate their wounded comrades from the battlefield would forget—or forgive.¹¹⁸

Early the following morning B and C Squadrons escorted British infantry into Aquino. As the majority of the defending garrison, mostly *Fallschirmjäger*s of the 1st Parachute Division, had begun withdrawing during the night, active opposition was desultory. Anti-tank mines and booby traps were another story—they seemed to be everywhere, at times slowing the armour literally to a crawl but only costing the regiment a single tank. B Squadron scored a coup by capturing the withdrawal plans of the 1st Parachute Division's artillery regiment—valuable intelligence indeed. Eighth Army Headquarters commended Neroutsos for his men's initiative, pointing out that it was the first time they had received such orders before the enemy had fully carried them out. By mid-afternoon all three squadrons had passed through Aquino and were advancing westward along National Route 6, A and B Squadrons on either side of the road and C Squadron trailing close behind with the footsore British infantry happily catching rides. By late afternoon they had reached the banks of the Melfa just beyond Roccasecca station, but a crossing point proved elusive and enemy resistance had once again stiffened alarmingly. Prudence dictated hunkering down, and at a safe distance from the Melfa, too. It was a very tense night, everyone fearing infiltration, and even the *Luftwaffe* paid a rare visit. Fortunately, sleep was the only casualty, and by dawn "Jerry" had quieted down considerably.¹¹⁹

On May 26, the British 6th Armoured Division (part of XIII British Corps) passed through the Aquino area, crossed the Melfa, and headed northwest along the main highway to exploit the rupture in the German defences. Now caught in the open, and without many anti-tank weapons, the German infantry suffered heavy losses.¹²⁰ Around midday, new orders from Maj.-Gen. Keightley via Brig. Murphy's headquarters outlined a follow-up advance by 78th Division infantry, which the Calgary and Ontario Regiments would support. In the event, only the Ontarios were called out, Neroutsos getting word they'd be relieved. That evening, courtesy of NAAFI, the officers and senior NCOs celebrated their good news with spirits and the others with rum. Next morning the first item to address would be a sad but necessary one—setting up a promotions board where the senior officers tabbed men from the ranks to replace the many NCO casualties suffered in the recent fighting. In the way of war, however, a sense of normalcy quickly descended on the camp, marked by the resumption

of sports and other entertainments, the appearance of appetizing food, and proper rest.¹²¹

Paying the Price

Later in the day the regiment's chaplain, Capt. (Hon.) A. E. Larke, and his driver returned to the Aquino airport area, their jeep loaded down with wooden crosses. Performing a proper service at the burial of comrades killed only days earlier was another sad but necessary task. May's victories had been won dearly. For the rest of his days, Stoney Richardson adamantly maintained it was the toughest fighting the regiment endured during the Italian Campaign, and no one who had been there would have argued the point. It had taken eighteen lives (a third of them officers), and wounded another 45, the heaviest unit losses in the brigade and the regiment's worst month of the war.¹²² Tank casualties had also been heavy. Twenty Shermans had either been destroyed outright (including five brew-ups) or damaged beyond repair, six of them by mines and twelve by AP rounds from *StuGs* or towed anti-tank guns. Another fifteen had been lost to mechanical breakdown and thirteen had bogged, but all twenty-eight were quickly recovered, repaired and sent back into action. Eight Stuart recce tanks were also temporarily lost, though only one of them to enemy action. In a tribute to American industry, Allied logistics, and the stalwart work of the 25th Canadian Armoured Delivery Regiment, the Calgary Regiment had taken delivery of twenty-two new Sherman Vs and four new Stuarts while the fighting was still going on. Mechanical breakdowns had been excessive, but the tank workshops attributed this to the weeks of training preceding Honker, when there had been little time for even regular maintenance. It was also clear that anything more than three weeks of sustained fighting simply wore out the Shermans. Weary crews and overworked workshops couldn't perform miracles, and regardless of their efforts, stocks of spare parts ran out by then. Finally, many of the regiment's Shermans were already worn-out machines when they reached Venafro.¹²³ Ammunition expenditure confirmed that most of their action had been in the infantry support role. Out of over 9,000 75-mm rounds fired, high explosive had exceeded armoured piercing by a ratio of more than five to one.¹²⁴

Band of Brothers in a Steel Box

Though they shared with other soldiers the waiting and the bursts of violence, tank crews fought a peculiar war. More than the other arms, they fought alone, separated even from their own regimental mates. During the periods of combat, but even during the long gaps separating those, the crewman of a Sherman Mk V operated in his world unto himself, a world of one tank and four other

men. There was an intimacy between and dependency on one another that only came close to being matched by the closeness among the crew of a heavy bomber. From the execution of battlefield tactics to tank maintenance, success could only be achieved as a team. Despite all the talk of armour protection and muzzle velocity, the foremost determinant in surviving an encounter with a German tank, *StuG*, or anti-tank gun was who got off the first shot, usually in just a matter of seconds from the first awareness. This required the crew to work as one or suffer the immediate consequences. By tank standards, the Sherman was comfortable, some thought having been given to crew ergonomics. But the crew still worked in cramped, exhausting conditions. In action, they were virtually blind, and hence largely unaware of the “bigger picture” outside. Crew communication, easily overwhelmed by engine and battle noise, could be reduced to a slap on the shoulder or kick in the behind. And they were assailed by the stench of gasoline fumes and sweat—it got worse the longer they were confined to their beast. At least inside the tank, maintaining the formal hierarchy between officer, NCO, and trooper was difficult, even counter-productive. The greatest bulwark of tankers’ morale was success on the battlefield, and a belief that no one—from the squadron commander to the lieutenant, sergeant, or corporal commanding a tank—would give or be given impossible or pointless orders. But combat, which was the focus of their service, was a rare occurrence, and it is easy to forget how essential it was to keep the crews engaged during the long periods of waiting between action, when frustration and boredom could take hold—the same periods that were filled with essential tasks like maintenance and training. Finally, faith in the weapon on which your life depended was critical, too, and despite the rough ride the Sherman is frequently given in military histories, the officers and men of the Calgary Regiment respected it every bit as much as they had the Churchill.¹²⁵ Jim Quinn, who served through the period detailed in this chapter, would later sum up the unique elements of tank crew morale from his own experience:

Unless one has served as part of a tactical combat unit it is difficult to understand the feeling of trust, respect and spiritual attachment that exists. Serving together during the most critical times in our lives, sharing the good and the bad, along with the personal feelings of fear, of joy, of pride in each other’s individual and collective accomplishments cannot be duplicated in any other collective experience.¹²⁶

These elements gave them their best chance to keep going—and to survive.

The Worm of Fear

In his reminiscences, Maj. Fred Ritchie wrote eloquently about the impact of accumulated strain on tankers. Generally tank crews never stopped to assist with the recovery or burial of other tankers. Of course they were usually too busy to attend to either, but it was also an unwritten rule, particularly when it came to recovering bodies. “As more of your comrades are killed,” he observed, “you become aware that your own time may be running out [and] the worm of fear grows in your gut.” Like all soldiers they suffered what we now diagnose as PTSD—“battle exhaustion” in contemporary army parlance. But unless you were completely overwhelmed by symptoms, you were expected to tough it out. Ritchie recounts an incident during the Liri Valley fighting where a crewman shot himself in the foot to escape the unbearable strain. There were times when entire crews refused to get out of their tanks, so fearful were they of mortar fire. And he recalled an officer “who had seen a great deal of action cracking up and feeling ashamed, but his nerve was gone.”¹²⁷ There was an understanding among most armoured commanders that even the bravest had their limits, and as we have seen, they would try to arrange a few hours or even days out of the line for those who had clearly reached them. That respite, coupled with loyalty to comrades, and the fear of letting them down, usually enabled most to return to action, until “the worm of fear” took hold again.

Brewing Up

Being inside a tank was much safer than being one of the “poor bloody infantry” outside, and tank crewmen knew it. But anyone passing through a battlefield could see thick black smoke pouring from knocked-out tanks and knew full well the likely fate of at least some of the crew. Statistically speaking, Shermans burned no more readily than the best German tanks, but in 1943 two-thirds of them still caught fire when suffering a penetrating hit. Once ammunition stowage was altered to include wet jackets and armoured shell bins, this fell to 15 percent. But it was not so much how likely fire was—the risk was definitely exaggerated—as what happened if there was a fire. Many crews kept the twin front hatches ajar even in action so they could get out more quickly if their tank brewed up, and British or Canadian tank crews were never criticized for abandoning their tank after it had been hit—but before it caught fire. Radio connections between Allied tanks were excellent, greatly facilitating fluid battle tactics. But it also let nearby crews hear the last agonies of comrades burning to death. Few soldiers, even among the recovery crews, wanted to look inside a burned-out tank. Standard practice was simply to haul them back to workshops, spray the interiors with creosote, and after a suitable period, climb inside and

remove any human remains. It was a gruesome task.¹²⁸ On May 24, Lt. Wilfred Beresford's Sherman, *Confident*, was hit by an 88-mm round only seconds after his lead tank had suffered the same fate. Both Shermans burst into flame. Three of his crew—Tprs. J. W. McMullin (the driver), W. L. Evans (the co-driver), and R. C. Langley (the loader/radio operator) managed to clamber out. Under withering German small arms fire, they only just managed to escape. A few hours later, when it was safe to approach the burned-out wreck, a cursory look inside and a search of the surrounding ground provided no evidence of the fate of Beresford or his gunner, Tpr. H. N. Elmes, so both were listed as “missing in action, presumed killed.” Subsequently, a more careful examination of the tank's interior located the remains of one or perhaps both of them—so awful was the fire damage that it wasn't clear. Later in the day the remains were buried in a common grave. An inquiry ordered by Lt.-Col. Neroutsos concluded that an ammunition detonation would have killed them both instantly, though no one could ever be sure.¹²⁹

Reflection

Reflecting on the tactical lessons learned in May and the preceding months, Brig. Murphy had concluded that armoured commanders had to rethink traditional ideas about what constituted “tank country,” namely wide-open spaces where armour could be massed. His critique—entitled *What is tank country?*—was widely circulated through his command, and one presumes beyond. Even handfuls of tanks had proven invaluable in the infantry support role, he pointed out, especially when the enemy didn't expect them. Such surprise could almost be guaranteed “by [executing] the unexpected or seemingly impossible.” In essence he was arguing that “the more difficult the tank going, the better the tank country,” and that the impossible terrain of Italy “need hold no ... terrors for the tank [as long as] it is co-operating with infantry schooled in the [proven] lessons of infantry-cum-tank warfare.”¹³⁰ The brigadier's ideas were not without merit, but only up to a point—actually trying to implement them would be a severe test of men and machines. As one of his lowly troop leaders put it, “when the Good Lord created Italy, he did everything possible to make it difficult if not impossible to use tanks.”¹³¹

Overall, the Gari and Aquino operations were clearly successful, and Lt.-Col. Neroutsos concluded his own after-action report with a resounding endorsement of the brigade and its support arms as a “perfect smooth working machine which was what one always dreamt that the army ought to be like but never was, until now.” Still, he saw deficiencies that needed addressing. He particularly disapproved of the repeated instances where he had been ordered to move his squadrons “on short notice with little or no information about

[the] enemy, [our] own [infantry] or [the] commander's intention." Could anyone have described the Aquino operations any better? Such attacks invariably stumbled, he continued, and left his tanks "in a precarious and dangerous position."¹³² It was an assessment which he knew his squadron leaders were in wholehearted agreement since he had polled them. As was to be expected, Maj.-Gen. Russell took a broader perspective, focusing on Honker's success and the manifest abilities of his men to overcome the adversity even the best planned attacks present. More than anything, it was "the time that was available for preparation and training [that ensured] those who were to fight together got to know each other" that had decided the outcome.¹³³

An Opportunity Lost

Amidst all this useful reflection, and as British forces relentlessly pursued the beaten enemy northward toward Rome, Field Marshall Alexander made the decision that Gen. Mark Clark's US Fifth Army would have the prize of liberating Rome, which they accomplished on June 4. Unfortunately Clark's obsession with doing so, and the employment of all his troops to do it, ran contrary to Alexander's clear intention to complete the destruction of the enemy south of Rome first. Instead, Clark's strategic blunder enabled the badly mauled enemy to escape northward to the prepared defences of the Trasimene Line, and in effect to execute a fighting withdrawal all the way to the Po Valley.¹³⁴

Forgotten Canadians ... And British Praise

Canada's 1st Armoured Brigade had played a stellar role in the Eighth Army's May victory, but under Indian and British, not Canadian command, so not for the first time in 1944 they were forgotten by Ottawa when formal congratulations were handed out to the rest of the Canadian forces. Still, in a note penned to Murphy in late March as his brigade was readying to shift to the Cassino front, Lt.-Gen. Charles Allfrey, commander of V British Corps, had confided that over recent months, "word went around that the Canadian Tanks were full of guts.... You have now established the fact that you will see any infantry through a fight. It is a great thing to have established, and you can be proud of it."¹³⁵ The men *were* proud of it, and by their actions in May had further burnished that reputation.

A Well-earned (but All-too-short) Break

A normal—and welcome—routine re-emerged during the period in reserve near Castrociello, just north of Aquino. The days filled with the usual mix of training, maintenance and sports. Movies, when available, proved almost as popular as baseball, and a performance by a touring entertainment

troupe—especially a Canadian one, as they’d just been treated to—even more so. Brig. Murphy brought down the house with his thank-you speech to the Canadian Women’s Army Corps performers by noting that after looking over the Gustav and Adolf Hitler Lines, and a lot of other lines, “it was a pleasure to look at curves.”¹³⁶ A few false alarms about imminent moves northward geared everyone up, only to disappoint. But the exciting news on June 6, ironically received courtesy German Armed Forces radio, was a cause of celebration for with the successful landing in Normandy, the end of the war seemed a little nearer. Back home, however, it doomed the Italian Campaign to fade ever further from the public eye.

A New Commanding Officer

Lt.-Col. Neroutsos’ painful right knee had been plaguing him since before the Gari River crossing and made it difficult to carry out his duties. On June 11 he announced, first to his senior officers and then to the remainder of his men, that he faced hospitalization in England, and Maj. Richardson would assume command with Maj. Ritchie becoming the new second-in-command. “It was a departure met with surprise, and a very deep and genuine regret, throughout the regiment,” the war diary opined diplomatically. Stern, aloof and lacking the common touch so helpful to those possessing it, Neroutsos was not unpopular, *per se*. What was unquestionable—and duly noted by Murphy—was that during his fourteen months in command he had raised the regiment “to a high state of fighting fitness through his untiring planning and control.”¹³⁷ Richardson’s elevation was an instance of the regimental system working at its best—a successor groomed within the unit who was already widely respected by his fellows and who had the self-reliance and confidence to make the transition from equal to uncontested boss. “It was a delight to take command,” he noted years later, “as we had gone through a lot of very difficult fighting and I had been with [them] through [it] all.”¹³⁸ It was a delight to everyone else, too. They had found their Page.

Roma

Plans now took shape quickly. The regiment would be moving to a new encampment north of Rome. As the war diary enthused, “quiet jubilation reigned throughout the camp at the prospect of escape from the spit and polish of static life, the probability of seeing Rome ... and the certain excitement of the forward area.”¹³⁹ The tanks were soon rolling toward Pontecorvo where they would meet up with their transporters, kicking up great clouds of the choking, fine-grained Italian dust that had been their companion for weeks. The remaining personnel stayed put for a bit longer, waiting for their own departure time, “reading

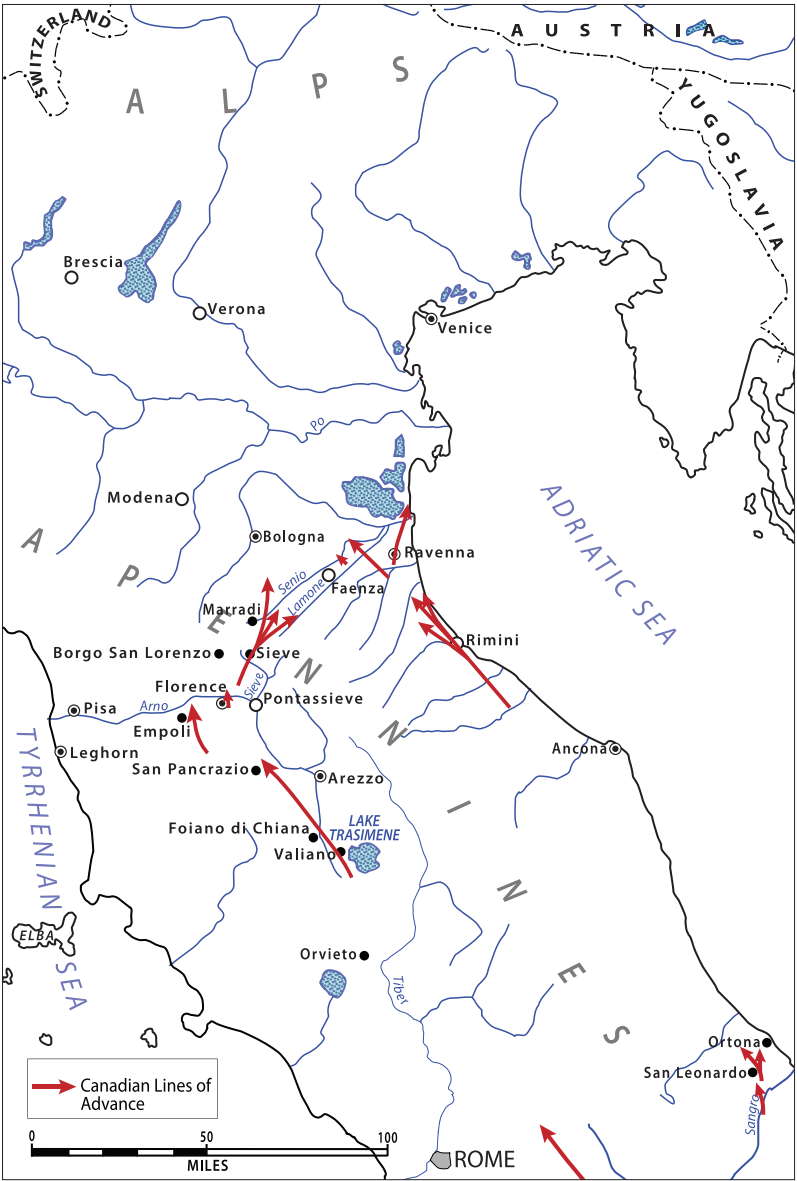
beneath trees, standing in unsettled groups, or listening to a versatile accordion (acquired after the mysterious fashion of accordions ...) playing jazz, cowboy tunes and Lily Marleine [sic].¹⁴⁰ With supply convoys and fighting units pressing northward along the few available Italian highways, the traffic congestion was beyond description. Thankfully Allied air superiority was total. Just after sunrise, the second column passed through Rome, “a city apart from the Italy seen thus far; magnificent buildings, altogether not a city of war.”¹⁴¹ The two convoys reunited to cover the last few kilometres to their new harbour area about 25 kms north of the capital, close by to where the British 4th Infantry Division, to which they were now attached, was encamped. The regiment was actually not far from the banks of the Tiber River which “for all its historic grandeur,” the war diary noted disappointingly, “resembled the Moose Jaw Creek at its barest points.”¹⁴²

But they were soon on the move again, this time a day-long 100-km grind snaking overland through picturesque hillside villages to a new harbour near Montefiascone, just southeast of Lake Bolsena. Though Rome was now all but out of bounds for leaves, Richardson did his best to arrange for a few dozen men at a time to visit the eternal city. With his friend Perry Millar, Fred Ritchie was among the lucky. The Sistine Chapel left him awestruck:

It was open, but empty of people, with only a Swiss guard at the entrance. We were exhausted and got sore necks gawking at the magnificent ceiling so we lay down on our backs and gazed and gazed. There was so much beauty to behold and no one to interrupt us ...¹⁴³

The Trasimene Line

Dust and heat were soon but a memory, replaced by rain and the atrocious local gumbo. On days they moved, it was through “terrible country,” the CO lamented, where “we did a lot of towing of the infantry [i.e., their vehicles], we had infantry riding on our tanks, we were pulling one tank with another out of the mud.”¹⁴⁴ The awful state of the ground was also providing the Germans with precious time to cobble together a string of defensive positions east and west of Lake Trasimene, the so-called Trasimene (or Albert–Frieda) Line. Field Marshall Kesselring had intended to make only perfunctory stands before reaching the Gothic Line north of the Arno River in order to ensure that what remained of his army would actually survive to fight there. But outraged by the strategy, Hitler ordered Kesselring to stand fast at the Trasimene Line. Almost overnight the Germans managed to throw together a string of well-sited



MAP 11:
Canadian Operations in Northern Italy, June 1944 – February 1945.

defensive positions astride the British line of advance.¹⁴⁵ That was a godsend for the enemy because the German Tenth Army formations that XIII British Corps and its Canadian armour faced remained woefully understrength. Between them, the 334th and 356th Infantry Divisions, 1st Parachute Division, and Herman Göring Panzer Division numbered fewer than 10,000 men with only a handful of *panzers* and *StuGs*.¹⁴⁶ But these remnants were battle-hardened and determined to fight. Believing the reinforcement woes of “English Divisions” (by which they meant British as well as Indian and Dominion forces) ensured “[they] cannot stand large sacrifices of blood,” German commanders intended to make their pursuers bleed for every kilometre.¹⁴⁷

On June 22 the regiment received word that stiff resistance had been encountered along the Trasimene Line. The Ontarios were already engaged, and the Calgary Regiment’s commitment seemed imminent. With no transporters available, their tanks had to make it forward on their own tracks, which was never desirable. Most of their Shermans were originals, and with over 1,500 kms on the odometers, pretty well worn out. To make matters worse, there were severe shortages of spares, particularly the rubber elements of the tanks’ running gear, which were literally burning up in the summer heat.¹⁴⁸ Their 80-km move to Città del Pieve, about 10 kms south of the battle zone, took five hours and cost them fifteen Shermans, most of them disabled by burned-out bogies. Lt.-Col. Richardson spent his evening consulting with Murphy and Brig. Algernon Heber-Percy, the commanding officer of the 12th British Infantry Brigade, and their staffs, only returning around midnight. The regiment was immediately placed on full readiness and everyone was keyed up to go, but a series of postponements followed. This time, the fighting had fallen to others.¹⁴⁹

The Arezzo Line

Once the Trasimene Line had been broken, it was known the enemy would fall back about 40 kms to the Arezzo area.¹⁵⁰ The considered view of the intelligence staff was that once the Arezzo Line had been breached the Germans “may well” fall back all the way to the Gothic Line not far north of Florence, leaving only “scattered rearguards” to sweep aside, though this turned out to be optimism bordering on fantasy. The misconceptions aside, infantry, armour, and artillery alike were warned that once they advanced into the Apennine foothills, movement would be restricted to roads all the way to the Arno. It would be a major advantage to the defenders whom Kesselring had ordered to carry out every manner of demolition “with sadistic imagination.”¹⁵¹

The Eighth Army plan to drive on Arezzo and then Florence placed Kirkman’s XIII British Corps in the central role, with his 4th British Infantry Division, supported by Murphy’s tanks on the left, and the 6th British Armoured

Division on the right. On the morning of June 28, orders were issued that the Calgary Regiment, along with two infantry battalions from Heber-Percy's brigade and a regiment of self-propelled howitzers, would join the fighting in 24 hours.¹⁵² It was likely they'd encounter their old opponents from Aquino, the *Fallschirmjäger* of the 1st Parachute Division, who had a well-earned reputation for fanaticism.¹⁵³ While an unpleasant prospect, it was also taken as something of an honour—the best against the best. C Squadron and half of A Squadron, along with the eleven Stuarts of the reconnaissance troop, set off that afternoon to occupy their jumping-off point, with B Squadron following a few hours later. At dawn on June 29, Richardson and Maj. D. C. Taylor slipped away to reconnoitre the attack route. The plan's final iteration called for a narrower thrust led by C Squadron and accompanied by 1/Royal West Kents, with B Squadron and the 2/Royal Fusiliers trailing some distance behind. Delayed by a heavy mist, when Taylor's tanks were finally able to advance it proved uneventful. As the British rifle companies cautiously infiltrated Laviano around mid-afternoon, the inhabitants confirmed that the German rearguard had melted away only an hour earlier.¹⁵⁴ With a lot of daylight left, it was decided to break with the plan and press on a further 4 km to Valiano. After two hours the force had only managed a kilometre. The tanks had found navigating around a succession of gullies difficult. At the same time, sniper fire took its toll of crewmen who ventured outside to speak with the infantry, or in the case of commanders, stood in an open hatch to better direct operations—a calculated risk that cost Lt. V. J. St. Martin his life. When the infantry tried to proceed on their own, they had no better luck. C Squadron caught up with them 1½ kms short of the village, the 14-km advance having cost the squadron three tanks, two of them to mines. It was obvious that rooting the Germans out of Valiano was going to require a prepared attack.

By 2000 A and B Squadrons and their infantry had made harbour just northeast of Laviano. One of the Shermans had arrived with a pig sticking out of the co-driver's hatch and a few of the others were veritable grocery delivery vans, carrying geese and sacks of vegetables and fruit supposedly acquired from farmers en route and that provided a welcome supplement to the thin army rations on hand as the campaign's logistical train unravelled.¹⁵⁵ At midnight both forces radioed regimental headquarters that they would hold in place until the operational situation had been clarified.¹⁵⁶

At first light, patrols reported that the enemy had dug in in strength on the low ridge along which the route linking Valiano and Petrignano ran and would definitely have to be evicted. This would require using both infantry battalions, each supported by a squadron of tanks. C Squadron and their infantry would assault Valiano once B Squadron and the 1/Royal West Kents had outflanked it

and headed on toward Petrignano, about 3 kms to the east. Simultaneously, the 4th Division's 10th Brigade, supported by tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment, would move directly on Petrignano from the south. The attacks on both villages ran into a host of difficulties—battlefield confusion, poor intelligence, the usual demolitions and mines, fierce resistance, and difficult terrain for tanks and infantry to operate in, let alone co-operate. Both armoured regiments shared the blame for liaison so poor they were unaware where the other was, but neither took any responsibility.¹⁵⁷ The confusion forced the artillery to call off barrages so as to avoid friendly fire.¹⁵⁸ Desperate to block the advance, the Germans threw a number of tanks, *StuGs* and anti-tank guns into the fray. At least one Panther was crippled, and a Mark IV probably disabled, by Calgary tank fire, though Richardson's men took the worst of it.¹⁵⁹ Covering the 3 kms to Petrignano took hours, and when the last German paratroopers slipped away around 2000, B Squadron had still not managed to reach the village. Brigade typically urged continued pursuit, but fearing a counterattack, and with C Squadron well behind and still trying to clear Valiano, consolidation was the prudent course. "Superficially, the day was not a marked success," the war diary truthfully recorded, "but we had inflicted casualties, and seen the enemy once more retreat, and higher command was very happy over the regiment's performance."¹⁶⁰ Mostly they'd been reminded that Kesselring's army was no spent force.¹⁶¹

Dominion Day passed unnoticed. Aware only hot pursuit would forestall demolitions, the regiment was ready to start out for Petrignano by 0530. But B Squadron had barely gotten underway when mines blew the tracks off two Shermans, requiring engineers and a bulldozer to come up and clear a path. The advance was repeatedly delayed by mines, demolitions and the steep terrain, and the tanks frequently lost contact with the infantry. Meanwhile C Squadron and the 1/Royal West Kents advanced into Valiano with the recce troop probing along the east side of the Maestro della Chiana canal.

During the early afternoon, in sweltering temperatures, both forces continued to press northeastward. Bent on Gabbiano, B Squadron managed to link up again with the Royal Fusiliers, who with tank support "advanced more willingly."¹⁶² By late afternoon, A Squadron and the Black Watch Battalion passed through C Squadron's sector but soon encountered a blown bridge. Sappers hurriedly laid a replacement under the Shermans' covering fire. The column finally reached their objective just west of Gabbiano around 2230. An hour and a half earlier, in fading light, B Squadron and a company of Royal Fusiliers had attacked Gabbiano, though they were unable to clear it completely and had withdrawn to safer ground for the night. Overall, the day had been "a classic example of pursuit fighting," the 14th's war diary enthused, requiring "aggressive

thinking and action on everyone's part."¹⁶³ But more than anything, it was Brig. Heber-Percy's steady hand and mastery of infantry-tank operations, that had carried the day and kept losses light. Still, as darkness fell near Gabbiano, Sgt. Tweedy had been killed and three of his crew wounded when a *StuG* knocked out their Sherman, and in earlier action, a shell burst had killed Maj. Alex Leslie as he stood in his turret consulting with some infantry officers.

Just after 0400, as dawn broke the following morning, engines coughed to life and all three squadrons headed off on divergent routes. Within four hours, by the usual circuitous traverse of the Italian hill country, C Squadron had advanced a good 20 kms and was overlooking the large town of Foiano della Chiana from across the canal. In an extraordinary turn of luck married to enterprise, the *recce* troop, which had already watched German engineers blow one bridge crossing the canal, saw A/Cpl. Lionel Kreger and a handful of comrades drive another demolition party off the main span, then hold it until reinforcements arrived. Brig. Heber-Percy rightly praised the *recce* troop's "gal-lant and invaluable work,"¹⁶⁴ for without a bridge suitable for 30-ton Shermans, the advance would have been stymied for days. Tanks and infantry were soon across the canal, and with South African armour closing in from the southwest, Foiano fell in short order. But sustaining the pace of pursuit was becoming more and more challenging. Between combat losses and breakdowns, by the end of most days the three squadrons were lucky to have thirty-five or forty "runners" between them, though often several more were being repaired by the attached Light Aid Detachment personnel. Here, the sterling work of the Light Aid Detachment fitters led by Sgt. Tom Curtin who slipped forward most nights to effect emergency repairs on abandoned Shermans deserve particular acknowledgement.¹⁶⁵ Finally, with supply dumps now as much as 120 kms to the rear over suspect roads, resupply—or rather the inadequacy of supplies—was adversely impacting every aspect of armoured operations.¹⁶⁶ Of course no matter how strained Allied logistics became, the enemy's situation was infinitely worse.

Into the Mountains

The recent advances had been through relatively open, undulating country, but they were now entering a more heavily treed landscape of steep hills. The sole route was a winding, narrow road, frequently enclosed by those same hills, where, in the frank assessment of Heber-Percy's staff, "demolitions would become a more serious problem and ... the employment of our tanks seriously curtailed."¹⁶⁷

Despite the now very tired state of the 12th Infantry Brigade and their tankers, Maj.-Gen. Ward, the CO of the 4th British Infantry Division, concluded

he had no option but to keep pushing them. The next objective for A and C Squadron and their infantry was Badicorte, a mere 17 kms southwest of Arezzo. As they jointly neared the village, a German counterattack that was forming up was smashed by artillery, but after probing attacks by the British infantry had been repelled, it was clear that capturing Badicorte would be best left for the following day. A plan drawn up overnight called for B Squadron and the 2/Royal Fusiliers to attack Badicorte at first light, while two-and-a-half hours later, A Squadron and the 6/Black Watch would head toward Ciggiano. Tank strength was down to thirty-three, with C Squadron by far the worst off, forcing Richardson to place it in reserve. The Germans, of course, had abandoned Badicorte, and so the tank-infantry force pressed on, reaching Oliveto, about 3 kms distant, in *only* 4 hours, the slow pace being attributed to the deteriorating terrain, not German resistance. A Squadron and their infantry made similarly depressing progress. North of Oliveto the tankers ran into a defender's dream, outright mountainous country "in the strongest sense of the word."¹⁶⁸ By early afternoon, B Squadron and the 2/Royal Fusiliers had covered an impressive 22 kms on what might only euphemistically be described as roads. But hopes of reaching the tiny hilltop hamlet of Gebbia, some 5 kms to the north for a crow but for tanks rather farther, had faded, and they harboured where they were, the infantry utterly spent from the heat. A Squadron's route encountered the practised handiwork of the enemy's own sappers—deeply cratered roads and every last bridge blown. They and their infantry called it a day at Verniana, about 5 kms to the southwest.¹⁶⁹

Dawn on the July 5 found the enemy hanging onto their positions rather than withdrawing. Nonetheless, A Squadron and the 6/Black Watch, with bulldozers to help clear the way, managed to seize Monte Altuzzo, hopefully opening the way for C Squadron and the 1/Royal West Kents to press on to San Pancrazio along a twisting route that was vital because it was the 4th British Infantry Division's main avenue of advance. Forward movement was painfully slow, with the rifle companies becoming separated from the tanks every time the latter were held up by demolitions. For operations such as these, a single bulldozer was worth a troop of Shermans. But at least they were making progress, at any rate until their advance ground to a halt in mid-afternoon, whereas B Squadron and the 2/Royal Fusiliers were stopped cold as they resumed their advance on Gebbia. The German paratroopers, who were liberally equipped with *panzerfausts* and *panzerschrecks*, lethal close-range anti-tank weapons, proved too stubborn to overcome.¹⁷⁰ One breakthrough attempt faltered when a *panzerschreck* destroyed Lt. P. V. Knibbs' tank, leaving him badly wounded and two of his crew, Tprs. D. B. Scott and B. A. Reynolds, dead. The squadron spent most of the day pinned down at its starting position, firing high-explosive

rounds at various distant targets and perhaps hitting some. It had been an equally exhausting day for the 28th British Infantry Brigade and the Ontario Regiment on their flank.¹⁷¹

The following day's plan assigned A Squadron and their infantry to batter their way into San Pancrazio, while the B Squadron force would stay put but hopefully distract the enemy from the main thrust. Getting close to San Pancrazio was one thing, taking it another. The Germans had dug in on the slopes the British infantry and Canadian tanks would have to cross, and neither artillery nor the Shermans' own guns could dislodge them. By late afternoon accurate fire from anti-tank guns and *StuGs* forced A Squadron to fall back until they had dealt with this threat, temporarily abandoning the 6/ Black Watch. Darkness finally put an end to the slugfest when the entire attacking force withdrew. As the regiment's war diary bluntly summed the day, July 6 "was distinguished by an almost complete absence of progress."¹⁷² But this gloom was not found in the 12th British Infantry Brigade's assessment, which noted appreciatively that "somehow the t[an]ks of the 14 CAR forced or bludgeoned their way up to the inf[antry], no doubt considerably surprising the Germans who might have thought their chosen country impassable to AFVs [i.e., armour]."¹⁷³

Continuous pressure harried the enemy's efforts to carry out an organized retreat, and given the Allies' relative advantage in resources, it was the appropriate strategy, but it rapidly wore down the pursuers, too. Road-bound in such rugged terrain, their ability to advance generally depended on the speed with which sappers could construct detours and fill in craters. And in the process the infantry frequently found themselves without their crucial tank support. When the German commanders were ordered to stand and fight, as on July 5 and 6, the combat was brutal and stalemate inevitable.

Temporary Stalemate

Faced with the imperative of holding onto the Arezzo–Florence highway in order to extricate as many units and their equipment as possible, the *Heer* continued to resist any advances by XIII British Corps. As the regimental war diary summed up the state of things, the "enemy's tenacity was too apparent to press the attack,"¹⁷⁴ and Corps headquarters agreed. Lt.-Col. Richardson promptly implemented 8-hour reliefs to give his crews some respite, while officers from the Calgary Regiment and their British colleagues set about improvising shared facilities for their men in San Savino, a nearby village spared by the fighting. These included an officers' club, a movie theatre for the other ranks, and a bakery to supply doughnuts and cookies (Maj. Ritchie's inspired

idea). Everyone deemed it a major improvement over leaving worn-out soldiers “parked in orchards and left without entertainment.”¹⁷⁵

A Different Italy

The changes in the countryside were not all topographic. As CBC war correspondent Peter Stursberg reported, the tankers found Umbria and Tuscany “a friendlier sort of country” like England, with villages that were not “dirty and evil smelling and ... crumbling away.” And the people were nicer, too, they told him, not “greedy” and “dirty” like in the south.¹⁷⁶ Finally they were seeing people who seemed grateful for their liberation. Partisan bands were more common the farther north one went, and their invaluable intelligence helped to overcome prejudices as well.¹⁷⁷ Having occupied these localities significantly longer, the German Army had more opportunity to alienate peasants and villagers with their harsh reprisals, confiscations of property and forced labour.¹⁷⁸ Still, the liberators suspected many Italians remained sympathetic to the Fascist cause (which of course an element did), and this certainly worked against more favourable impressions of Italians generally.

The Push Resumes

During the night of July 14–15, the 6th British Armoured Division launched a major assault to crack open the Arezzo Line defences and break the stalemate. The attack, and a simultaneous one by the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division, met with success. Exploiting this opportunity would fall to the 4th British Infantry Division.¹⁷⁹ Facing them across the hills, and determined to prevent the withdrawal from degenerating into a rout, were a motley assortment of German infantry, paratroop and armoured units.

Early on July 16, watched by a “crowd of doleful peasants,” Brig. Heber-Percy and Lt.-Col. Richardson drove through the rubble of San Pancrazio only an hour or so after B Squadron and 2/Royal Fusiliers had cleared it and moved on. On their right flank were A Squadron and the 6/Black Watch—their joint objective being Capannole, about 20 kms due west of the city of Arezzo (which the New Zealanders would capture the same day). Thanks to the German proclivity for mining roads, periodic fierce artillery and mortar barrages, and numerous machine gun nests that pinned down the infantry until they were eliminated by the tanks, both advances were painfully slow. To minimize casualties, resistance was dealt with by overwhelming artillery firepower, and a mere report of an 88 hidden in a village was enough to get the unfortunate place levelled by British gunners in a matter of minutes. German soldiers were more demoralized by Allied artillery barrages than anything else thrown at them, but the potent high explosive rounds fired by the Shermans came a close

second. The roads/tracks were steep and twisting, and any attempt to move off them necessitated crossing through orchards, in and out of gullies, and up exposed ridges and hills “that were never meant to be ... climbed [by tanks],” not to mention being exceedingly dangerous for the crews. But advance they did, reaching the outskirts of Capannole by early that evening.¹⁸⁰

The battle—really a series of battles—to break the Arezzo Line lasted a fortnight and officially ended on July 18. The official historian of the Canadian Army’s role in the Italian Campaign would later write that “the prolonged battle for Arezzo had given Kesselring ... ten extra days ... to complete the defences of the Gothic Line.”¹⁸¹ However, G. W. L. Nicholson’s assessment was unfair because it was misleading, for interrogation of German prisoners and captured enemy documents both made clear that the German Army had been ordered to hold the Arezzo Line until the middle of August. Constant Allied pressure and unsustainable casualties prevented them from complying.¹⁸² Reducing the Arezzo defences was a victory—not wrapped in bows—but a victory nonetheless.

A Partnership Renewed

The Calgary Regiment had stood down on July 17 and was anticipating being relieved. There was the usual backlog of maintenance to attend to, and no one turned down the opportunity to bathe in a nearby stream, their first clean-up in many days. But as it always seemed when things quieted down, the respite would prove short-lived. In fact, on the evening of July 18 Murphy informed Richardson that the brigade would probably be shifted back to the 8th Indian Division. Richardson passed on the news to his officers that very night, promising them he would press for their re-assignment to 19th Indian Brigade, their Honker comrades. Maj.-Gen. Russell, “The Pasha” as his soldiers affectionately nicknamed him, had already spelled out his own thoughts on the matter:

In the fighting in Italy ... this Infantry Division ... has been supported at various times by five different Armoured Brigades with the resulting difficulties of getting to know new friends ... Armour will always be required ... [so] we must be prepared to work with any. Every endeavour should, however, be made to place under command armour with which the infantry have previously fought or trained successfully.¹⁸³

With the Calgary and Ontario Regiments available, Russell was happy to oblige them.¹⁸⁴ Parting with the 4th British Infantry Division was not easy, however.¹⁸⁵ With not a little emotion, the war diary recorded the prevailing mood:

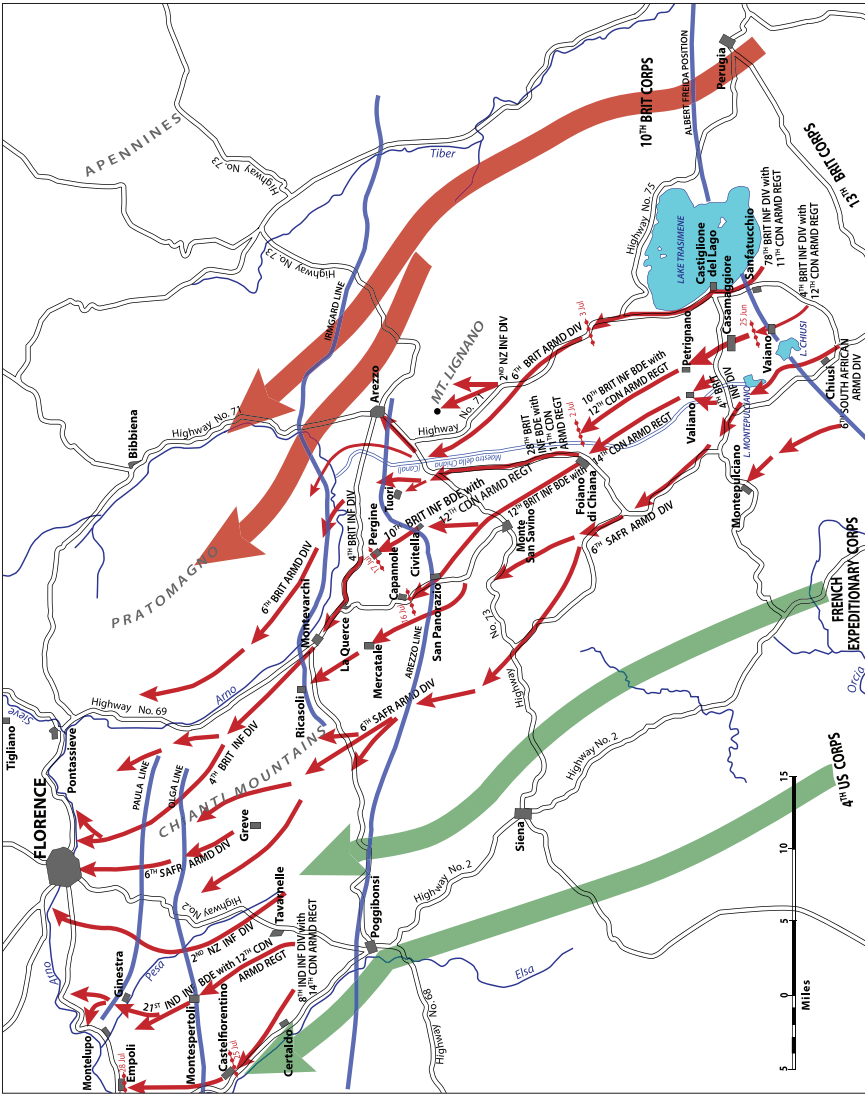
Brigadier Heber-Percy and members of his staff made a farewell visit to our mess tent. On both sides there was a most genuine reluctance to part, an adversity in which we were only sustained by gin and rum cocktails. Col[onel] Richardson and the Brigadier spoke words of mutual appreciation, the latter relating, how, on the previous day, the [Black Watch] had spontaneously cheered the tanks for two minutes. No eloquence could have meant as much as this simple statement. On our side the memory of 12th [British Infantry Brigade] will remain one of achievement, tuition, vigour, all seasoned with robust humour.¹⁸⁶

The senior officers of the 98th (Self-Propelled) Field Artillery Regiment had also attended this goodbye. The British gunners had been fighting alongside the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade almost continually since Sicily, and later both Lt.-Col. Richardson and Maj. Ritchie adjourned to the 98th's mess to hoist a few more toasts. "I've got his back, he's got mine" forged iron bonds, soldier to soldier.

On to the Arno

On July 16, Lt.-Gen. Kirkman's XIII British Corps launched a full-scale attack to seize all the Arno River crossings west of Florence. Spearheading the advance was the 6th South African and 6th British Armoured Divisions, with the 4th British Infantry Division between them and the 8th Indian Division in reserve.¹⁸⁷ Moving forward with the latter four days later, the Calgary Regiment was under orders not to press too hard and save their tanks for later. The column moved north from Capannole, making for the historic hilltop town of Sienna and then Poggibonsi. The circuitous 60-km route at least promised easier going. Unfortunately, the easier going ended at Sienna where they were swallowed up in an almighty traffic jam. By late afternoon, the squadrons reached their new harbours and, along with the Indian troops, were preparing to relieve Free French units worn out by their own weeks of hard fighting and now being withdrawn to participate in the forthcoming invasion of southern France. The tankers slept that night a mere 40 kms from Florence and the Arno River.

As it entered the line, the 8th Indian Division placed two of its brigades, the 19th and 21st, forward, with the former (and the Calgary Regiment) on the left, and an American division on their flank. The 8th's axis of advance lay generally north-northwest in the direction of the large town of Empoli on the Arno's southern bank. Brig. Dobree temporarily delayed the start of any concerted action so as to give the French more time to extricate themselves, but was open to the acquisition of better positions from which to launch such



MAP 12:
The Advance to the Arno, 21 June – 5 August 1944.

“concerted action.”¹⁸⁸ In the process of doing so, some German prisoners taken in C Squadron’s sector revealed very welcome news—while the enemy were aware of the Indians’ presence, they had no idea the 1st Armoured Brigade was in the area.¹⁸⁹

On July 23, A Squadron and the 1/Argyle and Sutherlands went on the attack, advancing north toward their standing objective, Castelfiorentina, which was known to be strongly held. As they closed in, troops of tanks fanned out to support the infantry companies by “dusting up” targets of opportunity and providing counter-battery fire. The intent was to envelope the town, and in the process force the Germans to abandon the ridge dominating the area, which was accomplished by last light. Meanwhile, in the 21st Indian Brigade’s sector some 15 kms to the southeast, C Squadron was temporarily supporting operations by the 1/5 Mahrattas. Save for having to navigate heavily mined roads, it had been relatively easy going until, as the column edged closer to Marcialla, intense fire from German artillery and *StuGs* put paid to any thoughts of advancing further. Maj.-Gen. Russell had made it clear to his subordinates that at this stage of the campaign their advances had to be carried out, when at all possible, without casualties, such was the reinforcement situation, but steady losses among engineers and infantry couldn’t be avoided.¹⁹⁰

July 24 dawned sunny and hot, soon to be hotter, which was pretty much all anyone could remember weather-wise over the preceding weeks. C Squadron and the 1/5 Mahrattas moved late, as was often the case because they had to await results elsewhere, and now found Marcialla clear. Labouring on they were repeatedly held up by demolitions and repeatedly warned by helpful locals that the *soldati tedeschi* were everywhere and mining everything. Forewarned, the snail-like advance continued, until by supertime the tanks and infantry had managed to get within a kilometre of Lucardo, where they came under fire from a hidden detachment of *StuGs* and took the wise option—consolidate and await the morrow. Further west, A Squadron had even less to show for their efforts, having spent the day firing at uncertain targets, shooting a company of infantry across the Elsa River, and getting into position to push some of their tanks across it the following morning when a suitable ford had been located. German sappers, with their usual thoroughness, had blown up all the bridges.

The rapid advance over the previous weeks had now all but severed XIII British Corps’ logistics, with shortages of artillery ammunition reducing many field guns and mediums to fifteen rounds per day. This meant the lead tank-infantry forces could no longer rely on the gunners to obliterate any opposition they encountered. Food was also running short, with the war diary lamenting sardonically that “war is war, and dehydrated potatoes are dehydrated potatoes.”¹⁹¹ But mostly it was the usual constellation of factors that were slowing

the advance—very difficult terrain, demolitions, and the seemingly numberless anti-personnel and anti-tank mines.

On July 25, C Squadron advanced slowly, passing through Lucardo but then stopping for the rest of the day as they waited for New Zealand success on their flank. To the west, A Squadron was still waiting to cross the Elsa, while B Squadron, now very spread out, continued to claw its way in the general direction of Montespertoli. By evening, the Highlanders had occupied Castelfiorentino and two troops of Shermans had managed to follow them into the town to assist with consolidation. The place proved to be one big booby trap, exacting its toll for days after it had been officially liberated.¹⁹²

July 26 brought the 8th Indian Division and their Canadian tanks, as well as the New Zealanders and South Africans on their right, up against the Olga Line, an improvised but formidable position stretching about 15 kms from Montespertoli to San Casciano. It was manned by *Fallschirmjäger*s, amply supported by *StuGs*, field artillery and a few tanks, including a handful of Tigers.¹⁹³ As A and B Squadrons and their accompanying rifle companies edged forward, they encountered the usual German welcome—all manner of mines and booby traps to complement mortar barrages and shelling. It was grim and dangerous work for the infantry and engineers, but tankers faced their own threats. Far worse befell the 2nd New Zealand Division who were hammered by a powerful German counterattack and suffered heavy losses. As was so often the German plan, their troops melted away with the ridge-top Olga Line “fad[ing] overnight like the morning mists.”¹⁹⁴

Il Fiume Alla Fine

Mercifully, both July 27 and 28 brought easy advances, a strong indication the enemy was hastily withdrawing to the Arno River and probably beyond. At long last the terrain began to slope downward, though the open country made the tanks sitting ducks and initially they were wisely held back. By late afternoon on the 28th, as 1/Argyll and Sutherland patrols cautiously infiltrated Empoli, they encountered a thin rearguard from the 3rd *Panzer*grenadier Division and delirious civilians bursting with intelligence about German defences on the far side of the Arno, some of it actually useful. Over the next few days, the Canadian armour participated in mopping-up operations all along the south bank of the river.¹⁹⁵ At first, enemy patrols crossed the river nightly, and while there were fierce skirmishes, “many were captured without great show of disappointment.”¹⁹⁶ But the nightly forays petered out, leaving only random shelling to harass the Canadian, British and Indian troops. Only the 8th Indian Division’s 21st Brigade and the Ontario Regiment were involved in any sustained action. It fell to the New Zealanders and South Africans on the

right flank of the XIII British Corps to mount the final thrust toward Florence in the opening days of August.

Calm Before the Storm

Having reached the Arno, early August saw most units shifting positions as part of a tried Eighth Army strategy to confuse the Germans and hopefully gain tactical surprise when the assault across the Arno was launched. As soon as the 8th Indian Division and 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade had handed over the Empoli sector, the regiment, divided into separate wheeled and tracked columns, set off on separate routes south and then east leading to a new camp south of Florence. For the tank crews, this meant 35 kms of twists, turns and switchbacks. The remaining vehicles followed a longer route with better grades, but traffic clogged both roads, stirring up the usual choking clouds of dust. To preserve secrecy, all unit identifiers had been removed or obscured, radio silence was maintained, and only rearward movements permitted during daylight hours. The reward for all this toil was inheriting a proper officers' mess with four walls and a roof. After a flurry "of voluntary homemaking, sweeping, picture-hanging, wine-hunting, fly-screening, radio-installing, furniture-moving [and] rug-laying, everyone slumped into chairs to view the magic scene."¹⁹⁷ Not to be outdone, the sergeants quickly laid claim to another building and proved equally energetic renovators. Nightly movie screenings and day-long leaves to Sienna helped lighten the routine of repair work and laundry. And following the wartime tradition, there was an end-of-campaign regimental dinner plus individual squadron dinners. Preparations for the former were chaotic, and when the promised pig failed to materialize, vegetables proved scarce and all a "procurement" party managed to return with was a jeep-load of pears, the situation looked grim. But at the last minute the mess secretary, Lt. Pat Patterson, wrought a miracle, and no one questioned how he had managed it. Both the commanding officer and squadron leaders kept their speeches witty and brief and the well-lubricated revelry continuing into the wee hours. Suffice to say the celebrations and rest soon re-energized the regiment. Otherwise, there was little to do but wait.

Scoring the Regiment

The Calgary Regiment's performance in the XIII British Corps' pursuit north of Rome, first breaking through the Arezzo Line and then harrying the retreating German Army to the Arno River, had been first-rate. As with everywhere else their brigade had fought in Italy, topography gave the resourceful and determined defender a notable advantage, which made the achievements of all three tank regiments even more impressive. Casualties had been bearable, certainly

when compared to the heavy losses suffered by the infantry they were there to support. That said, the tanks' repeated intervention in firefights had kept those losses from being much worse.

July had seen the 14th Armoured Regiment advance nearly 120 kms "with greater or less opposition the whole way" and all of it on tracks.¹⁹⁸ Stoney Richardson thought this an extraordinary achievement for armour—not just his men's adaptability to new operational demands, but also their dedication to the mundanities of maintenance—and he was right. These weeks had seen the first sustained operations under his command, and his overall management of the regiment both during and between actions had ensured that when the time came to fight it was ready. That said, most his officers and NCOs—indeed the new CO himself—were already a battle-experienced team which was a tribute to Richardson's predecessor.

The role of a regiment in an independent armoured brigade was more to execute than create operational plans—Richardson's most substantial contribution was preparing his officers and men to fight, and when fighting, to deal with the inevitable crises on their own. The CO intervened when appropriate. Most of the regiment's actions were fought by individual squadrons or even troops working in close conjunction with their infantry partner, and usually were only loosely linked to any larger regimental plan. For the most part, tank-infantry co-operation had been textbook, with all three of the brigade's regiments deserving their solid reputations. Thorough training reinforced by experience had convinced the 14th's officers and NCOs that practising the doctrine on the battlefield was, if not a guarantor of success, then certainly a prerequisite. Despite the seemingly endless grind of overcoming roadblocks, demolitions, mines, and ambushes, not to mention the constant threat of anti-tank rounds turning ones Sherman or Stuart into an inferno, their morale had held.¹⁹⁹ Being cautious was inevitable, for while Canada's volunteers were prepared to give their lives for the cause, they were not seeking opportunities to do so. Nonetheless, courage and initiative had been amply displayed.