

Ivor Cutler, 5th Battalion, The Northamptonshire Regiment

CHAPTER 1 September to December 1943 5th Bn The Northamptonshire Regiment in Italy The operation in Sicily, so far as the Bn was concerned, ended on the 14th August 1943, with the junction of the British and American armies at RANDAZZO. From then until the 20th September the policy was rest, reorganise and re equip. After the hard and gruelling fighting in which the Bn had successfully taken part, the comparatively halcyon days at RANDAZZO and PATTI, with warm and sunny weather, enabled everybody to fit themselves ready for forthcoming ventures. By the time we left SICILY on 20 September, the Italian campaign was well underway. All were in very good spirits when we stepped on shore at TARRANTO, as part of the 78th Division, very eager to join with the remainder of the 8th Army, who were engaged closely with the enemy further north. When the landing was complete, we had a light meal and marched to a concentration area about 4 miles north of TARRANTO. We bivouacked in an almond orchard, to await and marry up with the wheeled and tracked vehicles, which had come by a different route. On 25 September the move northwards began, and the Bn entrained for GIOVINAZZO, about 5 miles from BARI. For the next few days coy training was carried out including route marches to harden the feet. Then, on 29 September, the whole of 11 Inf Bde marched to TRANI, about 25 miles north. The following day it was learned that the Bn had been placed under command of 4 Armoured Brigade, and would shortly be in action. The preliminary to this was a further move in transport to SAN SEVBRO, where the Bn remained for the night. Next morning at 06.00 hrs the "Recce" party, consisting of the commanding officer, Lt. Col. J.F. Connolly, intelligence officer and company commanders went to HQ4 Armed Bde and received orders for the Bn, supported by 56 Recce Regiment and Tanks of 3 c.ly to attack and capture SERRACAPRIOLLA. The plan was for the tanks to move across country and capture the high ground west of the town while we, the infantry, were to follow along the road as far as possible in troop-carrying vehicles. We soon met an impassable demolition and it became necessary to take to our feet. Then we saw the tanks were moving forward steadily, without opposition. Taking advantage of the cover afforded by a valley, the Bn moved rapidly forwards towards the prominent hill on which SERRACAPRIOLLA stood. During the advance, loud explosions were heard and a heavy pall of smoke hung over the town. It was obvious that the enemy was destroying all he could before making a speedy withdrawal. From a commanding hill west of SERRACAPRIOLLA the tanks were engaging targets. They scored direct hits on enemy guns and vehicles and several fires were started. At 13.00 hrs, 1st October, five hours after zero, our leading 4 troops entered the town without opposition. "C" Coy, under Major R.W. Cook, MC, moved from the left and "B" Coy, commanded by Major H.M.A. Hunter, was responsible for the right sector. We received an amazing reception. Our men were mobbed by the civilians who were hysterical in their welcome of the first British troops to enter their town. The tanks followed up and immediately took up positions against a possible counter-attack. Several German dead, killed by the local inhabitants, were found lying in the streets and in the afternoon four enemy were taken prisoner by "A" Coy, commanded by Capt. T.J. Pepper. The civilians informed us that during the morning the enemy had withdrawn his main forces (about 300 strong) to the north of the town and had left small groups, which had been promptly dealt with. A further 4 wounded prisoners were brought in during the day to the R.A.P. Although German air activity has been negligible, no chances were taken and we left the town itself and took positions outside. The following day the advance continued towards TERMOLI, a small port about 25 miles north on the coast road. The initial objective given by the Bde Comd was the high ground between PORTOCANNONE and SAN MARTINO, which would form a base for the more difficult operation of crossing the river

BIFERNO and the subsequent capture of TERMOLI. While we were waiting for a bridge to be repaired just outside SERRACAPRIOLLA, twelve enemy fighter bombers dived on our troops and vehicles south of the town. A hail of fire from Bren guns and rifles gave them a warm reception and when Spitfires appeared on the scene a short battle followed. Two enemy aircraft were shot down. As a result of the enemy bombing, two men from the Bn were slightly wounded by shrapnel. At midday the Bn moved along the road in TCV's, but progress was slow for it was raining hard and cross-country diversions were rapidly deteriorating. Of these there were many, for in the first four miles three bridges had been demolished and the road was badly cratered. The Germans were using the same tactics that they had adopted in SICILY to slow up our advance. About 15.00 hrs an impassable demolition was met and the troops left their lorries and marched across country to their objectives in the area between SAN MARTINO and PORTOCANNONE. Meanwhile reports were received that SAN MARTINO was clear of enemy. Coys took up positions in the areas that had been reconnoitred, with "C" Coy right, "A" Coy centre, "D" Coy under Major M.W. Hunt left and "B" Coy in rear of the Tso Hq. Small parties went out during the night to PORTOCANNONE and these returned with information gained from the local inhabitants that the enemy had left the village just before our arrival. It is interesting to note that in every Italian village, however small, there is at least one man who can speak English of some sort. Many have spent some time in NEW YORK or in other parts of the UNITED STATES and one man, in order to show that he had been in AMERICA, produced a document which, on close examination, proved to be his discharge papers from SING SING Prison. During the night heavy explosions were heard from the direction of TERMOLI. Early the following morning, 3rd Oct, platoons from "C" and "D" Coys occupied the towns of PORTOCANNONE and SAN MARTINO. Nine escaped British P.O.Ws arrived at Bn Hq, having made their way through the enemy lines. They reported hearing many demolitions during the last four days of their journey. That morning, landing craft were seen approaching the coast south of TERMOLI and M.G. fire was heard from that direction. The naval craft were seen shelling the town. It was later learnt that a Commando raid had taken place and after a short fierce engagement the town had been captured. 36 Inf Bde moved up during the following night and later took over the sector from the Commandos. During this period our recce patrols went out to see whether bridges had been blown and a fighting patrol sought out the enemy without success. The Pioneer Pl, which was now proficient in the use of the American mine detector, lifted a number of enemy mines and destroyed booby traps. The general position of 78 Div was then as follows: 36 Inf Bde on the right flank was holding the high ground around TERMOLI. 11 Inf Bde was on the left. 1 Surreys, on the extreme left of the Divisional sector, had the task of attacking and capturing the town of LORINO. The third Bn of the 11 Bde, 2 Lancashire Fusiliers, was at that time under command of 36 Inf Bde. Except for heavy artillery duels on the left flank of 36 Inf Bde, 4 Oct was fairly quiet. That day it had been intended for 5 Northhamptons to relieve a Bn of the Bde, but recce parties, which had gone forward under Major L. Wigram, returned with information that the relief has been cancelled. At 10.00 hrs on 5 Oct the Bn came under command of the 36 Inf Bde; shortly afterwards the intelligence Officer went to TERMOLI to learn something of the future plans for the Bn. Throughout the morning heavy rain fell and the movement of transport became extremely difficult. The roads were treacherous and the fields a sea of mud. The rainy season in Italy had started and from that time we were shown many instances of how the weather plays an important part in the planning of operations. In several cases an advance was held up, and plans had to be considerably altered. That morning, the enemy counter-attacked with tanks and infantry towards TERMOLI along the ridge held by 36 Inf Bde. They had a certain measure of success, and 36 Inf Bde had to give some ground. It is mentioned that, owing to the nature of the ground, the 36 Inf Bde and 2 Lancashire Fusiliers were forward of the river BIFERNO, while the

remainder of the Division was behind it. Further, all bridges over the river had been destroyed, and R.E.s had not yet had time to construct another crossing. Also, only five tanks had been able to cross, up to the time the counter-attack was launched. However, the situation was saved when some rapid work by the Engineers enabled two squadrons of tanks to cross the river and support the 36 Inf Bde. After an engagement lasting the whole day the enemy was driven back and the position restored. It was a peculiar situation. We were able to see every phase of the battle from our hill positions and were prepared to repulse any attack on our front. Yet at a moment's notice we were ready to cross the river to support 36 Inf Bde. Two points of interest in relation to this battle are worthy of note. Firstly HQ 11 Inf Bde, which had been established in TERMOLI preparatory to the next move, found itself embroiled in the battle, and every man down to the cooks was called upon to become an infantryman. Secondly it was subsequently discovered that during the first four days of the British occupation of TERMOLI, a German O.P. had been established in the church tower in the town, directing enemy artillery. In the ensuing week little of interest affecting the Bn occurred. The town of GUGLIENESI was effectively bombed by medium bombers, and later occupied by a Bn of the 36 Inf Bde. One or two changes in our dispositions took place, and extensive patrolling was carried out. Throughout the weather hampered movement. A number of officers and men of the Bn of the 8th Indian Division which had recently landed in ITALY joined the Bn for a short attachment, to study our tactics and methods. The 2IC, Major L. Wigram, was posted away from the Bn. He had done much to foster the spirit of aggressiveness, particularly in patrolling. In SICILY he had trained a number of NCOs and men of the Battle Patrol in the art of infiltration and night work. Major R. Wasey joined us a few days later as 2IC. On 7th October we relieved 1 Surreys in the area of LARINO, behind the river BIFERNO. The ground to be held was very extensive and positions were taken astride the road leading to the river, in the form of an inverted "V", with "A" Coy at the apex, "B" Coy and "C" Coy respectively on the left and right flanks, Tac HQ in the centre and "D" Coy reserve with Main HQ in LARINO. During the whole of the period of our occupation of this area the enemy shelled the forward positions repeatedly, but as a result of well-sited and well-dug positions we received no casualties. This lesson had been truly learnt in previous campaigns. Slit trenches dug properly to the depth of 5 feet, give in most cases full protection against shelling and bombing. One gratifying incident occurred during a period of shelling in this area. Out of 30 enemy shells which landed in the Bn area, 25 failed to explode. But even on this very extended front the Bn was aggressive. In the early hours of 15 October, before dawn, "D" Coy commanded by Major M.W. Hunt waded through the river BIFERNO and took up positions on the high ground, just the other side. Their tasks were to ambush any enemy patrols and to try and locate O.P.s, gun and mortar positions. It was not possible for them to avoid being observed from their flanks and, immediately they were seen, the enemy opened up. Throughout the day they were bombarded by heavy artillery and mortars. Patrols which had gone on in front of the Coy encountered some enemy, and there was a brief exchange of M.G. fire. It was obvious, however, that the enemy had rapidly decamped when, later, fires and half-cooked meals were found. Until relieved by a unit of 8 Indian Division on the night of 19 October, we remained in our positions and carried out active patrolling to discover the enemy. Generally, recce patrols consisted of an Officer and two men, while fighting patrols were a complete platoon strong. The Bn was then deficient of some 10 Officers and about 100 men, so that even in a static defensive position the strain was great. No one man could afford a long rest for alertness was always the keynote. Everyone, therefore, was glad of the few days of rest and re-organisation which followed in the reserve area at SAN MARTINO. In all the rest periods it is invigorating to be able to relax both mentally and physically and then, with faith in one's leaders, colleagues and weapons, there is nothing but confidence in the future. On 22nd October the Commanding

Officer addressed the Bn and gave a detailed account of the orders of battle in Italy, possible future operations for the Bn, and lessons learnt from previous ones. It has always been the habit of the Commanding Officer to keep every man informed of the general, as well as local, situation so that everyone knows precisely what to expect, and what is expected of him. Subject to the disclosure of unpublishable information, no questions go unanswered. The next day we moved back into the line, at PETACCIATO we were on the right flank in Bde reserve. A rough picture of the Division's layout at this stage showed 38 Inf Bde forward, just behind the river TRIGNO, while 11 Inf Bde has 2 Bns, the 2 L.Fs and 1 E.S a little way back, and we covered the extreme right, particularly possible enemy approaches between the railway and the sea. "D" Coy was situated forward and right of the remainder of the Bn. The high ground held by both "A" and "B" Coys afforded excellent O.Ps covering the valley and mouth of the river TRIGNO. Patrols were carried out but no contact was made. During this period the Bn provided large working parties to assist the R.Es. Several conferences were held at HQ 11 Inf Bde, and plans were made for crossing the river TRIGNO, 5 Corps with 8 Indian Division on the left, and 78 Division on the right had been slowly but surely advancing on the whole front, hindered only by the difficult mountainous country, bad weather and innumerable craters and demolitions created by the retreating enemy. Our policy was to prevent the enemy from disengaging so that, despite the unfavourable conditions, the advance had to be continued. The crossing of the river TRIGNO and the battles that ensued are more particularly described in Appendix "A" and will therefore not be enlarged upon. At midday on 5 Nov, we were ordered to capture the high ground north of CUPELLO. This was part of a large operation which was successful in harrying the retreating enemy without respite. In the meantime 1 Surreys supported by tanks of 50 R.T.R. (4 Armd Bde) were launching an attack on the town itself, with, on their left, 2 L.Fs. Within half an hour the Bn was on the move, and an hour later CUPELLO was reported clear of enemy. While 1 Surreys were entering CUPELLO, by negotiating a deep ravine, we took a short-cut across country and accomplished our task without opposition. At this point the commanding Officer met the Tank Commander, and they decided to push ahead and capture MONTEDERISIO, a few miles on. The infantry advanced silently undercover with the tanks well sited to give covering fire, if required. The enemy had quitted the town, and the joyous population welcomed us with a wonderful ovation. Crowds milled and surged around the troops, who were taking up defensive positions around the town. During the advance a loud explosion was heard, and this was later confirmed to be the demolition of the bridges west of MONTEDERISIO, the main artery of the advance. The town stood on a high ridge overlooking a valley formed by the river SINELLO. During this phase, as well as in many others, the 3m mortars and Vickers medium machine guns had been manhandled over obstacles impassable to vehicles. These had to wait and come up when the roads had been cleared. Although at this stage the advance was too rapid to enable the enemy to lay mines and booby traps, the roads had always to be vetted by the mine-sweepers before my vehicles could use them. Thus, more often than not, the Bn moved across country, carrying on the man sufficient ammunition and food for 24, and on occasion 48, hrs. It is a rule learnt by experience that before embarking on any operation every man is issued, apart from his emergency ration, with some food, tea, sugar and milk. That night, covered by the Battle Patrol and a platoon of "C" Coy, R.Es commenced working on a diversion to enable tanks to cross the river. By first light the following morning, despite enemy shelling of the diversion, tanks of the 44 R.T.R. crossed and moved rapidly in the direction of SCERNI, supporting each other in their advance. Throughout the day a fierce tank battle took place on the upward slopes of the hill leading to SCERNI. Our artillery gave assistance by engaging targets spotted by sound and flash spotting. The tanks were meeting stiff resistance from Anti Tank guns, mortars and artillery. The enemy A/Tk guns were well sited, in some instances actually inside houses. At midday the Bn

forded the river and moved up across country. Later, when the mortar and MMG carriers arrived, we advanced and took up defensive positions astride the main road, with the 2 KRRC (the motored infantry of the 4 Armd Bde). The town of SCERNI was now clear, the enemy had withdrawn at dusk to a line west of the River OSENTO. The night 6th/7th November was quiet, and patrols were unable to find the enemy. The next day was spent improving our positions. There was some desultory enemy artillery fire directed chiefly against the tanks. Later that day we were ordered to be ready for an immediate attack on the ridge on the other side of the river OSENTO. This was not actually carried out until dawn the following morning, and it entailed climbing up an extremely steep slope. A previous reconnaissance pinpointed each Company's objective. Zero was at 05.45 hrs, and all Companies were in position at 07.15 hrs. Fortunately it was dry at the time and the essential fighting vehicles were able to follow up. Shortly afterwards a squadron of tanks, with a counter-attack role, joined the Bn, leaguering behind "B" Coy on the right. In the morning two of our men were killed and five wounded by enemy shells, which landed in "C" Coy area. We dug our positions, in the form of a semi circle; "A" Coy and Tac HQ on the left; then "C" Coy and "D" Coy with "B" Coy on the right. In the meantime the other two Battalions of the Bde were occupying other important features on our right. Later that day, and throughout the 9th November, rain fell consistently, and the lines of communication for supplies became impassable to all vehicles except jeeps, which had to make repeated journeys back and forwards to replenish the Bn. At that time, 11 Inf Bde were protecting the Division's left flank and we therefore were on the extreme left of the Div front. There was a fairly large gap of wild mountainous country between us, and the right elements of the 8 Indian Divisions, whose role then was the capture of ATESSA. We held these positions until 15th November, during which time there was little activity, except for artillery exchanges, and aircraft sorties during the spells of fine weather. But the weather was now deteriorating rapidly and it rained every day. One interesting patrol was undertaken, when a party of six were sent out with a number 18 wireless set to occupy a vantage point about 2000 yards forward and to wireless back information. The wireless reception was good and, although reports were negative, they were, none the less, important. Few of the reinforcements to join the Bn during the past six months were Northamptonshire men: many coming from the Suffolk, Hampshire, East Yorkshire and Leicester Regiments. In recent actions in which we had taken part these men, many under fire for the first time, had come through their ordeals extremely well. All showed keen and enthusiastic soldiers. On one notable occasion, when a former member of the East Yorkshire Regiment was asked to which Regiment he belonged, he promptly and proudly replied "Sir, The Northamptonshire Regiment of course". A fine team spirit was being built up so that, even under the most trying conditions, the men were cheerful and full of quick and ready wit. Our next location was CASALBORDENO, to which we marched through heavy rain. Here billets were found for all but a few, who went under canvas. The Bn had no operational role so it provided an excellent opportunity to clean up, rest and prepare for the next step. The mobile baths were available and a number of men attended a cinema show in the village. This next step, the crossing of the river SANGRO, was one of the most difficult operations the Bn had ever called upon to undertake, and it is a credit to our Officers and men that it was well and successfully carried out. A lengthy description is given in Appendix B, to be followed in conjunction with the sketch map. In this, as in other situations, the jeep, a most useful vehicle, able to negotiate any obstacle, enabled essential equipment and supplies to be carried up, which would otherwise have had to be manhandled. Again on 1st Dec we crossed the river SANGRO, this time over bridges constructed by the Engineers, and marched to occupy positions along the ridge to the right of FOSSACESIA. Proceeding by the coast track the move was slow, for the roads and verges were heavily mined and felled trees across the track were booby-trapped. The Bn pioneers

worked zealously to clear the way, and by 13.00 hrs we were in position. The ridge was a scene of desolation and devastation. Every house had been hit. Here it was seen what excellent positions the enemy had occupied. Their weapons had been covering the whole of the SANGRO basin, and it made our crossing of the river appear an even more creditable performance. On the night of 2nd December we were relieved by 48 Canadian Highlanders. When the relief was completed we marched back via TORINO DI SANGRO to CASALLORDINO, a distance of 15 miles. We arrived next morning at 06.00 hrs and occupied our previous billets. It was learnt that we were to move that night by transport to a rest area in the central sector, near CAMPOBASSO. For a month the policy would once again be rest, re-organise, re-equip and train for the next engagement. This was sorely needed, as we had not been out of the line for more than a few days at a time, ever since our first battle in Italy. Billets had been prepared in three villages: TORRELLO, FOSSALTO and MOLISE some 20 miles from CAMPOBASSO and between 2000 and 3000 feet above sea level. Soon after our arrival we were comfortably installed. In places there was even electric lighting. The weather had become decidedly colder. The civilians were extremely friendly and afforded their hospitality, they warned us that snow was to be expected at any time. When it did commence it would be several feet deep, blocking the roads and cutting off outside communication. Stocks of provisions and fuel were laid in but fortunately the weather was fine. During the next few days parties went into CAMPOBASSO for Ensa and Cinema entertainment. The Corps commander, Lt. Gen. M.C. Dempsey, CB DSO MC and the Div Comd Major Gen. V. Eveleigh CB DSO OBE visited the Bn on 8th December and spoke to some of the senior officers. "The best laid plans of mice and men, aft gang agley" and so on 9th December a warning order was received to prepare to move. Reconnaissance parties under the Commanding Officer went to the area of MONTENERO and on the night of 10th December after a 60 mile move by transport we relieved 2 Bn Wiltshire Regt (5 Div). The ground was very rugged and mountainous, heights ranging from 3000 to 5000 feet and it was necessary to employ mules to transport rations, ammunition and other supplies to the forward Companies. The mule track was over a difficult mountain track, and it took about an hour to accomplish the journey. Two platoons, 75 mules in each, were stationed in the village at the disposal of the Bn. The positions were "B" and "C" Coys forward holding high ground, with Bn HQ "A" and "D" Coys in the village of MONTENERO. In addition a Company of 1 Surreys came under command and were placed on the left flank. Owing to the extreme cold and exposure in the forward positions the Commanding Officer decided that the rear Coys would relieve the forward Coys every 5 days, and 1 Surreys did likewise. In view of the open ground the Coys remained on the rear slopes of the hills during the day and at dusk moved to the forward slopes to prepared positions. O.Ps were continually manned. Throughout the whole of the operations at least one Artillery Officer had been attached to the Bn so that artillery support was quickly and efficiently obtained. Targets which warranted it were engaged by the whole of the Divisional Artillery – furthermore, counter battery work was facilitated by accurate spotting by our forward O.Ps. Our patrols were busy, mainly to prevent infiltration of enemy patrols, to find out the enemy's intentions, not let him break contact, and to find suitable river crossings. The enemy were occupying the high ground immediately on the other side of the river and we found their patrols were enterprising. Two parties of enemy were seen to be wearing white cloaks as camouflage, blending with the snow. Now it snowed quite often and the hills were covered, making the conditions most uncomfortable and difficult. The road to the Bn from the rear was completely under enemy observation for a distance of some 10 miles, so that supplies and messages could only be brought up at night. In view of the likelihood that we might be cut off by snowdrifts a carrier pigeon service was innovated. Although many successful trials were made to test this method of communication, it fortunately never became necessary to use it. In the wide frontage there

were many gaps where enemy patrols could penetrate. Several standing and mobile patrols were found by the rear Coys to help fill in these gaps. On the night 18th/19th December a standing patrol on the bridge some 4 miles from the Bn was attacked by a strong enemy patrol. The mist and darkness assisted the Germans who came in from the rear and, after being engaged, the enemy patrol withdrew, but they killed one man and captured five others. While in these positions the enemy intermittently shelled us, but there was only one slight casualty. Our own Artillery and the heavy 4.2 mortars of the support group engaged enemy targets. Four other men of the Bn were captured during this period by a bold enemy patrol which infiltrated through a wide gap in our line. On the 22nd December four South African Officers were posted to the Bn and two days later a further officer and 86 men joined, to bring us nearly up to strength. The Bn now had more Officers than it had ever had since SICILY. A comparative list, showing the changes since those days, is attached as Appendix "E". Christmas arrived and we were to spend our second Christmas in the line. Memories of 1942 are strong in the minds of many of the men who had served with the Bn in the early days of the North African Campaign. Then their Christmas was spent in the bleak hills of TUNISIA, with only soggy biscuits as their festive fayre. However, despite conditions, a programme was arranged whereby the rear Coys could have their Christmas dinner in MONTENERO on the 25th December, while the forward Coys would celebrate on the 27th Dec after they had been relieved. A Carol service followed by Communion was held in the village the following morning and then the men had a wonderful Christmas dinner. Bn funds had bought turkey, Christmas pudding, oranges, tangerines, figs, nuts and mincemeat. The NAAFI issue of wine, beer, whiskey, chocolate and cigarettes, as well as an issue of pork, ensured that there was nothing lacking. Indeed it was wonderful. The following message from H.R.H. The Duchess of Gloucester, Colonel in Chief of the Northamptonshire Regiment, was read out to all ranks:- "My best wishes for Christmas, and the New Year to you all" But the feast of Christmas is international, observed by friend and foe alike and it is not surprising that on Christmas Eve "B" Coy, in their forward position, could hear in the distance the enemy singing the carol "HEILIGE NACHT SERLIGE NACHT" which they themselves had given to the world. Until being relieved by a Bn of the Irish Bde on the 30th December, little else of note occurred. An alarm caused by an enemy patrol led to an extensive day sweep over the area but, although no actual enemy were encountered, their patrol route was discovered and the information was passed to the relieving Bn. The New Year found the Bn in CAMPOBASSO temporarily out of the line. We are ready for what is to come.

CHAPTER 2 January to March 1944 January 1st 1944 The Bn at this time was in CAMPOBASA, former Appennine holiday centre; a beautiful city, possessed of fine buildings, wide streets and a general air of progressiveness so lacking in other Italian cities we had visited. What made it even more attractive were the recreational amenities it provided. Three cinemas gave two shows daily, changing programmes twice a week, and the old Opera House was converted into a theatre for visiting E.N.S.A. Parties. A club for Warrant Officers and Sergeants, known as the "Crown and Stripes", was opened, and for the Officers "The Aldershot Club" and the "Royal York Hotel". This latter establishment provided not only food and drink but boasted an Italian orchestra comprehensively equipped with vocalists. On the afternoon of the 5th a warning order was issued to the effect that advance parties would proceed to a new location at 10.00 hrs the following morning. This was subsequently cancelled and the event was celebrated by a party at the "Royal York Hotel". After a series of orders and counter-orders, due to the fact that the roads, in places, were practically impassable, the advance party finally left at 09.00 hrs in the morning of the 7th. On the 11th January the Bn moved into a series of picturesque villages: "A" and "S" Coys in SESSANO, Bn HQ and "B" in PESCOLANCIANO, and "C" and "D" Coys in

CAROVILLI. Billets were comfortable and all were soon settled in. In passing, Bn HQ was established in a magnificent old 17th century castle in PESCOLANCIANO, inhabited by a real live Baron and Baroness. This castle was entered over a draw-bridge, and when the draw-bridge was up the castle was circled by a 200 ft. drop. The Mess was established within, and contact soon made with the Baron and his consort. The scenery in this location was probably the most beautiful we had seen in the course of our wandering through Italy. Mountains rose sheer on every side, their snow-covered summits glistening in the bright wintry sun. In the valleys nestled picturesque villages, their normally dirty exterior concealed under a blanket of pure white snow. A few of us borrowed skis and took our first tentative timid steps on the more gentle of the slopes, Others satisfied themselves with the less spectacular sport of climbing a mountain top, to be rewarded with a view of mountains, crags, valleys and gullies stretching for miles in every direction. Advantage was taken of the quiet situation, and a certain amount of training was carried out with emphasis on brushing up the wireless knowledge of the officers. To assist in this a wireless "circus" visited the Bn to instruct all officers in operating the No. 22 Set. The Bn S.O. – at that time Lt. J.R.S. Michell – toured Coys in turn with a party of signallers, to demonstrate the No. 18 and No. 38 Set. On the 14th January the Bn received the news that the Div Comd, Major-General G.P. Keightley, CB, OBE, would visit the Bn in a few days' time. As a result, drill parades were carried out daily, and on the 17th a full dress rehearsal was held for the following day's inspection. After the parade, the G.O.C. saw every officer in the Bn and complimented the Commanding Officer on the smartness and general turnout of all ranks. "O" Gps were held on the morning of the 20th and orders given for the relief of 1 Surreys in the VASTOGIRADI area, At the same time an advance party for the 2 LP arrived in the area from CAMPOBASSO. At this juncture it must be pointed out that the system of reliefs carried out in this zone was in the nature of a triangle, the corners of which were situated in CAMPOBASSO, PESCOLANCIANO and VASTOGIRARDI. The 3 Bns in the Bde occupied these corners in turn for a space of 7 days: therefore "A" Bn, as relieved by "B" Bn, who had spent 7 days in PESCOLANCIANO, "C" Bn meanwhile moved from CAMPOBASA to PESCOLANCIANO. Such, at any rate, was the plan, but the weather more often than not interfered with the schedule. At 07.30 hrs on 21st Jan "A" Coy moved by MT to CAPRACOTTA, the rest of the Bn following in the afternoon. The TVC's were hampered by bad conditions on the roads caused by snow drifts, particularly in the region of CAPRACOTTA, where bull-dozers had to tow the TCV's through a diversion built to avoid snowdrifts 18 ft. deep. By 17.30 hrs Coys found themselves located as follows: "A" Coy CAPRACOTTA, "B" and "C" Coys SAN PIETRO, "D" and "HQ" Coys VASTOGIRADI. The three towns – CAPRACOTTA, VASTOGIRADI and SAN PIETRO – constituted a garrison with all the troops in the area coming under the Garrison Commander – at SAN PIETRO Major H.M.A. Hunter, at CAPRIACOTTTA Major T.J. Pepper – at VASTOGIRADI the Commanding Officer. The Q.M. continued to vegetate at CAROVILLI. At CAPRACOTTA every single house, with the exception of the Church (occupied by "B" Coy), was demolished to its foundation. It was one of the first examples of the complete and deliberate 'scorched earth' policy we had seen in this country. Chalked on the shattered walls of a few of the buildings were the words "How do you like your winter quarters, Tommy?". Extensive positions were dug and the Bn settled down behind its defences to watch and wait. The ground in this area was very simple. CAPRACOTTA and SAN PIETRO stood on the right and left ends respectively of the ridges, which sloped gently down to the SANGRO River, some three miles away. On the northern bank of the river, the formation of the ground repeated itself with a similar slope reaching up to a ridge occupied by the enemy. The front lines therefore were in the region of 7 miles apart, with the country in between forming a happy hunting ground for patrols. Lieut. G.W.R. Terry of "A" Coy led a fighting patrol of 20 Ors back to ATELETE, and the next morning reported by wireless that he had been

successful and was returning to his own lines. His night's "bag" amounted to 1 enemy killed, 1 wounded and 1 prisoner. These were later identified as belonging to 305 Inf Div. Hard upon the heels of this success "B" Coy provided another special patrol under Lieut D. Jewell to proceed to an objective north of the SANGRO which left at 18.00 hrs on the 28th with instructions to return on the morning of the 31st, or as soon as the mission was completed, the mission being to capture prisoners and therefore secure identifications. In order that this patrol should carry out its task in as comfortable a manner as possible, arrangements were made for it to cross the river "dry-shod". This consisted of enlisting the aid of half a dozen mules whose strong backs provided ferries for men, Bren guns, PIATs, wireless sets and the rest of the variegated paraphernalia of war. The next few days were uneventful and on the 31st January the Bn was relieved by 2 L.F., proceeding to AGNONE, a large provincial town, several miles to the south. Meanwhile "B" Coy's patrol had wirelessed back for permission to stay out another day. This was readily granted, allowing the patrol to conclude its mission satisfactorily and it returned to SAN PIETRO on the 1st of Feb, bringing with it 2 Germans. The Bn had no sooner organised itself comfortably in AGNONE, than the time came to move on again. In fact, the advance party hit the trail exactly 24 hrs after its arrival in the town. So great was the air of secrecy enshrouding forthcoming plans that the rumour again flourished luxuriantly. An icy douche was, however, administered to half-formed hopes that we were going home when the advance party was issued with route cards. The destination was CASTELFRENTANO. A quick glance at the map confirmed the fact that this town was a stone's throw south of the German bastion of ORSGNA. So into the trucks and off we went, travelling straight across the Italian mountain chain until, in the late afternoon, the ADRIATIC SEA came into view. After crossing the SANGRO by means of a 1200 ft. Bailey Bridge there was a slight check to allow a conference between the advance party Commander and a Brigade L.O. As a result of the conference the plan was changed and the party proceeded to LANCIANO instead of CASTELFRENTANO. At dusk LANCIANO was reached and the party commenced work in order that the billets would be ready in time for the Bn who were arriving the next day. The billeting area allotted consisted of an ex-tobacco factory which had been used as transit camp by our predecessors. The strategic aspect of our stay in LANCIANO was not quite as grim as previously believed. The Bn occupied the role of a counter-attack force available at short notice to assist a Canadian Unit, should they be pushed off the ridge they were holding before ORSOGNA. Routes to the objective start lines, and all the necessary information required should a sudden move be necessary, were all tied up, after which we settled down to a watching brief. LANCIANO was some seven miles behind the front and had escaped undue damage during the initial battle for the SANGRO Ridge and the approaches to PESCARA. As it possessed a good Opera House and an up-to-date Cinema, these buildings served as places of entertainment for the troops. A number of excellent shows were out on at the Opera House, including a visit from Lesley Henson, Hermione Gingold, and the remainder of their party. Mobile cinemas also visited "EL ALCAZAR" practically every day and played to capacity audiences perched on old tobacco crates, hat stands and various other articles of equipment which could be pressed into service in lieu of the luxurious, plush tip-up seats of the modern picture house. One memorable afternoon the Signal Platoon were playing football on a field behind the town, blissfully unaware that German guns were being trained upon them. Suddenly a sharp little "stonk" burst around the field and the game was hurriedly abandoned. Apart from the shelling, life flowed by peacefully enough and the Bn spent an enjoyable ten days there. News of movement was again in the air and on the 11th the Bn moved off once more. This time the destination was CASAL NUOVO, a small town in the region of FOGGIA. The activities of the advance party on this move deserve particular mention. It left some three days ahead of the Bn and proceeded to LUCERA where, owing to rain, snow and

sleet, they were forced to call it a day and spend the night in a couple of old houses. Next day word was received that billets had to be found for the Bn in the village of ROSSELLA, some 12 miles away. This was done in the middle of a violent rainstorm with the coy representatives trudging around like drowned rats, knocking on doors, startling Italian housewives and demanding “avers voi una stanza non occupada?” which, for those who are not students of the Italian language, means “Have you an unoccupied room?”. This time the scene shifted to LUCERA, a grimy town near FOGGIA. On arrival at this point the town Mayor (nobody ever found out how he became involved in the affair) directed Major R. Wasey and his henchmen to the twin villages of CASEL NUOVO and CASAL VECCHIO. With haunting mental pictures of the Bn wandering aimlessly about southern Italy without a home to call its own, the party dashed off at top speed. The journey was peaceful enough, until a peasant’s cart pulled onto the road in front of the leading 3-tonner. The driver stood on everything he had, the truck shuddered to a violent halt and promptly fell on its side. As it was a heavily loaded and thickly populated vehicle, much consternation was caused among all concerned, especially to Major Wasey who was riding in the front. The language issuing from the rear of the truck held all enthralled as, one by one, the survivors crawled clear of the wreck on all fours. The Bn moved in the next day after an 8 hour run in the TCV’s. At this time of the year weather conditions were bad, with alternating rain, snow and sleet and bitter icy wind. As the route mapped out for this move lay once more across the mountains, trouble with bad road surfaces was anticipated. This anticipation was fully realised. The first check, a halt of two hours, occurred at LUCERA, after which progress was slow and painful. As the column climbed higher, difficulties increased proportionately, until a halt was called in the mountain town of MOTTA. Here billets and cookhouses were hurriedly obtained and everyone settled down to make the best of a bad job. When morning came complete chaos was revealed. Convoys were lying about all over the place, in hopeless confusion, as a fleet of Scammels endeavoured to cope with the situation. Following much high-pressure staff work, the wheels began to turn once more and the convey wended its way up the tortuous mountain road. It was on this part of the journey that Lieut. R.N. Ruddock came into his own. A few weeks previously he had performed a spell of duty commanding the MOTTA Road Post, and consequently was considered an expert in the business of negotiating vehicles through snowdrifts and round icebound corners. So, with alacrity, he donned the mantle of greatness thrust upon him and with a great show of energy dashed up and down the column waving his stick until all the obstacles were surmounted. It was a wonderous performance. A wearisome day brought the Bn to the town of ALFIE, on the road to CAPUA. By this time it was dark – a moonless and starless night. An hour previously a truck carrying “S” Coy’s M/Gunners had left the road and turned over in a field, one man being killed and several others injured. It was a tragic event. It had been understood that the final destination was ALFIE, but on arrival there the convoy had to proceed to an area in the region of CAPUA over 30 miles away. By this time vehicles were scattered about the countryside in various states of disrepair and the convoy was now a convoy in name only. In view of this the Commanding Officer, with a number of T.C.V’s, went forward to the new location, making arrangements for the remainder to come on as soon as complete. All that night trucks rolled up to the collecting point and by dawn were ready to resume the journey. The Bn was together again by noon in the village of SAN SECONDINO. The whole Division was concentrated in this area and we all assumed (later events proved this assumption to be correct) that it was preparatory to a move to the CASSINO front. SAN SECONDINO had suffered bitterly from the fighting that ensued along the axis of Highway 6 after the crossing of the VOLTURNO. The Quartermaster – Capt. D. Ord – had taken part in that fighting as a member of the 56th Division, and consequently knew all there was to know about the village and its environs. The rumours and half truths concerning the Division’s future role

were crystallised into facts when the Divisional Commander addressed all Officers and Senior NCO's on the subject of the forthcoming operations, the object of which was to break into the LIRI Valley and open the road to ROME. Armed at last with the knowledge of what was soon to be expected of it, the Bn settled down to training, special emphasis being laid on mine clearing and night operations, as it was fully realised that these infernal machines would be sown in large numbers over the battlefield. Running parallel and south of Highway 6 where it passes through CASSINO is the railway line to ROME. With typical thoroughness the Germans completely tore up the tracks as they retreated, and at bridges, culverts and viaducts demolished the embankment. The embankment was soon repaired and pressed into service as a road, which proved vitally important in supplying troops dug in on the banks of the RAPIDO, and opposite CASSINO STATION. To distinguish it from Highway 6, the road was christened "Speedy Express". The Bn's new home lay along Speedy Express in a series of nondescript fields dotted here and there with stunted, sorry-looking trees. The battlefield picture was completed by the broken empty shells of one-time farmhouses. The Bn arrived in the rain after dark. Companies were detached from the column and led to their respective areas. As it happened, there was little tentage available, so everybody had to improvise as best he could. Some of the improvisations carried out were remarkable. One Company found itself parked alongside an old water aqueduct. On closer inspection it was revealed that the water channel was supported by a series of low arches. It did not take long for the Company to appreciate the situation, seize spades, and with frantic desperation borne of a desire to escape the downpour, dig the earth out from the arches until they made reasonable shelters. So attached did this Company become to its kennel-like habitations that it refused to change them for tents. Within a few days the arches were improved beyond recognition. The floors were lined with straw and the open sides were boarded up and covered with a thick layer of mud, which kept out the cold and the rain. Some even boasted a home-made electric light system and miniature stoves. Bn HQ was fortunate enough to find themselves a house. It wasn't much of a house but it did provide a certain amount of shelter, although during the first night the Padre's bee received a thorough soaking from a steady stream of water, which poured through a hole in the roof. Within a short time of our arrival, full details were issued of the forthcoming operation. CASSINO, stumbling block of previous offensives was to be crushed by a "thousand bomber" raid after which the New Zealanders would clear the town and sweep down the west bank of the river RAPIDO. As soon as this objective was successfully attained the 5th Northhamptons and 2LF were to force a crossing of the river and clear up what enemy resistance remained. An early crossing had been attempted in January by two American Brigades who were repulsed with very heavy losses in what was later known as "The Battle of Guts". The enemy were holding their "Gustav Line" in great strength. Its right flank was firmly anchored in the three strong points of CASSINO, the Monastery and MONTE CAIRO. The left flank rested on the natural barrier of the ARUNCI MOUNTAINS. Linking these two bastions was the river RAPIDO, a deep, fast-flowing stream with steep banks. It was an ideal defensive position and had been quoted as such in old-Italian military textbooks. To make the line completely secure, the Germans flooded the low-lying country round CASSINO, making it impassable for tanks. Such then was the nut that had to be cracked. As the river crossing would have to be made by assault boat, training was carried out by Companies in large puddles and sheets of water with which the area abounded. Playing with these boats was quite an amusing pastime and comic relief was provided by the inevitable man falling into the water. All through February the rain came down in torrents converting tracks and fields into waterlogged swamps which consistently postponed the awaited offensive. It had been arranged that when the bombing of CASSINO started the Bn would move forward to an assembly area. With monotonous regularity rain continued to fall and the only activity

undertaken by the Bn was to provide covering parties for groups of Royal Engineers who were striving with might and main to prepare passable tracks down to the river. During this period the Germans were patrolling strongly and on a number of occasions had encounters with 1st East Surreys who were manning the forward positions. Day succeeded day and still no hint of action was forthcoming, then suddenly on the 15th March the Bn was summoned to an address by the Commanding Officer. "Der Tag" had arrived and that morning the bombing would start. Soberly and with full realisation of the importance of the task that lay ahead the Bn prepared to move forward. Meanwhile the first wave of bombers appeared flying high above CASSINO. They circled lazily over the town like little silver insects. Those of us who were watching saw small black shapes detach themselves from the bellies of the planes and go screaming down into the embattled town exploding one after another with an overlapping series of angry crumps. The attack was on. For three hours, wave after wave of planes came over, jettisoned their deadly cargoes and turned for home. It was an awe-inspiring sight. The fact that we human beings were cowering under that colossal weight of bursting red-hot metal ceased to exist. The fact that we were human beings ourselves also ceased to exist. Individual personalities were at a discount. We were all mechanical cogs of a mighty inexorable machine that was driving us on to an unknown future over which we had no control. Just before the bombing ended the Bn moved forward into the assembly area, a procedure that was enlivened by odd enemy shells. Once established, companies carried out last-minute preparations and sat down to watch and wait. Conflicting reports began to drift in from CASSINO. The New Zealanders were through the town. The New Zealanders had been driven out of the town. The Indians had captured the Monastery. The Indians had been cut to pieces. From this jigsaw of reports and rumours the picture slowly pieced itself together. The attack was not meeting with the success anticipated. Although fighting with superb heroism the New Zealanders and Indians were finding Heindrich's parachutists a tough proposition. Well dug in with carefully-sited machine guns the Germans were hitting back with ferocious fanaticism, seemingly unshaken by the bombing. After several days it became apparent that the attack was petering out after having gained a few yards of blood-soaked ground. Meanwhile the Bn remained in a state of readiness. Despite the fact that a few thousand yards away raged a mighty battle, conditions in the Bn's area were quiet. Enemy shelling was sporadic and caused little damage with the exception of one shell which hit a house occupied by "B" Coy. Major Rosser, M.C. of the South African Army and "B" Coy Commander was seriously wounded. He subsequently lost a leg. It was now quite obvious that we would not be required to cross the RAPIDO and after over a week in the assembly area the Bn moved back to MIGNANO preparatory to the relief by 78 Division of an Indian division in the mountains between the Monastery and MONTE CAIRO.

CHAPTER 3 March to July 1944 GENERAL SITUATION The general layout of the front on March 24th was as follows: The American Fifth Army was on the left from the sea to the ARUNCI MOUNTAINS. The Eighth Army held the line of the GARO and RAPIDO Rivers, over which they had a bridgehead. CASSINO and the Monastery area were mainly in German hands, but 8th Army Indian troops were on the high ground behind the Monastery and overlooked it. To their right Allied troops held positions across the APPENNINES to the ADRIATIC. THE STORY OF THE BOWL The Move Up At 8 o'clock in the evening on 24th March 1944 the Commanding Officer left PIAVIOLI, near MIGNANO where the Bn was resting. With him went a reconnaissance party. The journey was made in total darkness, one truck overturning en route. His exact destination was not known, but it was considered to be in the CASSINO area. Telephones rang, orders were given, the Bn worked hard and in two hours in a blinding snowstorm 80 vehicles took the road

heading North. Overnight a good sleep had been enjoyed. Due to this, and to previous experience in moving, things went without a hitch. Moving slowly, due to lack of information, the column passed through MIGNANO on to Route 6. Five miles further on the main road was left and the column took an Army road bulldozed through olive groves. Near SAN PIETRA, where this road commenced, the I.O. was seen driving at break-neck speed towards us. The column stopped to hear the latest information about its destination. Capt. Dave Brown was rather stupefied at the question, stating that he had come back to ask us where we had been told to go. Moving on a bit further the column drew up by the side of the road between S. VITTORE and CERVARO. It was a dangerous place to stop as it was in full view of the Monastery, and with great relief the column moved on again at about 6 in the evening. Vehicles had to proceed at 500 yard intervals. Everyone got through without incident. At S. MICHELE the column dispersed and men de-bussed. Dinner was prepared and the kit loaded onto pack-mules. This area was the eventual home of A2 Echelon. At dusk the long column marched on foot down into the Valley, which lay between the Monastery and SAN MICHELE. Famous landmarks such as CAIRO village and the Plasterers Arms were passed, the trek continuing up a mountain track that was almost invisible in the cloudy night. Hairpin bends and mules returning from the top did their best to upset the efforts of the muleteers to get their beasts up. Thoroughly exhausted, hot, swearing, but thankful, the Battalion was met at the entrance to the "Bowl" by Company guides, having on their minds the impression of fallen men and lost kit which had been evident on the journey. When only five yards from BHQ the Adjutant slipped on a stone, dislocating his knee. Fortified with morphia and Benevento Gin he spent the night under a deep mantle of snow and was taken to the A.D.S. in the morning. Major Pepper took over the duties of Adjutant and Capt. Ennals his 2 i/c took command of "A" Company. Description of the Bowl The Bowl, the area in which the Bn now found themselves, was aptly named; for here, in the middle of a range of hills, was a deep valley with steep sides. In it a certain amount of safety was enjoyed from the enemy's shells. It was the home of BHQ and officiating point for the mules. In it too were large dumps of rations, water and ammunition for the forward troops. Although shells and mortar bombs fell in the Bowl with alarming frequency, casualties were few. At the time, in fact, we were more frightened of our own shells, and short's from our own 4.2 Mortars.

The First Night The journey from SAN MICHELE to the line was made in two phases. The first was the concentration of the Bn in the "Bowl" and the second the relief in the line of two Bns of the 4th Indian Division. This relief took place on the night of March 26th. During the day the Companies rested and concentrated in areas prior to marching off. At two-hourly intervals they climbed out of the "Bowl" and went forward to take over the line. The relief of the Bns which had been in the area for a period of 35 days was completed without a mishap in the pitch darkness then prevailing. It was not possible during the night to see the area so everyone got down to taking stock of his own position. Occasional shells and tracer bullets went overhead. It was later discovered that, due to their numerical superiority, the enemy had the upper hand, but that was soon rectified and the position restored. At dawn the ground could not be studied owing to a heavy mist. When the mist lifted the scene was as follows: rocks lay everywhere. The men were in stone-built "Sangers". The positions were on a false crest and were well camouflaged from the enemy. In front lay a bare ridge culminating in a bump. This bump was *593 and was held by the enemy despite frequent attempts to recapture it by British troops. To the right of *593 lay a deep valley with another ridge beyond it. Over that second ridge lay Route 6 to the North of CASSINO. To the left of *593 lay the Monastery, with a depression between, about 800 yard from it. MONTE CAIRO overlooked the whole scene from the right rear. Everywhere the ground was stony and bare. Digging was impossible. Sanders served the purpose of cover and shelter very well but needed strengthening before the protection was adequate. A map of the area is appended. Conditions Holding dominating positions the enemy was able to employ snipers with good effect. The slightest movement on the part of anyone occupying a Sanger was greeted by a sniper's bullet. In consequence it was soon learned that during daylight it was essential to remain under cover. Look-outs had to be alert, however, as the enemy was only 90 yards away. Periscopes were used, but were often spotted by snipers and their positions frequently had to be changed. Conditions in these forward Sangers can be imagined. Nothing other than tea boiled over Tommy cookers could be taken hot. Haversack rations were the order of the day. Boxes had to suffice as latrines. Interior economy was carried out after dark when it was possible to get up hot dinners, which had been cooked further back. Rats infested the area and could be heard at night tearing at the bodies lying around. As the weather grew warmer so the stench increased and the flies grew more prolific. In "B" Coy area there was a farm building. Although no roof was left, there was a certain amount of cover on the ground floor. This was utilised as an R.A.P. and cookhouses for the forward companies. Here was cooked the food for the men manning the Sangers. The enemy often fired close to the door of this building, making entry difficult. Capt. Richardson, the M.O. thought that a live doctor was better than a dead one, thus staying indoors for a fortnight. Due to his taste for tea the sooty fires made him look black when he emerged. At no time was the R.A.P. further back from the forward troops.

Administration Meanwhile at SAN MICHELE, the administrative organisation was slowly developing into the most efficient machine yet organised to maintain a Battalion in the hills. After the teething troubles of the first two days no man, isolated in his Sanger at the front, needed to worry about his NAAFI, his food, his mail or his welfare. Everything humanly possible to do was done. This organisation was in no small way due to Major Wasey, the 2 i/c, whose tireless energy ensured the success of the whole thing. Mules, laden with a double issue of rum and a bottle of gin for the C.O., regularly left SAN MICHELE on a 3½ hour cross-country journey on the 7 p.m. mule train. The rations were drawn daily at MIGNANO. At SAN MICHELE they arrived at 8 o'clock each morning, where, amidst the pine trees, a space was roped off for them. CQMS Hayman then got his ration party, who were in the main members of the A/Tank Platoon, to sort them out into mule loads. A mule could carry 160 lbs, thus making it necessary to sort out the food carefully to avoid overloading. It was essential to put the more valuable items, such

as rum, tea, sugar and milk, on separate mules in case one did not complete the journey. Mail was put into metal boxes to keep it dry. Water was carried in cans. Loads were tied together with special ropes with metal rings on them in order that they could easily be fixed to the saddle, and were placed side by side with a space in between. Thus, when all the tying up was completed there would be a double row of loads. At 6 o'clock in the evening the mules would be led up the centre of these two rows and the loads hooked onto each side of them. The loads were placed in position on the order "load" given by CSM Mann, whose muleing abilities were excellent, his experience in the earlier battles for TUNISIA proving invaluable. Pack Transport The mules came from Pack Transport Companies and were driven by Arab, Italian or Indian muleteers. During the afternoon jeeps and trailers were loaded with rations and ammunition required by the Mortar Platoon, which was situated near the foot of the hills under the command of Lt. Mountjoy. These jeeps off-loaded at "Jeephead" and waited to bring back the guides who took the mule column forward. All supplies for the Mortar Pln were manhandled from Jeephead. Bombs, carried 3 at a time, eventually accumulated into a dump of 5,000. The departure of this maintenance train each night was the culmination of a day's hard work on the part of all those who had helped to gather together the supplies and load them. Led by Jeeps the mules slowly moved off with a Colour Sergeant in charge. Normally some 50 mules were required nightly to carry the necessary stores for the Battalion. In the first jeep would travel an officer whose duty was to contact the C.O. for orders and to pass on details of work done in the Echelons. Also carried by this officer was a packet of questions which usually remained unanswered. The Mule Track Wending their way down the Mad Mile into the valley of the Inferno the jeep and mule trains divided near CAIRO village. The jeeps kept to the road always hoping that the enemy's artillery would not open up. This road was a favourite target for his guns, another Unit's recce party receiving a direct hit on a jeep whilst proceeding along it. The "Plasterers Arms" was a particularly well-shelled area and jeeps frequently travelled round the corner on two wheels in a determined effort to ensure that the next shell would land on the jeep behind. The mules, where they left the road, went across fields. It was a shorter route than the road and was not subject to shellfire. Nevertheless the mules suffered very heavy casualties at times. One night nearly 40 were killed in a field near the "Plasterers Arms", the arrangement made to keep them forward immediately cancelled in view of this. Mules are expensive animals. They take 3 years to become efficient pack animals. Reaching the foot of the hills the mules commenced to climb the arduous track to the Bowl. Rarely did one fall over the side of the mountainous track but on one occasion Major Wasey was walking down the track when he tripped over a rope stretched taught across it. Feeling along it one way he touched a mule's head, and the other way an Indian doing his best to pull the beast up. The mule train on arrival was unloaded, the mules returning to their base as fast as their drivers could ride them. Rations were collected together by COMS Lockwood who, with Pte Petit and the butcher Pte Fowler, distributed them to the companies. The RQMS paid a visit to the area one night, but due to the exhaustion of the climb soon puffed off down again. The cobbler Cpl. Davis was also in the "Bowl" mending boots. A list of the normal supplies required for daily maintenance by the mules is attached at Appendix "A". From the Bowl the supplies were carried on the backs of Indian porters to the forward positions, aided by a proportion of L.O.B. personnel. Ninety Yards from the Enemy From the forward troops came back tales of high spirits and bravery. Manning their "Sangers" day and night with the same area of ground always facing them they were holding out stubbornly against the enemy's bullets and bombs. The sense of nearness to the enemy was very acute. In the darkness a displaced stone would make a noise out of all proportion to the quietness of the night. Numerous cans were strewn about which, when accidentally kicked, caused a salvo of mortar bombs to come over. Between the lines lay innumerable bodies – those of English, Indian, American and German

soldiers who had fallen in the close fighting of the past months. They lay in the open as it was impossible to get at them. At night time some of them were covered up with stones after putting a blanket, lime and creosote on them to hasten decomposition. Graves were quite out of the question. In the Bowl a cemetery was created where the bodies of those who had fallen near its perimeter were buried. In the darkness barbed wire was laid and sangers were improved and strengthened, although movement at night was necessarily precarious due to the continuous use of flares put up at the slightest sound. The sangers eventually resembled blockhouses. One received a direct hit, the occupants being uninjured. Alterations had to be made carefully. Disguised periscopes usually drew fire from the snipers the following morning. Shell-carrying leaflets were sent over to the enemy lines, some leaflets blowing in to BHQ. The Enemy Attacks "D" Coy under Major M.W. Hunt, was attacked one day by the enemy. The C.O. happened to be with the Coy at the time. The attackers came from *593 and advanced in broad daylight with grenades held in their hands behind their backs. Holding their fire "D" Coy waited until the enemy was within 50 yards of the sangers. Then, opening up, the enemy hurled his grenades and ran for cover into a small gully between the positions. Seizing their opportunity 2" mortar bombs and grenades went back in great quantity. "A" Coy and "C" Coy supported "D" Coy in their counter-attack. The enemy withdrew in disorder and after dark a party of "D" Coy crawled cautiously forward to find the bodies. Owing to the number it was not possible to tell how long they had been dead. They were all cold. This battle was a great morale-booster and caused a desire for further similar actions. Whenever companies had to go forward, they always chose the forward position in preference to the other, which was not in such close contact with the enemy. Impressed with their initial repulse the enemy did not appear again in force but fired from a distance. The Monastery could be clearly seen and any movement was shelled. By the end of the first week reliefs had been arranged. This involved ourselves, and the 1st East Surreys. On April 2nd "B" Coy was relieved, followed by "C" Coy and "D" Coy on separate nights. "A" Company had previously been withdrawn from this area to hold a position on the right rear, known as the "Snake's Head". Companies were thus able to rest for four days in the "Bowl" before resuming their vigil in the lines. Our Companies were relieved by Companies of the 1st East Surreys, the command alternating between the two Commanding Officers, depending on the number of Companies forward. This arrangement worked very well. 3* Mortar Support Unfailing support was given to the forward Coys by the Mortar Platoon, which was situated in a deep ravine behind the Bowl at the foot of the hills. The Surreys' mortars were under command. The mortars were well dug into the steep sides of the valley and telephones linked each section position to the comfortable and strong command post which, in turn, was linked to the forward Companies and BHQ by telephone and wireless. It was impracticable to have forward O.P.'s so that all firing was done direct from infantry PI O.P.'s. Where possible, the forward company commanders gave corrections direct by telephone. The D.F. tasks were seven in number and the code name was "Bashful". Later, another five tasks were added. All these tasks covered areas immediately in front of the forward Companies and all known German mortar positions. Particular targets were also engaged.

Fire Power In the area of 100 sq yards, 150 bombs, each weighing 10 lbs, could be brought down in one minute. Thus, for each German bomb sent over, 10 British bombs went back. Up to 10 mortars fired at one time. When the attack was put in by the Germans on "D" Company, all 10 mortars fired, the enemy retiring right into the barrage. A few days later an enemy patrol was wiped out by four direct hits. During the month 3,639 rounds were fired. Invariably the enemy retaliated when the mortars opened fire. Caves provided ample protection and only four casualties were suffered. On two occasions 75 mm shells ripped through the sandbagged walls and came to rest unexploded between the bipod legs. On 17th April the enemy brought down a very heavy stonk, one shell landing on an ammunition dump. This went up, rapidly engulfing other dumps nearby. The whole hillside caught on fire as red hot metal landed in the gorse. The damage amounted to one mortar blown to pieces and 600 bombs blown up. The lost mortar was replaced the next day. Supplies presented their own problem. All food, water, mail and ammunition was manhandled from the jeeps to the positions. Leave The heartening news that leave was to commence for all personnel was received one day with general enthusiasm. The resorts were BARI and MAIORI re-christened "Axminster". The latter was essentially a 78th Division rest camp and was the only place of its kind in ITALY. Situated on the West Coast south of NAPLES the men were able to rest for five days by the blue Mediterranean. An interest was taken in it by the B.B.C. who recorded the various phases from the line until the holiday was over. The Leave parties came down to the BOWL overnight where they congregated, descending the hills the next night. At the foot they were met by jeeps and trailers and taken to A2 Echelon where a hot meal and tent awaited them. After breakfast the following morning passes and money were issued to everyone and, still in their dirty clothes, they were transported to B Echelon where the Q.M. gave every man a complete set of clean clothes which were donned after a shower bath. Thoroughly fresh, the men were able to depart on leave in the right frame of mind. Parties to BARI were accommodated in a camp just North of the town. Captains' Conferences – The Staff On Good Friday, Maj-Gen. C.F. Keightley, CB, DSO, the Divisional Commander, visited A2 Echelon where he discussed the supply problems. Shortly after this visit the daily Bde conference took place with the Staff Captain, John Williams, in the chair. These conferences were the best occasion to discuss the failures of yesterday and the plans for tonight. Perhaps they were of benefit to some but, normally, the agenda, never having been prepared, they were most aggravating. Typical points brought out were the non-return of water cans from the forward areas: the loss of mule ropes: the shortage of tommy cookers which were required for the bridge-head: the loss of items from the previous night's mule train. However, they were necessary to tie up odd points such as Bde mules arriving in between "A" Coy and "B" Coy mules, and the Surreys' rations being unloaded in the dark by the Northamptons. Before the meetings closed, chaos written on pink sheets of paper was turned into order, and a round of gin back in the Mess helped one to forget that there would be another one tomorrow. Rum Oblivious of the worries of those behind, the forward troops continued to drink the rum that had fallen off the mules. If the Commanding Officer had a financial interest in rum sales then the mules would probably have drunk it too. The BOWL commenced to look like a town. BN HQ was the most ambitious and was named "Ville Rose". On entering, one would be confronted with a very "rummy" spectacle: buried behind the latest court martial papers would be Major Pepper. Dependent on whether you carried a bottle, he would, or would not, notice your entry. If he did, then all touch with the outer world was lost and the next officer to come up from A2 Echelon had to ask the same questions, making sure no bottle was produced. Perhaps the "Punchbowl" would have been more apt. The importance of rum to troops in these conditions cannot be too strongly emphasised. Any influential person who reads this History must ensure that requirements are met during this coming winter. The bottom of the BOWL was occupied by HQ

Coy and the Indian porters. Resting Coys were spread along the rim. Frequently, large stones crashed to the bottom whilst cries from up above gave warning of impending disaster to those below. The cries had the adverse effect and everyone rushed out to see what was happening, filling the valley with laughter as the stones went thundering past. Medical Arrangements The medical arrangements were noteworthy. Stretcher-bearers were constantly on the scene whenever a casualty occurred. Protected by the Red Cross Flag the wounded were placed on a stretcher and taken to the R.A.P. for the attention of the R.M.O. in full view of the Boche. The enemy respected the Red Cross and, in turn, his was respected. Numerous are the stories of comradeship between the stretcher-bearing parties on both sides. From the R.A.P. the stretcher was carried down the hill by teams of men, stationed along the track at 200 yard intervals, to the A.D.S. where evacuation continued through a F.S.U., M.D.S., C.C.S. to General Hospital. The journey from the line to hospital nearly 100 miles back, took only 24 hrs. From the stretcher the wounded man could see the valley up to MIGNANO, the view of the 8th Army seen by the Germans for so long. During his stay in the BOWL Major Hunt was awarded a Russian Decoration for valour, presented to him for continued good service throughout three campaigns. First signs of relief Advance parties of the Poles who eventually relieved the Bde, arrived at the end of three weeks. Considerable amusement was caused when they arrived as they were not easy to understand. Difficulties were, however, overcome and when the hand-over came everything was completed without any hitch. In fact, the officers were all so well at home that they were last seen staggering about from one sanger to another beleaguering the Germans with foul oaths. They seemed to know no fear. Before the hand-over was complete, A2 Echelon had been subjected to two shellings from German guns. On the second occasion Major Cook's tent was written off but no-one was hurt. Throughout the long vigil in the hills the administrative and "Q" side of Division had worked extremely well. The staff, from Lt.-Col. C.E. Tryon, MBE, downwards, had personally supervised the organisation and were frequently to be seen at night on the supply routes, ensuring that everything was being done that could be done. Major Pearson, MBE, A.P.M. and the Divisional Police also helped and were instrumental in ensuring that the supply routes were controlled and kept clear. Their work was invaluable. Relief The relief of the Bn commenced on the night of April 25th when the Poles took over. In spite of periodical shelling and Nebelwerfering, Coys came down the tracks and embossed at SAN MICHELE at intervals. In pouring rain the vehicles made their way back to CAPUA where they arrived at 7.30 in the next morning. On arrival they found the camp already erected. With considerable ingenuity, Major Cook, MC, who was acting as 2 I.C. and Capt. Andrews had built ovens, erected tents and placed blankets in each tent. For a week the advance party had been at CAPUA getting the area into one which could be enjoyed by the Bn which had seen nothing but stone and boulders for a month. The Camp The green fields and flowers and the blossom and birds were a welcome contrast to the bareness of the BOWL. Tents had been pitched in the fields of clover and young fresh green grass. The area was in a valley opening onto the VOLTURNO River and only five miles from SANTA MARIA. On either side, hills covered with mauve flowers rose to the blue skies. Streams ran through the fields and the feeling of spring abounded. The drenching rain on arrival, although soaking everything through, did not damp the spirits of the men, who knew they had arrived for a rest. Thick mud was prevalent, and trucks were bogged. It was a joyful day when two days later the sun appeared. The rain kept off for the rest of the fortnight. Feminine Invasion Miss Ruth Hoard of the Y.W.C.A. joined the Bn and became a member of the Mess. Miss Hoard was in charge of the canteen at "Cobbler's Corner" and sold delicious cakes there. About 3,500 were sold per day. The exquisite icing and marzipan being responsible for half the sales, and Miss Hoard for the other half. This feminine invasion always gave the officers an excuse to go out shopping in SANTA MARIA and CAPUS. It must be

recorded that, as a result of these expeditions, the Mess turned into a fruit and flower show. The hand of a woman was clearly visible. Entertainments E.N.S.A. shows in the camp and in CAPUA – cinema shows every night – baths, and trips into NAPLES – culminating in a performance of “Blythe Spirit” with Emlyn Williams – took precedence over training. In hospital CAPUA was near the General Hospital at CASERTA and NAPLES. When in the line the Padre always made a weekly journey to see those who had been less fortunate and were lying in hospital. His cheery words and news were the most sought-after things in the hospital: for patients feel so very much out of touch with the activities of the Bn. This close proximity allowed us all to visit friends. Major Rosser was still there and practically the whole of “B” Coy found an excuse to go and visit him. Training On May 1st the Bn went into serious training. Starting with individual work, it was gradually built-up through Section Platoon and Coy to Bn level. The Bn’s river crossing was witnessed by the Army Commander, Lt.-Gen. Sir Oliver Leese, Bt., KCB., DSO., and the Commander 78 Division, Maj.-Gen. C.P. Keightley, CB., DSO. On the same day Lt.-Col. T.A. Buchanan, MC who commanded the Bn in SICILY, paid us a visit. He was commanding a Bn of Royal Fusiliers. A night exercise and W.T. exercise completed the very extensive training which was to fit the Bn for its next battle. Mosquitoes became prevalent and all the normal precautions such as daily mepacrine, mosquito nets, sprays, long trousers, unrolled sleeves and buttoned-up collars were taken. Major Pepper left for the Staff College at Sandhurst but, very unfortunately, the Bn moved and no-one could say “Goodbye”. BATTLES FOR THE GUSTAV AND HITLER LINES MAY 11TH THE GREAT OFFENSIVE Heralded by the thunder of 1,000 guns, the 5th and 8th armies assaulted the Gustav Line from CASSINO to the sea. Crossing the RAPIDO, the 4th British and 8th Indian Divisions established bridge-heads over the river. The first assault on Germany had begun. The Bn still in reserve, the sergeants took the opportunity to hold a final party in their Tarpaulin-covered Mess – Major Percy, singing many bawdy songs led the evening on to unsurpassed heights, the noise only dying down in the early hours of the morning. Outside it was quiet. Dim flashes in the sky and faint rumbling told of war. In the trees nightingales sang oblivious to the destiny of those who listened. Everyone was well versed in the battle and our role in it. By the Divnl Commander downwards the Bn had been kept informed of the latest developments and with these thoughts in mind we went to be wondering about the future. INTO BATTLE On May 14th, at 8.30 in the morning the Bn in the Brigade column moved northwards up route 6 towards CASSINO. Near VALRANO the column halted in a very dusty field, the 2 L.F. column being beside our own. After a six hour delay we moved off again, turning at route 6 near MOUNT TROCCHIO, an old friend which we had seen from every angle in the past. After a night’s sleep, the Bn in single file marched off to its first major attack since the battle of the SANGRO last November. Wending its way down the slopes leading to the RIVER MORO the column was invisible in the heavy pall of smoke laid to cover the bridge across the river by Royal Engineers. This Bailey-Bridge was crossed, the Bn continuing on down tracks full of the destruction and carnage of war to an area in a shallow valley. SMOKE SCREEN Overlooking the whole area stood the Monastery. A good observation post. It was shrouded in smoke making observation of our movement impossible. At times, the smoke would lift, causing general alarm until further smoke shells were landed to conceal it once more. This smoke screen had been in operation for several months. Its effectiveness can be judged by the fact that three divisions were able to form up, unobserved, and launch an attack behind it. At a point about one mile beyond the river the Bn halted. Tanks lay behind the crest of the hill and as much cover as possible was made use of to avoid stray bullets. The C.O. called “O” groups forward and planned an attack onto the CASSINO PIGNATATO ROAD. This road was the Bn start line for an attack which was to start at 1600 hrs, but, owing to scarce information, it was decided that no chances would be taken and orders were issued for the advance. The Commanding Officer’s

appreciation was correct. The road was held in strength. The C.O's orders were given out at 1200 hrs and, after a very hurried reconnaissance, "D" Company started off at 1315 hrs to keep up with the Inniskilling Fusiliers on their left, "B" Coy on the right. Owing to the speed at which the advance had to begin, the Squadron Commander of the tanks could not be found and the advance began unsupported by tanks. Both Coys experienced considerable M.M.G. Mortar and shell fire. "B" Coy were heavily mortared on the start line before they were able to advance. Sniping was encountered but this did not hold up the advance. Just after half past one "D" Coy's leading Pl reached the objective, a road junction, and came under heavy M.M.G. fire from close range which was dealt with. DESTRUCTION OF ENEMY GUNS The second platoon went down a road towards a hamlet to assist some fusiliers who had come too far to the right of their objective. The leading Pl had, in the meantime, spotted an enemy S.P. gun some 300 yards ahead, which had been engaging in the tanks. L/Cpl Allkin and Pte McGill went forward with a P.I.A.T., fired two shots both of which hit the gun, the crew baling out. At 1530 hrs, half an hour before the attack was due to go in, the Company was lined up in a ditch by the side of the road when 6 Kittyhawks, mistaking their target, dive-bombed the area. A few minutes later our own guns killed two men in Coy HQ and destroyed the wireless set. The attack was postponed. Tac H.Q. moved forward and "A" and "C" Coys moved up between "B" and "D" Coys. Two hundred yards from its objective, "C" Coy was held up by heavy mortar fire and sniping. Putting on a final assault the position was taken from a well-entrenched enemy. Unfortunately Major R.W. Cook, M.C. was killed by a sniper when consolidating. During this action "C" Coy alone took 84 prisoners from houses and deep dug-outs. Altogether the Bn collected 126 prisoners from an area which was supposed to have been our start line for a bigger attack.

LT. W.A.M. HILLIAN, M.C. Lt Hillian in "B" Company was meanwhile very active. Seeing a German Patrol across the road moving towards a position which dominated his platoon position he took a Bren Gun and, firing it from the hip, charged the enemy patrol, killing and wounding five of its members. He then led his platoon forward and consolidated around the feature. For his pluck and daring he was awarded the Military Cross. "D" Coy, in position for the postponed attack, could not move from the positions by the side of the road until dusk, owing to the close proximity of the enemy. During darkness digging, interrupted and speeded up by Nebelwerfer fire, continued. MAY 16TH In the early hours of the following morning, "C" Coy moved across the road and captured a house, which had been occupied during the previous day by enemy and was causing trouble. During this attack two men were taken prisoner by a German patrol and marched off down the road towards "D" Coy, the route taken by the patrol on its way in. Lt Tallis and a standing patrol with "D" Company heard this party coming down the road, stopped them, found they were Germans, captured them to the disgust of the German Officer, and released the two "C" Coy men who promptly returned to the place where they had been captured and carried on as though nothing had happened. Continuous heavy mortar fire was experienced by all companies throughout the first night. Reporting the location of an enemy S.P. gun, "B" Coy gave Capt. Ruddock the chance he had been waiting for. Sighting his A/Tank gun in a good position, he personally loaded and fired it, knocking out the gun. At midday a large shell landed behind the house occupied by Main H.Q. The vibration brought the walls crashing down on the occupants, one of whom, a signaller, was killed. Frantic efforts were made to remove the rubble under which were buried at least six signallers, and one by one they were extricated, half-smothered in dust, and evacuated. Cpl Houghton was the last to be found and, despite continuous attempts by the M.O. to bring back life, he could not be revived. This catastrophe put Main H.Q. out of action as the 22 Set and 3 eighteen sets and communications were destroyed. Within an hour, Brigade had replaced the sets and communications were restored. Fortunately the Adjutant could not be recognised owing to bewilderment and dust. The shelling and mortaring was the heaviest the Bn had experienced in three campaigns. Colossal shells landed all day doing relatively no damage whatsoever. At 1830 hrs on the evening of May 16th a strong counterattack was put in on the Bn on our right, The Black Watch. This attack included heavy concentration of mortar fire on all companies. With the aid of tanks it was beaten off and the situation had returned to normal by nightfall. The 1st East Surreys and 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers had passed through the Bn, continuing the Divisional thrust for the main Highway 6 North of CASSINO. HEAVY OPPOSITION After the counter-attack the enemy apparently withdrew. Shelling became less frequent and smoke screens were increased between the RAPIDO and the forward positions. That night an air attack was made on concentrations in the area and for a considerable time bombs fell all around, some as near as 400 yards from Main H.Q. – one outside the R.A.P. Fires were commenced and one plane was shot down near B Echelon, the pilot falling by parachute gave rise to an airborne landing scare. "A" Company, commanded by Major D.V. Emmerton, MC, which had been in reserve in the initial stages of the battle, went through after the consolidation, following the retreating enemy. Despite heavy enemy fire which depleted their ranks they continued until further movement was impossible due to the weight of the fire encountered. After lying up, throughout the days, taking advantage of what little cover the ground offered, the company advanced in Night Attack formation after darkness fell. They captured a farm-house about 1,000 yards forward of the Bn main positions and dug in quickly; this proved most well-advised as, twenty minutes later, they were stonked in a terrific fashion by our own Div field arty – it says much for the effectiveness of the digging that no casualties were sustained. At dawn the following morning a company of 1 Surreys passed through and "A" Company was withdrawn to the main Bn area. FALL OF THE MONASTERY On the 18th

comparative peace reigned. The Monastery came into view when it was captured by the Poles, and the smoke screen abruptly floated away in the morning breeze. An extraordinary feeling of pride at our achievements and thanks at our deliverance pervaded. The Gustav Line was no more and the enemy had been given a sound thrashing. In the evening the Bn moved forward a distance of 8 miles to another concentration area in front of the Adolf Hitler Line. The journey was complete by 2300 hrs and everyone dug in and got down to sleep. During the Gustav Line Battle sleep was scarce and the opportunity was a godsend. The C.M.P. were conducting traffic along the tracks which had been so hardily won only a matter of hours before. Rest was disturbed by shelling. Casualties were suffered when the men were caught before they'd been able to dig in. A portee received a direct hit and was destroyed by fire. MAJOR "REGGIE" COOK, M.C. The loss of Major Cook was a great blow to the Bn. He had commanded "C" Company with great gallantry throughout NORTH AFRICA, SICILY and ITALY. He was essentially a soldier and, as such, will be remembered by all those who knew him. He was buried by the side of the road where he fell, at the side of two of his men. He would have wished for nothing else. THE HITLER LINE "C" Coy, now commanded by Capt McLeod was sent forward to hold a gap South of AQUINO airfield between the Recce and 2 L.F. whilst plans for an attack on the Hitler Line were made. SIGNALLERS Throughout all these battles the signallers, whether with Bn H.Q. or with a Company, showed exceptional devotion to duty. At all times and in all conditions they stuck to their sets, unheeding of all that went on around them. Lines were repaired under shellfire several times a day. The spirit which they showed, and the work that they did to maintain good communications at all times, are too numerous to record. The remainder of the Brigade was holding defensive positions facing the Hitler Line. The L.F.s were on the perimeter of AQUINO airfield and the Surreys on their left. Various roles were allotted to the Bn, one of which was to pass through the Surreys and infiltrate into the outer defences of the Hitler Line. Their task was eventually cancelled and the Bn was able to spend a few more days where it was. Very deep shelters were provided by the Germans in all houses in the area. Several were 20 feet deep and contained beds, chairs and tables. They were all on the wrong side of the houses for our use and were more of a novelty than a shelter from shelling. To our right raged the battle for PIEDIMONTE. This was clearly visible from our positions. After days of fierce fighting the Poles took it. It was the right hand bastion of the line. Shelling of the area continued. A draft joining the Bn came under fire sustaining casualties. As the days passed the shelling gradually decreased in intensity but the cross-roads behind "S" Company was kept under harassing fire.

“ELEPHANT’S BREATH” AND “PIG’S BACK” An operation in which we took no part followed. Known as “Elephant’s Breath” it consisted of a gigantic artillery concentration on the northern half of the line with the intention of drawing the enemy to the north to meet what appeared to be a large-scale assault. This allowed the Canadians to attack in the centre making a deep penetration into the defences. “PIG’S BACK”, the next operation, involved the Bn in an advance across the river AQUINO passing through the Surreys and L.F.s who were to make the bridge-head. Previous reconnaissance had shown the Hitler Line to be manned by inferior troops and to be incomplete in its minefields and its wiring. The First Canadian Division under a barrage of 21,000 shells, broke into the defences and were heavily engaged by both mortars and machine-guns, the tanks coming across dug-in Panther turrets. The Canadians put in their final attack on May 23rd from which few enemy escaped. THE ENEMY HAD FLED On May 25th at 0545 hrs the Bn moved on tanks up the lanes leading to the river AQUINO. Camouflaged in the leaves and foliage the men and tanks were hard to pick out when stationary. The first tank across the bridge broke it, necessitating the remainder of the Bn marching forward. The order of the march was “D” Company, “H.Q” Company, “A” Company, “B” Company, “C” Company. By 0800 hrs the Bn was concentrated and, led by “D” Company, advanced along a lane roughly parallel to the river. Mines were encountered three hundred yards ahead, which caused minor casualties to the tanks. The Bn however pushed on and one by one the houses in the area were reported clear, there being no opposition. In the area lay many dead Germans, victims of our immense barrages. In the cornfields could be seen the defences, and from hedgerows well camouflaged anti-tank guns pointed down the lanes. The Padre made history in this advance by capturing two enemy, one riding a motor bike devoid of trousers. The havoc wrought by our gunfire was devastating. Complete woods were stripped of branches and foliage, only the bare battered tree trunks standing. During the advance a sound was heard in a house in AQUINO. A Lancashire Fusilier stuck his head out of the window in time to avert a major disaster. TRANSPORT Whilst this advance continued the transport had been unable to move due to the minefields on the track. The 22 set was never out of touch with Bn H.Q. but, through being off-loaded from the 15-cwt to the jeep, was not reliable. It was essential to proceed forward. This was possible after Major Crocker had received a route to the Bn over which it was possible to pass. Digging through a bog the transport eventually managed to rejoin the Bn. Accompanying the transport was an Army Film Unit, which took many interesting films and photographs of the Hitler Line. As an indication of the speed at which war moves when opposition is light, Div. H.Q. moved into the Bn area three hours after the Bn had taken it. At our request we were allowed to remain until we moved on that night. ON AGAIN Rounding the corner in a cloud of dust the column, reassembled and in transport, took a wrong turning by following the tanks. Matters were soon put right and the area in front of the MALFA, over which we were to cross the following day, was reached in daylight. The largest house was reserved for Bn H.Q. and, as the advance was not to continue till the following day, guards were set and the majority retired for sleep. At 11 o’clock that night enemy aircraft appeared. Pathfinders dropped flares, lighting the area brilliantly. Then bombers appeared and discharged their loads in the Div. area doing little damage. Bn H.Q. received a direct hit on the cornice from an a/personnel bomb. No casualties were suffered but Major Hunt and Capt Piercey, who had taken refuge in the German dug-out under the building for the night, were considerably shaken when debris came in by the door. In half an hour the raid was over and sleep continued. Division received a few casualties near the house they took over from us during the morning. RIVER MALFA The following day at noon the Bn moved forward ahead of the tanks and crossed the RIVER MALFA, up to the shins in water. No opposition was encountered and the Coys deploying over a larger area occupied the houses for a few days’ rest. Before occupation each house was cleared systematically. Every house was numbered and

Coys reported the capture of each one by its number. The C.O. captured the best for BHQ much to the consternation of "B" Company who, arriving after him, began to organise a clearing expedition when he appeared on the steps. In the house was a dead German. He had evidently bled to death from a wound received during our shelling. Within half an hour he was buried. "B" Coy's area was beside the river. An Indian Bn, not knowing they were there, advanced through them registering great surprise at small parties of men brewing up in supposedly enemy territory. Just across the river lay ROCCASECCA. "S" Company found a bath, which became the property of all comers. Peace was shattered when medium guns moved in. Roofs were raised each time they fired. Here it was too that our much prized water trailer was stolen. R.A.F. DESTRUCTION The area from here northwards was littered with the burnt-out wrecks of vehicles and aircraft. Literally hundreds of vehicles were seen – testimony to the large scale attacks by fighters on the enemy's communication. The enemy's two bastions had fallen. Now he was only able to fight rearguard actions and then move on again overnight. Battle was not joined again until the 5th and 8th Armies had swept north of ROME into the hills. Occasional skirmishes took place, and here and there a strong pocket of resistance would be found and neutralised. THE MOVE TO ROME On leaving the area the C.O. was indisposed and left in his car with a temperature. The Bn moved in two bounds to its next objective, the hills to the left of ALATRI and the village of FUMONE. The first night was spent near SEPRANO and the second at TORRICE cross-roads. From TORRICE the Bn moved up route 6, through FROSINONE and ALATRI. The enemy was being cleared from ALATRI by 36 Brigade and it was found necessary to clear the left flank in the hills. The Bn moved up a valley, two companies on each side of it meeting no opposition. At the head of the valley the Bn consolidated for the night. RSM Surkitt, DCM, meanwhile contacted some Italian Partisans and, with his batman, stalked a German 88 mm S.P. gun three miles away in the valley. Lobbing a grenade among the crew and scattering them, he lay in wait for the party to return, eventually getting back to the Bn lines without casualties. In retaliation one of the Partisans was shot dead by the enemy that night, but the destroyed gun remained as mute evidence of the RSM's initiative. FUMONE The following morning the advance continued over the hills until FUMONE came in sight. "B" Company then went into it amidst the cheering inhabitants. No opposition was encountered and another bloodless victory made it possible to rest a few days, gazing on the wide span of countryside which lay before us. Fascists were imprisoned and the village was in a happy state of mind when we left it. The R.S.M. met his partisan comrades who proudly announced that two Germans had been killed and five wounded before they blew up their S.F. gun and fled. On the evening of June 8th the Bn moved out of FUMONE on its long journey up Route 6. Disappointment was great when a bypass was suggested as the means of going north of ROME but, on arrival at the end of the bypass, we were diverted through the centre of the capital. In the bright moonlight ROME was a grand sight. Its buildings showed large in the wide tree-lined streets and regret was felt when the dome of St Peters faded into the southern background. The journey lasted all night and was very tiring and cold. A cold grey dawn was just breaking when Captain Cave-Brown met the convoy to lead it to its final destination. FROM ROME TO LAKE TRASIMENE At first light on June 9th the convoy arrived at RIGNANO where it spread out in a field under the cover of trees. After the tiring journey most of the day was spent in sleep. The Bn was still well behind the line, although with the rapid advance still in progress, it was possible to travel 20 miles forward a day, remaining in the rear the whole time. Whilst in the area a Russian P.O.W. was brought in. He had been captured at BREST-LITOVAK in the original German advance and had escaped from forced labour in Northern ITALY on September 3rd 1943. The I.O. and an armed party searched the area for active Fascists but could find no-one. The roads became impassable due to the weight of maintenance traffic. All the services normally to be found one hundred miles from the enemy

were in the colossal drive forward. Rain did not improve matters at this stage and another two days were spent here before moving. The ultimate objective was changed twice. First it was to have been FROSINONE, then TERNI – but as both places had fallen before we could reach them the objective later became FLORENCE. Relieving Lieut. Hillian's platoon which had been guarding Kesselring's HQ – a very strong labyrinth of caves built by the Italians to house the government in the event of air-raids – the Bn set off in convoy in a northerly direction. The night was as black as ink and no lights should have been used. Twice the column, led by the Adjutant, took the wrong turnings, on the first occasion completing a circle, the head catching up with the tail. The route was via CIVITA, CASTELLANA, VALLERANO and VITERBO where the destruction wrought by the Air Force was phenomenal. On arrival at our destination, Sgt. Thirkill, who had been captured at MONTENARO last December, rejoined us. He had escaped when his train was bombed by the R.A.F. and had since lived with Italian peasants. On again at 5 o'clock in the evening we passed through CASTIGLIONE and spent the night on a spur within sight of the enemy across the RIVER PAGLIA. During the day 75 miles had been covered, and it was unpleasant to have to endure air-bursts and harassing fire at the end of every day. The following evening passing ORVIETO, which stood on a hill on our left, the column moved up the hills on the north bank of the river. On arrival in the concentration area at the top of the hill the enemy put some air-burst shells right above the Bn. No-one was injured. After a journey of 250 miles we were again in contact with the enemy. At 4 o'clock in the morning of June 16th the Bn moved by march route through the village of FICULLE crossing the river and making its way unopposed through FAIOLO. "A" Company, riding on the tanks of the Wilts Yeomanry, who were in support, crossed after the blown bridge had been cleared and made their way with the carriers following to FAIOLO where they halted. At 11 o'clock, five minutes after arrival, the Royal Air Force, seeing a block of traffic on the road and presumably being surprised that British troops should have been so far forward, decided to clear the road. Diving down to within a few feet of the ground they machine-gunned and strafed the column for 20 minutes, causing only 4 minor casualties and hitting nothing. Later, it was found that a report had been sent to Div. that an enemy column had been bombed and routed by the Air Force and therefore should make our job a lot easier. An attack was launched on MONTE GABBIONE at 1330 hrs supported by the Wiltshire Yeomanry, the artillery and Bde Support Group Mortars. The enemy could be seen quite clearly moving trucks and tanks about on the road running through the town. "A" COMPANY IN MONTE GABBIONE Advancing from FAIOLO "A" Company formed up in a wood prior to attacking the town. Co-operation with the tanks was found exceedingly difficult, due to the ground, and on advancing from the wood the company found itself without direct tank support. The country was close and approach under cover comparatively simple for the first 2,000 yards. On leaving this cover MG and rifle fire was encountered causing a few casualties. MONTE GABBIONE overlooked the entire area but steady progress was made towards the foot of the concealed hill on which it stood, by "A" Company with "C" Company on the right. A group of houses at the left edge of the town appeared to be the key point of the German defence, and certain definite buildings were selected for platoon objectives. Immediately the barrage lifted 8 Platoon, led by Lieut. G.W.R. Terry, made a swift move round the left flank of the houses of which the school was the outstanding point: 9 Platoon advanced to a large building on the right and 7 Platoon remained just below the town as fire platoon. As each Platoon reached the road running out from the town an enemy staff car passed. Too late to prevent its escape, the Section Commander on the spot directed his Bren fire gun onto it and the car swerved madly, and screams were heard from its occupants. It was later found overturned just beyond the corner. Meanwhile the remainder of 8 Platoon had entered the school by the front door, killing one German and wounding another as they attempted to escape. The wounded man was made

prisoner, together with another rather shaken German. 9 Platoon entered the large house further to the right, engaging several fleeing enemy as they hurriedly evacuated their position. Coy HQ entered the school by the front door and joined 8 Platoon. Immediately afterwards, rifle fire and MG fire were directed against the house from the buildings on the other side of the street about 40 yards away. These houses were situated on a bank and were consequently higher than our own positions, which proved a distinct disadvantage as the enemy was able to fire straight down through the windows into the narrow passage which ran along the front of the school on both floors. This narrowness made it impossible to site the weapons back from the windows, making it difficult to defend the buildings against counter-attack. The front door was heavily barricaded but the ground floor windows had no shutters and were therefore vulnerable to any attack launched with grenades. Coy HQ with its wireless communications was by now set up in the large downstairs lecture room: several casualties (including the prisoners) being tended there. The enemy made this difficult by firing bursts from an M.G. through the wooden front door, and the bullets spattered across the passages through the door-less entrance to the room, showering the occupants with plaster as they struck the walls. Meanwhile, in 9 Platoon's area, Lieut. M. Pulleyn led a party to engage an enemy post and, in a gallant dash forward, was badly wounded in both arms. 9 Platoon then consolidated in the building they had seized, linking up with Major Newby and "C" Coy who had penetrated a small distance into the town. 7 Platoon then moved round the left edge of the houses, across the exit road and occupied a small house opposite the school, but, before being able to consolidate the position, it was faced with a party of Germans firing automatic weapons down onto it from a veranda above. Part of the house had broken out into flames caused by an enemy phosphorous grenade, and faced on one hand with the Germans and on the other with the burning house, the Platoon Commander decided to vacate the position. The only exit was from a veranda at the rear of the house. This was 30 feet above ground level and the first man to leave descended at some speed via the drain pipe which was wrenched down in the process – the rest of the Platoon left by jumping down the 30 foot drop. One man was killed before leaving the house and one man was wounded. Major M.H. Crocker arrived via the back window of the school, saying he was carrying out a forward recce. He wisely decided after several bursts of fire had penetrated the front door that the limit of the recce had been reached. From the windows in rear of the school the Reverend Elworthy, the Padre, could be seen coolly wandering along with two S.B.'s apparently oblivious to the enemy mortar and small arms fire. His attention was attracted and he finally arrived via the back window (which by now had become the most popular entrance to the school – the front entrance was at this time quite out of the question). The S.B.'d tended to the wounded and evacuated them through the window – one on a stretcher and the remainder walking. The enemy attempted to reach the school by covering the roadway with smoke, intending to lob grenades in at the unprotected windows. They were held up by grenades and Bren fire and never succeeded in crossing the road. Major Crocker now decided to rejoin Bn HQ with a list of requirements in the way of food and ammunition. The best route back was open to debate, as periodical bursts of fire were sweeping across the back of the school. The Padre, who also wanted to return, volunteered to act as guinea-pig, and, showing a good eye for ground, he dropped from the window and made a quick dash for the nearest cover. The enemy MG remained quiet when Major Crocker left by this route making swiftly across the open space to the cover below. The exchanges in fire between ourselves and then enemy continued, when suddenly the Coy was amazed to see the decorative facades of the houses opposite crumbling under the intense fire of 75 mm guns. The accuracy with which the shells missed the house occupied by "A" Coy and yet found their mark on the enemy positions was astounding – and Major D.V. Emmerton, MC, was at a complete loss to understand the origin of the fire orders and the obvious knowledge of

the situation shown by the tank squadron. Only two hours later did he find that Major Crocker had contained the tank squadron commander far down below in the valley and directed their fire onto the enemy to such excellent effect. Night came at last and "A" Coy, feeling very hungry and now almost out of ammunition, awaited counter-attack. But none developed and later in the night supplies arrived carried by portees from "B" Company. Lieut. J.C. Pearson of "C" Coy, with his runner Pte. Barnacle, seeing that the tanks were held up by fire from enemy S.P. Guns the previous evening, stalked the crew, killed one and wounded two. When "C" Coy entered the town the gun was found to be destroyed. Early next morning "C" Coy advanced further into the town and occupied it, the enemy having withdrawn during the night. Moving into the town in the afternoon Bn HQ was surprised by the surrender of two German Artillery officers in their staff car who were driven by L/Cpl. Turner of the Regimental Police. That night the rain descended heavily but, from an inspection of the town, it was considered that its capture was one of the best actions ever fought by the Bn. ON AGAIN Early next morning the Bn embossed and travelled via PIEGARO, (captured by the L.F's) where it debussed and continued on foot. Objective was a hill named "NORFOLK", up which "C" Coy climbed to take MISSARIO. Held up by opposition the Coy dug in for the night in pouring rain. It was decided not to proceed with the attack due to the lateness of the hour and the weather. Advancing in the very early morning, the last hill and PANICALE were taken. Major Wasey, with "C" Coy and troop tanks, went across the hills north of TVERNELLE, one of the tanks being lost when the road gave way. Later the two forces met and settled down in the village and in MURA to watch a tanks battle on the plain before them. The hills having been cleared, the next task was the plain. Disturbed whilst resting on their hard-earned laurels, the Bn was off again to hold the town of MACHIE, three miles down the road. The town and PANICAROLA on its right were both taken in the pouring rain, the position being improved the following day when "B" Coy moved forward from PANICAROLA to a large church a mile ahead. Reports were given by P.O.W. that the enemy intended to hold the next ridge for seven days. Coys were concentrated to form strong-points lest the enemy should counter-attack. "B" COMPANY'S ROLE On completing its task under Major Wasey, "B" Coy established itself in a very large mansion at MURA, which was situated at the foot of the hill upon which PANICALE stood. On the Bn's advance on MACCHIE the right flank was to be protected by "B" Coy which was going across country to the village of PAIVICAROLA. During this advance, which was extremely slow owing to the poor visibility in the rain, the enemy was not contacted until nightfall. This first contact was 1,000 yards from PAICAROLAS when 5 Germans were rounded up in a farmhouse in the middle of a party to celebrate their withdrawal to FLORENCE. No further contact was made as far as the cemetery, some 150 yards from the village, although transport could be heard moving at the far end. The advance then continued over the road to MADONNA DELLA CARRIERA, a very large church standing beside a convent. Patrols sent out failed to contact the enemy. Three days were spent in these positions. Occasional shells landed in the area but everyone took the opportunity of making themselves as comfortable as possible and a very well furnished and decorated Mess was introduced. LAKE TRASIMENO On the morning of June 24th the Bn, with "C" Coy forward, acted as right flank protection to the Irish Brigade attacking towards CASTIGLIONE. Opposition was met but overcome, and a number of prisoners were taken. Later, "D" Coy, with tank support, advanced to clear ground up to the line of the stream. The Bn was operating on the banks of LAKE TRASIMENO. The following day "D" Coy crossed the stream and advanced into their objectives. Very heavy fighting took place. Throughout the day heavy shelling and mortaring of the Bn area was experienced – some of the heaviest experienced in ITALY. This was continued throughout the night and into the following morning. In the evening of that day the Bn was withdrawn from the shelling area, the front having been taken over by 36 Brigade. Intercept messages indicated a possible German attack

necessitating the quick move forward again of "D" Coy. No attack came in and they were able to return in the morning. One night Bn HQ received a direct hit which caused a few casualties. THE LAST ADVANCE Moving right back again on the 27th further orders were awaited. They arrived on the 28th. Aircraft were coming over regularly each night firing tracer ammunition up and down the streets and roads. The move to the next and final Battle took place over bad, dusty roads across country to PIANA where Bn HQ was established. Following a heavy artillery concentration both "B" and "B" Coys gained their objectives which were clear of enemy, though it was evident that our artillery had surprised them as several dead bodies were found. Heavy enemy guns shelled the area at intervals throughout the night. "B" Coy moved forward at 0730 hrs to occupy GAGGIA without opposition. 56 Recce on our right were later contacted and "C" Coy made another advance, occupying PADERE I MONELLI without opposition. Passing through, "D" Coy established forward patrol bases and sent out patrols as far as the RIVER SPINA which runs into the northern end of LAKE TRASIMENO. Enemy machine gun nests were located, but "D" Coy was not fired on although mortar concentrations were brought down ineffectively. At 0300 hrs on 2nd July 1944 the Bn left the line, having handed over to 6 R.W.K. By 0430 hrs everyone was in bed at MACCHIE and PANICAROLA in their old billets. On the 24th June a large advance party had left the Bn for a destination unknown. We only knew that after a continuous nine months, most of which had been spent in contact with the enemy, the Division was to be taken out to rest. END OF PART 3 CONCLUSION The narrative set out above indicates the spirit of the Bn during the preceding nine months. It was found that we soon forgot the nasty times – the times of heavy shelling, the days of hard slogging with little sleep, and advances under fire. Each one of us remembers the narrow escapes he had, but they are never related or discussed as are the tales of stupid mistakes or of humorous episode. The great joy is that we can now say proudly and justly that there is no soldier like the British Infantryman. We were lucky in that for the whole Italian Campaign we had as our friend and leader Brigadier R.K. Arbuthnott, DASO, MC, whose active brain was always at hand to advise and help us.