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"Quansem Ilep"
I Canadian Corps Breaks the Gothic Line
Summer, 1944

By
Lee A. Windsor
B.A.(H), Acadia University, 1993

Thesis
Submitted to the Department of History
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Masters of Arts degree
Wilfrid Laurier University
1996

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"Quansem Ilep"
Motto of the British Columbia Dragoons
meaning "Always First"
in the Chinook Language

In Memory of the Sons of Canada
who fell in the Foglia Hills
and of Dr. James Lawton Stokesbury
who taught me how best
to remember them

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Introduction

During the late summer of 1944 the armies of Hitler's Germany were reeling under the combined blows from east and west. The forces of the western Allies had broken out of the Normandy beachhead and were pursuing the German army across France toward the German border. In the east, the Soviet Army's powerful summer offensive had destroyed Army Group Centre. At sea, the U-boats had been defeated, and in the air the combined British and American Bomber offensive was severely hampering Germany's capacity to supply its crumbling defenses. With the German resources already stretched to the breaking point in the east and west by August 1944, another threat from the south was about to add to the strain.

In order to keep the pressure on Germany's southern flank and to prevent the withdrawal of German units to reinforce other fronts, the Commonwealth Eighth and the American Fifth Armies in Italy launched Operation "Olive" to smash through the Gothic Line, the last major defensive system in front of the Po industrial basin. The multi-national Eighth Army was to deliver the first and heaviest blow of Field-Marshal Alexander's "one-two punch" strategy. At the centre of that blow the men of I Canadian Corps executed one of the most brilliant operations in Canadian military history echoing the deeds of their fathers at Vimy Ridge, 27 years earlier.

In spite of the spectacular Canadian success in Operation

"Olive", the battle has received very little attention from historians. This neglect is the result of a post war decline of public interest in military matters that lasted throughout the 1960's and 70's. The past decade however, has witnessed a revival in operational military history. This rejuvenation is closely linked to a developing inter-disciplinary interest in twentieth century war which centres on the question of military effectiveness.

The relationship between events in the political and economic arenas, military strategy, combat operations, and frontline tactics is at the heart of the three volume anthology entitled Military Effectiveness, edited by Allan R. Millet and Williamson Murray. One goal of this series is to link events on the battlefield to the broader societal context in which they occur. In such a broad study of the impact of politics, ideology, and group psychology on military organizations and how they perform, something must suffer. As a result, the enormously complex investigation of battle is left to others. The articles in the series rely entirely upon assumptions about operations found in the body of secondary literature.

The problem is that there is no consensus within the western military history community on the issue of operational effectiveness, particularly with regard to the Second World War. The contemporary debate over effectiveness has been dominated by historians such as John Ellis in Great Britain and Carlo D'Este in the United States who argue that the armies of the western Allies

in the Second World War failed to develop an effective method of war fighting and suffered considerably from poor leadership. They argue that Allied commanders "seemed unable to impose their will upon the enemy except by slowly and persistently battering him to death with a blunt instrument." That instrument was the Allies' overwhelming material superiority.¹ In Canada, John A. English, Brereton Greenhous and William J. McAndrew use similar arguments to draw the same conclusion. One of the central tenets of this "Brute Force" model is "that the Germans were superior to all of their opponents in terms of tactical military competence." The American, Colonel Trevor Dupuy has even created a quantitative system to measure combat effectiveness which indicates that "the Germans were consistently better than the Americans and British in ground combat capability in World War II."

There is, however, one substantial fault in the "Brute Force" model. The contention that Allied ground forces were not as effective as they could be is selectively supported by examples of unsuccessful or inefficient operations. John A. English's influential work, Failure in High Command, analyzes some of the least successful Canadian battles in Normandy such as Operation Totalize/Tractable while neglecting victories like 7 Canadian Infantry Brigade's defence against an SS counter-attack on 7 June 1944.

Canadian historians of the Italian campaign have developed a similar focus. W.J. McAndrew's 1987 Military Affairs article,

¹ John Ellis, Brute Force (London: 1990) p. xviii.

"Fire or Movement? Canadian Tactical Doctrine, Sicily 1943", examines artillery dominated battles in an effort to illustrate that rigid Canadian planning seriously hampered battlefield opportunism. Brereton Greenhous chose the costly attack on Ortona as a case to study poor leadership for his 1989 Canadian Defence Quarterly article, "'Would it not Have Been Better to Bypass Ortona Completely...?' A Canadian Christmas, 1943."

For all of the battles that did not have a satisfactory outcome or that involved an inefficient use of resources, there were others that were successful both in achieving their objectives and doing so with minimal loss. This reasoning is the impetus for a growing school of thought among western historians. In his study of the United States Army's 88th Infantry Division in the Italian campaign entitled Draftee Division, John S. Brown follows the path of the first American all "Draftee" formation to go into combat. He discovers that "tiny cadres of professionals had been able to mold masses of erstwhile civilians into proficient fighting organizations."²

Brown is also known for challenging the quantitative theories of Trevor Dupuy, by pointing out flaws in the sampling system that skew the results. He further suggests that Dupuy's findings have helped to foster a "mythology of German combat superiority" that lends support to the "Brute Force" model.³ Picking up where Brown

² J.S. Brown, Draftee Division (Lexington: 1986) p. 159.

³ J.S. Brown, "Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy and the Mythos of Wehrmacht Superiority: A Reconsideration", Military Affairs January 1985: pp. 16-20.

leaves off in the military effectiveness debate is Michael Doubler, who wrote a study of the American role in the campaign in Northwest Europe, concluding that the United States Army adapted quickly to the new battlefield and developed an effective combined arms doctrine.⁴

Terry Copp has led the Canadian response to the "Brute Force" model with studies like The Brigade which traces the path of 5 Canadian Infantry Brigade from its creation, through training and into action. Close evaluation of this formation down to the battalion level in training and combat reveals that "the Anglo Canadian armies developed a clear and coherent battle doctrine before the invasion of Northwest Europe," and that it proved to be very effective.⁵

This is not a new approach but rather a continuation of the theories first advanced in the official British, American and Canadian histories. Each of these official studies centred on an effort to determine how it was that these western armies, each with tiny interwar establishments that paid only modest attention to the intricate theories of modern war, were able to rapidly expand and adapt to meet the challenges of the 1940's battlefield and emerge victorious.

The official histories and other works like The Brigade and Draftee Division, which present a balanced perspective of both the

⁴ M.D. Doubler, Closing with the Enemy (Lawrence: 1994) pp. 1-9.

⁵ Terry Copp, The Brigade: Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1939-45 (Stoney Creek: 1992) p. iii.

well and poorly fought battles of a specific Allied formation have also inspired case studies of particularly successful actions. Detailed, sharp end examinations such as Oliver Haller's "The Defeat of the 12th SS" and Lee A. Windsor's "Boforce" approach events from a company/squadron level, illuminating those aspects of the Allied way of war that are often missed by the studies of failure. One purpose of the present study is to add to this lively debate by taking a close look at the Canadian attack on the Gothic Line during the Italian Campaign in 1944. In doing so it will reveal how and why I Canadian Corps was able to achieve one of the most stunning victories in Canadian military history.

The Canadian triumph in the late summer of 1944 was primarily the result of events on the battlefield. Rather than a massive orchestrated offensive involving thousands of men skillfully directed by the Corps headquarters, the Gothic Line was broken after a series of small battalion sized actions. If the complexities of this battle are to be fully understood, then the analysis must be directed at the actions of rifle companies and tank squadrons, and sometimes even their component platoons and troops.

It may be argued that once the Corps commander's plan is put in motion the leadership of general officers becomes largely irrelevant. It is instead the leadership of the lieutenant-colonels commanding battalions and the junior officers and sergeants under them that determines the outcome of battle. Often the success or failure of a single platoon of 30 soldiers to seize

and hold a key piece of high ground can have considerable consequences at the highest military and political levels. A corporal leading a ten-man rifle section can destroy a machine-gun nest which may be holding up his battalion and in turn his entire division. A single shot by a German anti-tank gunner into a command tank can bring the advance of a whole armoured regiment to a standstill. While knowledge of operational plans and the conduct of senior leadership is crucial to understanding a battle and its outcome, it is every bit as important to study the action at the tactical or sharp end if the particular circumstances that impact on the outcome are to be appreciated.

A number of external factors also play a role in determining which side will be victorious. A series of questions emerges, both from these external factors and from the action itself, that connect the events on a single day to the broader issues debated by mainstream Second World War historians. The answers to these questions are readily available, but they are buried deep in the war diaries and radio message logs of the units engaged as well as in the reports compiled in the immediate aftermath of battle. From these documents, the action can be pieced together by the historian much like a crime scene by a detective. Only when the course of events has been reconstructed in detail, can its meaning and relation to the broader questions be determined.

Fortunately, Second World War military operations are among the best documented events in Canadian history. The actions of Canadian Army formations are recorded in detail, hour by hour and

often minute by minute, at all headquarters from Corps on down through to individual battalions. This detailed information allows the historian to re-create a remarkably accurate picture of combat, the most complex and confusing of historical events. In addition to daily entries, the officer responsible for a unit's war diary included as an appendix, all documents he considered useful for later research on the unit's actions in any given month. These documents include operations orders, movement tables, target lists, nominal roles, maps, air photographs, routine orders, medal recommendations, and training schedules.

Two particular types of documents found in war diary appendices are especially valuable for historical research. Within some infantry battalions and armoured regiments, the junior officers commanding the sub-units were required to submit written accounts of the actions of their particular company or squadron in a battle. These accounts, known as after action reports, provide fine grain information which was often not included in the unit's daily diary entries.

A second document, the unit message or operations log, contains a written record of all incoming and outgoing radio and telephone messages. Because it is found in all war diaries from brigade level and above this source is more consistent than most of the others. They are also the most accurate because the logs are composed as the events occur and are not dependant on human memories which can be impaired or coloured by the strain of battle. In this study of the Gothic Line, all personal accounts of events

are examined against the message logs resulting in an highly accurate re-construction of the Canadian role in Operation "Olive".

Of all the external factors to be assessed in the breaking of the Gothic Line, Canadian Army effectiveness is undeniably the most important. Closely connected is the issue of command ability. German field commanders are generally portrayed as being skilled professionals, expert at innovation and making do with less. In contrast, Allied leaders are portrayed as inept, lacking in imagination and totally reliant on material superiority. The Canadian attack on the Gothic Line indicates evidence to the contrary, thus demanding a re-evaluation of Allied leadership.

Many students of the Second World War contend that, in spite of Allied superiority in quantity of weapons, the Germans possessed a qualitative superiority that matched their vaunted tactical skill on the battlefield. In particular, their heavy Panther and Tiger tanks and their self-propelled anti-tank vehicles, with high velocity 75 and 88 millimetre guns were well known in Northwest Europe for being able to pick off thinly armoured Allied Sherman tanks long before the Germans came within range of the underpowered Sherman guns.

The answer to the question of superior armoured vehicle performance in Northwest Europe, usually decided by gun power and armour protection is not sufficient to explain armoured warfare in Italy. The ground in the Foglia valley is very different from the wide open plains of Normandy. The very steep rolling hills and loose rocky soil of the Foglia valley added new factors to the

armour equation, including climbing and river fording ability, engine and suspension reliability, and most importantly, speed. These factors demand a closer look at the Sherman tank in the Italian environment before it can be written off as a failure.

Other questions arise concerning the effectiveness of the Allies' overwhelming domination of the air. Air superiority is considered critical to the success of the ground battle. Some contemporary historians have pointed to the lack of Allied air-ground co-operation and the inability of Allied aircraft to hit their targets as more examples of waste and inefficiency. The argument that millions of litres of aviation gasoline and thousands of tons of high explosives were expended, not to mention the lives of the airmen, for comparatively modest results, fits the "Brute Force" model. Once again, however, the events of the Gothic Line battle challenge this model and demand a closer inspection of events to determine whether or not Allied airpower ever managed to successfully team up with the ground forces.

The politics of Coalition Warfare were felt strongly throughout the Italian Campaign. Anglo-American rivalry at the political and grand strategic levels had repercussions on the battlefield that could be felt from Canadian Corps headquarters right down to the frontline tankers and infantrymen. The nature of the war in Italy as a secondary or holding campaign not only affected the planning and execution of operations, it also presented a number of morale problems. The strain of combat was magnified in Italy by a belief among soldiers that the battles they

were risking their lives to fight were not contributing as much to the defeat of Germany as those being fought in Northwest Europe. This problem was further compounded by a chronic shortage of fresh soldiers to replace the losses taken in action, particularly in the infantry. Add to this the painfully slow rate of advance through difficult terrain with unbearable extremes of weather, and the result is a rate of battle exhaustion casualties far in excess of that found in Northwest Europe.⁶ Canadian success in the Gothic Line must be measured against this backdrop of grand strategy and individual mentality.

A more obvious reason for the lack of historical research on the Gothic Line is that the great breakout from the Normandy beachhead and the drive to close the Falaise-Argentan gap was going on at the same time. The controversy surrounding this battle to close the pocket around the retreating German armies, and the battle of Normandy in general, have been the focus of western historians writing about the war with Germany. The war in Italy was and still is considered a side show or at best, a holding operation, designed to draw German forces away from the main Allied effort in Northwest Europe. The bulk of material produced by western historians on the course of the Italian campaign concentrates on events prior to and including the victory in the Liri Valley and subsequent capture of Rome on 4 June, 1944. The associated battles of Monte Cassino and Anzio, are the subject of

⁶ Terry Copp; William McAndrew, Battle Exhaustion (Montreal: 1990) pp. 8-10.

a number of books, largely because in late 1943 and the first five months of 1944 Italy was the only place in the world where significant numbers of Allied soldiers were directly engaging the enemy.⁷

The majority of works written on the post D-Day Italian campaign are British in origin. The apparent lack of American interest is understandable given that prior to the start of Operation Olive, the United States Fifth Army, under General Mark Clark lost half of its combat strength for the invasion of southern France. The dramatic reduction of American combat power in Italy meant that the British, who had always been the dominant partner in the theatre, would play the leading role in the remainder of the campaign. The United States Army Official volume Mediterranean Theatre of Operations: Cassino to the Alps is one exception. In this work, Ernest F. Fisher sets an impressive standard of scholarship on the subject of Fifth Army operations from the fall of Rome to the end of the war.

The other reason British historians hold a virtual monopoly on analysis of the post D-Day period in Italy is that the British wartime political and military leadership favoured the pursuit of a "Mediterranean Strategy". The British Empire, at war since 1939, preferred to fight the Germans on the peripheries of Hitler's Europe where best use could be made of the Royal Navy's domination

⁷ Among the most notable books on the battles of Cassino and Anzio are Carlo D'Este's Fatal Decision: Anzio and the Battle for Rome, Martin Blumenson's Anzio: The Gamble that Failed, and W.G.F. Jackson's The Battle for Rome.

of the sea. This contrasted sharply with the American belief, unfettered by memories of the bloody 1914-18 war, that the best road to victory was the shortest one. For the United States military, which by 1944 was the dominant partner in the western alliance, the return to France as a springboard for a drive into Germany itself was the only option. An Allied attempt to strike at the "soft underbelly" of Germany, through Italy, was always the desire of the British and so their historians took the lead in telling the story. The majority of British works, however, are overall histories of the Campaign in Italy from the invasion of Sicily in mid-1943 to the end of the war in 1945. Valuable books like G.A. Sheppard's The Italian Campaign: 1943-45 and W.G.F. Jackson's The Battle for Italy devote limited space to the operations of a single corps.

While the battles in the Gothic Line are the main focus of the limited post D-Day Italian Campaign historiography, the impressive display put on by the Canadians in late August and early September of 1944 has been neglected. The tendency among British historians is to draw attention to the efforts of V British Corps, which was to be the pursuit corps once the German defenses were broken. Douglas Orgill's 1967 work, The Gothic Line, epitomizes this neglect by discussing of one of Canada's greatest military achievements in four pages.⁸

The Canadian breakthrough is also largely ignored because of

⁸ Douglas Orgill, The Gothic Line: The Italian Campaign, Autumn, 1944 (New York: 1967) pp. 63-66.

Operation "Olive's" overall failure to achieve its objective of reaching the Po industrial basin. The highly successful first phase of the battle, in which I Canadian Corps shone so brilliantly, is overshadowed by later stages of the operation in which Eighth Army bogged down behind the Gothic Line and the larger Battle of Rimini developed. Historians aim their investigations at trying to determine what went wrong with Operation Olive and why it failed. Again, Orgill's book sets the standard with only one quarter of the text being devoted to the cracking of the Gothic Line itself and the rest concerned with the subsequent slogging match that developed on the approaches to Rimini.

The British official volume for this period of the Italian Campaign, W.G.F. Jackson's The Mediterranean and Middle East: Volume VI, Victory in the Mediterranean, Part II, June to October 1944 stands out as the most well balanced account of Eighth Army's battle in the second half of 1944. Published in 1987, Victory in the Mediterranean explores all of the external and internal factors contributing to the outcome of Operation "Olive", and most importantly, it gives proper credit to the Canadians for making the decisive penetration in the Gothic Line. Quite correctly, Jackson lays responsibility for the failure to exploit this success on General Leese and V British Corps. The broad scope of this work, by necessity, curtails any detailed analysis of I Canadian Corps' greatest battle.

Canadian scholarship on the subject is dominated by the excellent work of the Canadian Army Field Historical Section, under

Lt-Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, who wrote the Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War: Volume II, The Canadians in Italy. Like its British and American counterparts, the official work does not have the space to discuss operations in detail. Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham's Tug of War stands out as an excellent single volume history of the campaign while Dan Dancock's The D-Day Dodgers provides readers with a popular history of Canadians in Italy. Like the British single volume histories, these two Canadian books must limit their discussion of the Gothic Line. Two Canadian historians from the Department of National Defence Directorate of Military History have explored, in several brief articles, the role of the Canadians in the Gothic Line. In their work, however, Dr. William J. McAndrew and Brereton Greenhous seek to explain the ultimate failure of Allied strategy in 1944 rather than the operational achievements of Eighth Army.

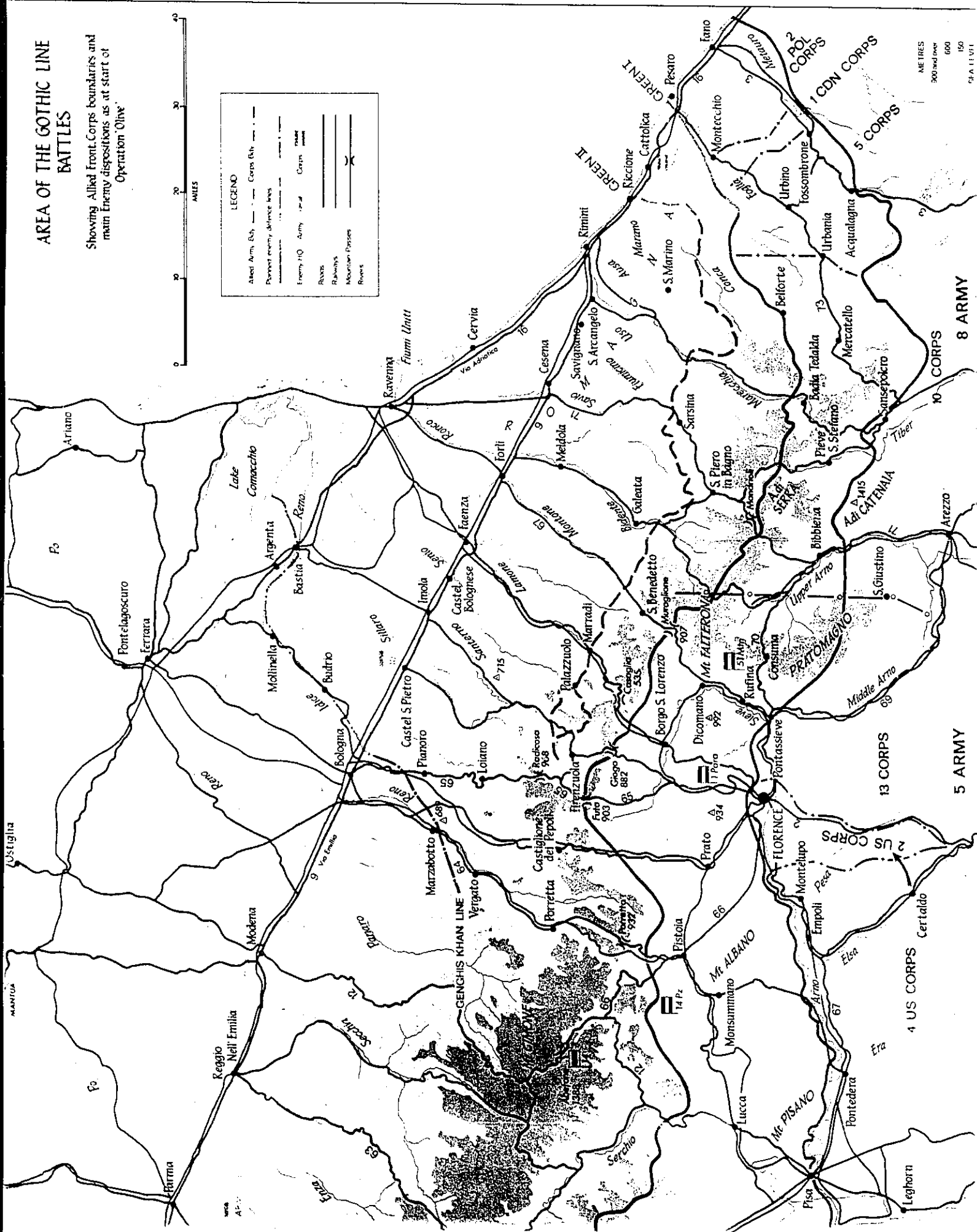
Having examined all of these works, it is clear that if the answers to questions about Canadian Army performance are to be properly answered, a more detailed study of the Gothic Line is required. Indeed, it is the purpose of this study to fill what many consider an unconscionable gap in the narrative of the Allied campaign in Italy.

AREA OF THE GOTHIC LINE BATTLES

Showing Allied front Corps boundaries and main Enemy dispositions as at start of Operation 'Olive'



LEGEND	
—	Allied Arm. Bdy
- - -	Corps Bdy
—	Planned enemy advance lines
—	Enemy HQ
—	Army
—	Corps
—	Mountains
—	Roadways
—	Mountain Passes
—	Rivers



FEET
300 and over
600
150
1945

Chapter I: World Backdrop

By the summer of 1944, the eventual outcome of the Second World War was no longer in any doubt. Yet with Germany ready to fight until the bitter end, it was still up to the Allied leadership to ensure that the defeat of Germany was accomplished quickly and with the smallest possible cost in lives. With a massive army already deployed in Northwest Europe and more troops on the way, the United States had come to dominate the western alliance. In the first thirty months of war, before this American ascendancy had been assured in the summer of 1944, the senior military leaders of the United States and Britain had repeatedly clashed over the issue of strategy.⁹

The debates had begun at the Arcadia Conference in December 1941, very shortly after the American entry into the war. The American military planners, led by United States Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, were of the opinion that the best way to defeat Germany was by a prompt invasion of France, as early as 1942, but by 1943 at the latest.¹⁰ The heads of the British services, led principally by Chief of the Imperial General

⁹ The positions of the British and American military leadership in the debate over strategy are examined in detail in their respective official histories. See: Michael Howard, Grand Strategy: Volume IV, August 1942 September 1943 (London: 1972); Maurice Matloff, The United States Army in World War II: The War Department, Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1945 (Washington: 1959).

¹⁰ Matloff, pp. 10-11.

Staff, Field Marshall Alanbrooke, managed to convince the United States that returning to France in 1942 was not an option given the relative strengths of the western Allies and the Germans at that time.¹¹ At this first meeting of what was to become known as the Combined Chiefs of Staff it was the views of the British with over two years of war behind them that prevailed over the newcomer Americans. The invasion of France would be scheduled for 1943 while in the meantime, United States forces would be employed in helping clear the North African coast. This was the beginning of the American role in the British Mediterranean strategy.¹²

The next act was played out one year later, at the Casablanca Conference of January 1943. Much had happened in the intervening twelve months. Hitler had strengthened the German forces in Tunisia forcing the Allies to do the same. American confidence had been hit hard with the disastrous defeat of the United States Army's II Corps at Kasserine Pass at the hands of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps. What the Allies expected to be a walk through battle in North Africa had developed into a bitter slog that would not be resolved until May with the surrender of Panzer Armee Afrika at Tunis. Hitler lost 250 000 men in Tunis, but he had gained valuable time. With so much Allied material and so many men in the Mediterranean, there could be no invasion of France that year. The delay infuriated General Marshall and strengthened

¹¹ Howard, pp. 21-22.

¹² James L. Stokesbury, A Short History of World War II (New York: 1980) pp. 183-185.

American resolve to force the British to commit to a Cross-Channel invasion as soon as was practicable. The Combined Chiefs agreed on the spring of 1944 as the target date for the assault, but that left a decision yet to be made as to what to do until then. The combined bomber offensive would of course be escalated, but more direct pressure had to be placed on Germany as well. Sicily was chosen as the answer for a variety of political and military reasons not the least of which being that its seizure had the potential to force Italy out of the war, and secure Mediterranean shipping lanes. But Sicily would not take long to conquer and even before Operation Husky was launched in June, the Combined Chiefs met again in May in Washington and decided to grant the British their wish of using Sicily as a springboard for the invasion of mainland Italy.¹³ In return the British chiefs had to commit to 1 May, 1944 as the date for Operation Overlord, or the invasion of France. They also had to agree that much of the forces currently fighting in the Mediterranean would be withdrawn to England at the proper time to participate in Overlord.¹⁴

So it was that all operations on the mainland of Italy were to be secondary to the buildup for and eventual invasion of France. This notion would define the nature of the campaign in Italy and provide a consistent strategic purpose for it. Operational goals would shift as the campaign developed into the fall of 1943 and on

¹³ W.G.F. Jackson, The Battle for Italy (London: 1967) pp. 19-22.

¹⁴ Stokesbury, Short p. 186.

into 1944. The elimination of Italy from the war, the establishment of bomber bases, the capture of Rome were all on the wish list for the Combined Chiefs at one point or another during the campaign, but one desire remained constant from the first landings in Sicily, right up to the final 1945 offensives. Above all other purposes, the Allied Armies in Italy were to put pressure on the German southern flank and force them to commit forces that could otherwise be used to oppose the main Allied effort in Northwest Europe or the Soviet offensives in the east.¹⁵ To this end, the Italian campaign paid off richly for the Allies. Had even a few of the over 20 German divisions committed in Italy in the spring of 1944 been able to withdraw to shore up the German defenses in France while the Normandy beachhead was in its fragile infancy, then the victorious Allied outcome may have been very different or at the very least would have taken much longer to effect.¹⁶

The debate over the Mediterranean versus Cross Channel strategy did not end with the Allied landings in Normandy or the breakout from the beachhead during the high summer of 1944. Even with the bulk of the Anglo-American armies driving through France towards the Rhine, there was one last act in the strategic drama yet to be played. In November of 1943, while Canadian soldiers

¹⁵ E.J. Fisher, The United States Army in World War II: The Mediterranean Theatre of Operations, Cassino to the Alps (Washington: 1977) p. 4-5.

¹⁶ Ellis, p. 289.; G.A. Sheppard, The Italian Campaign: 1943-45 (New York: 1968) p. 281-295.

were fighting their way towards Ortona, the Combined Chiefs decided at the Tehran conference that in addition to the divisions that were to be withdrawn from the Mediterranean for Operation Overlord, a half dozen more should be withdrawn the following spring. These formations would then be used for an invasion of southern France in support of Overlord, to be known as Operation Anvil.¹⁷ The British delegation had to commit to this demand in return for an American agreement to carry on the offensive in Italy to seize Rome and advance to the Pisa-Rimini or Gothic Line.¹⁸

Operation Anvil, originally scheduled for May 1944, was postponed pending the fall of Rome. There were not enough landing craft in the Allied arsenal to sustain both the Overlord and Anvil operations as well as the smaller landing being planned for Anzio in an attempt to unhinge the German Gustav Line defenses which were holding up the drive on Rome.¹⁹ The political value of capturing an Axis capital was recognized by both Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt. Thus, for a brief period in the first half of 1944, the Allied Armies in Italy enjoyed the status of having priority over other theatres.²⁰ This renewed interest in the Mediterranean region rekindled British desires to destroy the German armies in Italy and possibly even put direct pressure on the

¹⁷ Fisher, p. 6.

¹⁸ Ellis, p. 292.

¹⁹ Fisher, p. 6.

²⁰ John Ehrman, Grand Strategy: Volume V, August 1943 - September 1944 (London: 1956) pp. 243-244; Matloff, p. 424.

southern borders of Hitler's Reich.²¹ The position of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff had not changed however. The Americans still viewed the action in Italy as secondary to Overlord and while they agreed to a postponement of Anvil, they would not accept its cancelation.²²

General Marshall, and the other American Chiefs of Staff, were of the opinion that the best way to support Overlord by diverting more forces away from the Normandy area was by landing in southern France.²³ The British Chiefs of Staff and Winston Churchill, believed that the mere threat of invasion in southern France or somewhere in the Mediterranean served the same purpose as an actual landing.²⁴ The British argued that the actual invasion would not force the Germans to commit any extra forces to stop Anvil and that once the location of the landing had been determined, enemy units guarding other coastal areas such as the Adriatic, could be withdrawn to shore up other defenses.²⁵ As an alternative the British Chiefs proposed that the seven Anvil divisions that were to come from Italy should remain there to assist in the pursuit north from Rome so as to continue to tie down the two dozen German divisions already in theatre and force the German high command to

²¹ Sheppard, pp. 247-248.

²² Fisher, p. 6.

²³ Matloff, p. 417.

²⁴ Ralph Bennett, Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy (New York: 1989) p. 289.

²⁵ Ehrman, p. 250.

commit even more forces in an attempt to hold back the Allied offensive.²⁶

In addition to having a differing operational view of how to support Overlord from the Mediterranean, the Americans also opposed the British proposal for a sustained offensive in Italy on political grounds. The United States Army's official history points out that the Americans did not wish to get involved in Northern Italy and possibly the Balkans as they feared coming into conflict with the Soviets.²⁷ The Americans also wished to avoid problems with the Free French government as four of the seven divisions to be withdrawn from Italy were French and anxious to participate in the liberation of their homeland.²⁸

When Allied troops stormed ashore in Normandy on 6 June, a final decision had still not been reached as to which course of action to pursue in the Mediterranean. In the end it was the Americans who prevailed after laying down the issue of port facilities as a trump card during the summer of 1944.²⁹ The bottom line was that even if the French Riviera landing was not the best operational means of tying down German combat power, the ports there were vital to the build-up of American strength in France for the great offensive into Germany itself.³⁰ The invasion of

²⁶ Ehrman, p. 246.

²⁷ Matloff, pp. 425-427.

²⁸ Matloff, p. 425.

²⁹ Ehrman, pp. 349-350.

³⁰ Matloff, pp. 467-468.

southern France, renamed Operation Dragoon, was slated to commence on 15 August.³¹

The removal of seven divisions from Field Marshall Alexander's order of battle drastically weakened his capacity to wage offensive war, yet that was exactly what the Combined Chiefs ordered him to do. Alexander and his staff estimated that if the Germans were to restore a front line in Italy before the Allies swept into the Alps passes, they would have to bring in eight to ten divisions from other theatres, thus playing into Allied hands. Alexander's estimations were very close to the mark and by the middle of the summer, Hitler released eight fresh divisions to Field Marshall Kesselring, as well as replacements for the units that had been battered around Rome.³² The arrival of the fresh German formations in Italy made a renewed Allied offensive that much more important in order to keep them there.³³ The problem was that the Allied Armies in Italy were expected to attack the Gothic Line and drive into the Po Valley even after the withdrawal of the Anvil/Dragoon forces. The first plan for pursuit of the broken German armies to the line of the Po was drawn up in the optimistic belief that the seven Anvil/Dragoon divisions might be allowed to remain in Italy.³⁴ Most importantly, the specially trained and equipped

³¹ Sheppard, p. 286.

³² Bennett, pp. 294-295.

³³ Jackson, Battle pp. 253-259.

³⁴ W.G.F. Jackson; T.P. Gleave, History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East, Volume VI, Victory in the Mediterranean, Part II, June to October 1944

French mountain divisions would hopefully be available for Alexander's proposed drive through the Apeninne mountains from Florence to Bologna. Also, the removal of the Anvil/Dragoon divisions during the pursuit from Rome slowed down the Allies and gave the Germans time to partially recover.³⁵ Nevertheless, Field Marshall Alexander and his staff set to work to come up with a plan that would make the most of the forces available. Planning for a large scale offensive with limited resources was the genesis of an idea that would have a tremendous impact on the breaking of the Gothic Line, especially in the Canadian sector. Whatever the plan, the Allies had to hit the Germans hard with the full weight of their limited combat power concentrated on a specific point. The Germans could make excellent use of the Rimini-Bologna rail and road system to shift reserves away from quiet sectors to reinforce the threatened areas so an Allied breakthrough at the chosen point would have to be achieved quickly or not at all.³⁶ The requirement for rapid breakthrough and exploitation was emphasized from the highest of Army Group Headquarters down to the infantry sections and tank crews that would execute the plan.

Two German Armies were deployed to check the Allied advance in

(London: 1987) pp. 52-56.

³⁵ Not all those discouraged with the plan to reduce Allied combat power in Italy were British. U.S. Fifth Army commander, General Mark Clark also expressed his outright disgust with the American Joint Chiefs for failing to recognize what an opportunity the Allies had in Italy in the summer of 1944. Mark Clark, Calculated Risk (New York: 1950) pp. 368-379.

³⁶ Jackson, Battle p. 121.

Italy, in addition to forces assigned to protect coastal areas from seaborne attack. All were under the overall command of Field Marshall Kesselring's Army Group "C". General J. Lemelsen's Fourteenth Army covered the western half of the frontline roughly opposite Clark's Fifth Army. Col-Gen. H.G. Von Vietinghoff's Tenth Army faced Oliver Leese's men. The primary German goal in the summer of 1944 was to prevent the Allies from reaching the Po Valley.³⁷ The Po and the surrounding Lombardy Plains, was the most industrialized region in all of Italy. War production from this area was not so much critical to the overall German war effort, but it did sustain Army Group "C". If Kesselring's armies were driven out of the valley and forced back to the Alps then they would have to be supplied directly from the strained German system over the narrow mountain passes, highly vulnerable to Allied bombers.³⁸

Following the costly defeat around Rome in the late spring of 1944, Field Marshall Kesselring planned to conduct a fighting withdrawal to the Gothic Line, which was sited along the last natural barrier south of the Po industrial basin. Adolf Hitler overruled this plan and ordered Kesselring to hold the Allies as far south as possible. Hitler correctly believed that the Gothic Line was not yet ready but he also feared that if the Allies managed to get as far as that then they could easily mount a landing on the eastern Adriatic coast and seize vital natural

³⁷ Lt-Col. Pretzell, Ops Offr. German Tenth Army, Material for Presentation of the Battle of Rimini, Aug 44-Feb 45 pp. 1-3.

³⁸ Pretzell Rpt, p. 2.

resources in the Balkans.³⁹ Hitler was also aware that the closer the Allies came to Germany's southern borders, the easier it would be for their bombers to attack the Reich. On Hitler's orders, Kesselring carried out a number of delaying battles which did serve to slow the pace of the Allied pursuit but cost dearly in men and equipment.⁴⁰

Even after the date for Operation Dragoon was confirmed and the chance for getting any of the seven divisions back was gone, Field Marshall Alexander and his Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General A.F. Harding, intended to hold to the original plan and attack through the centre of the Apeninne mountains towards Bologna. They reasoned that the full weight of Fifth and Eighth Armies could be combined to drive an unstoppable wedge into the Gothic Line. Because of the bulge in the frontline toward the west, an attack on the Florence-Bologna axis was the shortest route to the Po River and thus fit the criteria of rapid exploitation. If a breakthrough could be achieved there and the line of the Po reached then the potential existed for the German left wing, to be trapped in the Rimini pocket. Alexander and Harding also determined that not only were the Gothic Line defenses incomplete around the proposed axis of advance, but that the major roads in the area ran with the grain

³⁹ F.H. Hinsley, British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations, Vol III Part II (London: 1988) pp. 311-314.

⁴⁰ Orgill, p. 27.

of the country.⁴¹ The roads and rail lines ran north south along the rivers and valleys rather than across them, therefore there existed less opportunity for German engineers to carry out demolitions that could alone, stall the advance as they did in the fall of 1943 when the Allies first approached the Gustav Line.⁴²

During the first week of August, with less than one month left before the start of the Allied offensive, the Eighth Army plan was changed. The change was the result of a meeting between Alexander, Harding, and Lt-Gen Oliver Leese, commander of Eighth Army at the Orvieto airfield south of Lake Trasimeno.⁴³ Leese was not keen on the plan as it stood primarily because he did not feel the best use could be made of his army by employing them in the mountains.⁴⁴ The day before his meeting with Alexander, Leese had visited the commander of his 13 British Corps, Lieutenant-General Kirkman, in the mountains. Kirkman convinced Leese, who was already having similar thoughts, that an Eighth Army attack in the central Apennines, without the French Mountain troops to call on, would be disastrous.⁴⁵ Leese suggested to Alexander and Harding that he move the mass of his army to flatter ground of the Adriatic coastal

⁴¹ Ellis, p. 339.; Jackson, Mediterranean pp. 68-71.; Orgill, p. 29.

⁴² Lee Windsor, Boforce: A Study of Mobile Warfare in 1943, Canadian Style (Unpublished BA Thesis: 1993)

⁴³ The Allied change of plan for a new offensive in Italy in the late summer of 1944 is discussed at length in: Jackson, Mediterranean pp. 119-121.

⁴⁴ McAndrew, "Commanders and Plans", pp. 50-51.

⁴⁵ Rowland Ryder, Oliver Leese (London: 1987) pp. 183- 186.

belt. He argued that it was here that the best use could be made of Eighth Army's strength in tanks and artillery, and its skill in conducting the set-piece battle.⁴⁶ Leese also suggested that such an move would have much better chances of achieving surprise if the concentration of troops could be achieved without German knowledge. The centre of gravity for the pursuit battles from Rome had been in the interior Apennines and Leese reasoned that the bulk of German strength was concentrated to oppose a major offensive there.⁴⁷

General Leese was well aware of the disadvantages of an attack on the Adriatic flank. The most troubling was that the new axis of advance would run directly against the grain of the country.⁴⁸ Even if Eighth Army could breach the Gothic Line, behind it were innumerable rivers and streams running between hill spines down to the sea.⁴⁹ The main roads ran north south, but in the Adriatic sector, they all had to cross the rivers and run over the crests of the ridges creating plenty of opportunities for German engineers as well as a series of switch defence lines for the German main force.⁵⁰ The Germans could withdraw up the coastal corridor until reserves arrived from the Bologna area. Unless Eighth Army could smash through the forward defenses and race past all the river lines before the Germans could regain their balance, then the

⁴⁶ Orgill, pp. 28-31.

⁴⁷ Jackson, Battle p. 121.

⁴⁸ Ellis, p. 339.

⁴⁹ McAndrew, "Commanders and Plans", p. 51.

⁵⁰ Orgill, pp. 28-31.

autumn rains would turn the dust into mud and the streams into torrents, bringing the advance to a grinding halt no matter how much momentum it possessed.⁵¹

In addition to the practical military reasons for Leese's request to move Eighth Army to the east, there were more personal, or more correctly, national reasons. General Leese, and his American Fifth Army counterpart, General Mark Clark were far from being friends or from having any kind of relationship that would permit the kind of close co-operation necessary for a combined army thrust on the Florence-Bologna axis. Leese was still bitter about Clark's decision to drive north to Rome rather than inland in keeping with the original plan to trap the German Fourteenth Army in the spring of 1944.⁵² Leese had no desire to have his men fight alongside the Americans in what he was confident would develop into a national competition with the press manipulating Clark.⁵³ Whatever General Leese's reasons were for not wanting to conform to the original scheme, Field Marshall Alexander and General Harding realized what that it was not possible to order a commander and his staff to commit to a plan in which it had no confidence.⁵⁴

With exactly three weeks from the time of the decision to the suggested startdate of 25 August, Eighth Army went to work at its

⁵¹ Jackson, Mediterranean p. 121.

⁵² William J. McAndrew, "Eighth Army at the Gothic Line: Commanders and Plans", RUSI March 1986: p. 50.

⁵³ Eric Linklater, The Campaign in Italy (London: 1951) p. 348; Ryder, p. 184.

⁵⁴ Jackson, Mediterranean p. 124.

monumental task of moving thousands of men and vehicles across the Apennines under the noses of the Germans. This was no small task and that it was completed successfully can be regarded as one of the great organizational accomplishments of the war. By 1944, with four years of combat behind it, Eighth Army was a model of administrative and operational efficiency. Orders were turned into action in a remarkably short time with the usual staff paperwork kept to a minimum. This Eighth Army tendency to keep paper orders to a minimum served it well, but it makes the task of the historian that much more difficult.⁵⁵

The Canadians made a substantial contribution to the "great march east" by constructing a special road for tracked vehicles. The east-west road network in Italy was totally unsuited to military traffic, especially of the volume required for the Eighth Army deployment. Compounding this problem was a shortage of the massive wheeled tank transporters. The bulk of the Sherman tanks and Sherman based self-propelled guns would have to make their way to the coast under their own power while the less road worthy Churchills of 21 British Tank Brigade travelled on the 34 wheel transporters. Yet if the tracked vehicles were to use the same roads as the wheeled transport, then in no time its weak metalling would crumble and if it happened to rain, then Operation Olive would bog down before it started. The problem was solved by the Royal Canadian Engineers, who constructed a 120 mile one way tank

⁵⁵ Jackson, Mediterranean pp. 119-128.; Linklater, pp. 308-311; Shepperd, p. 309.

track along secondary roads running parallel to the main lateral highway.⁵⁶ Not only was the great march east, a testament to the work of the engineers, military police and Corps and Army staffs who planned it, it was also a demonstration of the merits of the Sherman tank. Many of these vehicles had to travel 400 miles before going into action and did so with minimal breakdowns.⁵⁷ This would not be the last time that the mechanical reliability of the Sherman tank would pay off for the Eighth Army in Operation Olive.

The change in plan also presented the Allied intelligence services and signal elements with a difficult problem. Prior to Eighth Army's move east, Allied Intelligence had put a deception scheme into action to confuse the Germans. The plan was largely based around I Canadian Corps. Like their fathers in the First World War, the Canadian Corps in Italy had earned a reputation as being tough and specially suited for bashing through fixed fortifications. It was the Canadians who had forced the decisive breach in the Hitler Line back in the spring and German Intelligence was convinced that if they could locate the Canadians then they would also know where the next major offensive to break

⁵⁶ G.W.L. Nicholson, Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War: Volume II, the Canadians in Italy, 1943-45 (Ottawa: 1956) p. 497.

⁵⁷ Peter Chamberlain and Chris Ellis, British and American Tanks of World War II (New York: 1981) p. 114.; Jackson, Mediterranean p. 131.

the Gothic Line would develop.⁵⁸ The problem for the Allies was that in accordance with the original plan, they had been attempting to deceive the Germans into believing that the main attack would come in the Adriatic. They did so by creating the illusion, through false signals traffic mostly, that the Canadians were concentrating with the Polish Corps in the coastal belt. After the decision was taken to actually attack in this area, Eighth Army Intelligence staff attempted to convince the Germans that the original deception scheme was a hoax to draw attention away from the real build-up in the central Apennines.⁵⁹ In conjunction with the counter-intelligence, known as Operation Ulster, units would make their way to the coastal concentration areas under strict wireless silence and with unit patches and other insignia removed. To what extent the Germans fell for either cover plan remained to be seen.⁶⁰

General Leese's plan for breaking the Gothic Line was quite simple. He intended to smash through the forward line of defence along the Metauro River at the run and then have this momentum carry his army through the main line of resistance along the Foglia River and beyond to Rimini. When the expected German reserves arrived, it was hoped that they could be engaged far to the north

⁵⁸ German War Diaries for this period are filled with references to attempts to locate the Canadians. The fact that 1 Canadian Armoured Brigade operated independently from I Canadian Corps was the source of much confusion for German intelligence, Hist Sect Rpt #27.

⁵⁹ Orgill, p. 33.

⁶⁰ Nicholson, Italy pp. 288-294.

and away from the Pesaro-Rimini corridor so they would be denied the use of the excellent natural defensive lines of the corridor.⁶¹ Once the troops crossed the startline, it was vital that they race north with all possible speed in order to make this plan work. If they did not, and the German reserves arrived in the corridor before the autumn rains, then the advance would stall.

Lieutenant General W.A. Anders II Polish Corps, consisting of the 3rd Carpathian and 5th Kresowa Infantry Divisions and the 2nd Polish Armoured Brigade, would form the right shoulder of the attack. These soldiers had been fighting hard all the way up the Adriatic coast for the last several weeks. To make matters worse, the Poles could not expect any reinforcements to make up for the losses sustained in this pursuit or any that would be incurred in Operation Olive, so Leese ruled that their role in the battle would be limited.⁶² The Polish mission would at first to screen the buildup of Eighth Army and then to advance up the coastal road from Fano, at the mouth of the Metauro, to Pesaro at the mouth of the Foglia. Instead of attacking the heavily defended city, they were to mask it with one division and with the balance of the corps,

⁶¹ McAndrew, "Commanders and Plans", p. 51.

⁶² While all Allied Armies were suffering from replacement shortages in 1944, II Polish Corps' problem was particularly acute. The bulk of Polish reinforcements in Italy came from captured Poles who had been conscripted to serve in the German Army and who promptly surrendered to the western Allies at first opportunity. This supply was nearly exhausted however, after the heavy losses in the Battle for Monte Cassino, and the drive to Ancona in the middle of the summer. The Corps was in need of a period of reorganization. W. Anders, An Army in Exile (Nashville: 1981) pp. 180-192.

seize the hills to the northwest of the city, isolating the German garrison.⁶³

To the left of the Poles, Leese proposed to place his most powerful force, V British Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General C.F. Keightley. This corps was tasked as the pursuit force was composed of the 4th British and 4th Indian Infantry Divisions, the 46th and 56th British Infantry Divisions supported respectively by 25 and 7 Armoured Brigades, and lastly, 1st British Armoured Division would compose the corps' breakout reserve. On the left of the Keightley would be the two divisions of I Canadian Corps supported by 21 British Tank Brigade. New Zealand's 2nd Division and 3 Greek Mountain Brigade made up the Army reserve.⁶⁴ In spite of the constricting space of the corridor, Leese decided to place all three Corps in line abreast rather than attempt to pass V Corps through the Poles and Canadians following a "break-in". Experience in the Hitler Line had shown that passing one corps through another in the confusion of battle would inevitably lead to traffic tangles that could jeopardize the pace of the advance. General Leese put the tentative plan to his Corps Commanders at a conference held at the Canadian Corps Headquarters on 8 August. Burns and Keightley readily agreed, but the Poles, represented by their deputy corps commander had a suggestion. Their experience had shown that in the coastal belt, that German defenses and demolitions were more

⁶³ Operations Instruction No. 22, War Diary, I Canadian Corps, August 1944.

⁶⁴ Eighth Army Order of Battle 25 August, Jackson, Mediterranean p. 225.

troublesome the closer they were to the sea. The area on the coast road was focus of German demolitions operations. The built up areas around this road were also easier to defend. The Poles pointed out that whenever they ran into these sort of difficulty they would hook around the inland left flank on roads that were much less developed, but still intact. Based on this advice, Leese had the Canadian and British Corps' trade places, putting the Canadians in the moderately good tank country in the centre and the British in the close country of the Apeninne foothills.⁶⁵ This decision would have a substantial negative impact on the course of events. D-Day for the assault was scheduled for 25 August.

Eighth Army's offensive was to be supplied through Ancona. The port had been captured by II Polish Corps on 18 July after inflicting crippling losses on the German 278th Infantry Division.⁶⁶ This left little time to repair and expand the port facilities to be able to receive the 4000 tons of fuel and supplies per day, necessary for the operation. To this would be added a further 2600 tons per day arriving by rail from the ports of Ortona and Assisi. Fuel would be pumped from Ancona to the forward unit supply dumps by means of a four inch pipe, laid by a special construction engineer unit. The administrative staffs and engineers performed miraculously in this task and the buildup of vital stores prior to the attack was completed successfully.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ McAndrew, "Commanders and Plans", p. 55.

⁶⁶ Anders, pp. 186-192.; Jackson Mediterranean pp. 81-84.

⁶⁷ Jackson, Mediterranean pp. 131-133.

In spite of the diversion of much of the Allied air resources to support Operation "Dragoon", Eighth Army could still count on plenty of air support from the Desert Air Force along with several extra medium and heavy bomber squadrons from the Mediterranean Allied Tactical and Strategic Air Forces.⁶⁸ The airmen went into action a full week before the startdate, hitting supply dumps, rail yards, fortifications and other targets. Air reconnaissance squadrons completed sweeps of the battle area to provide updated air photographs to assist not only the planners, but the combat soldiers in familiarizing themselves with the ground. On D-3 the air attacks were redirected at the lateral roads on which reinforcements would travel once the battle began. In keeping with Operation "Ulster", targets in the central region were also attacked, wireless traffic was kept to a minimum and no airfields in the Adriatic region were to be used until after the offensive began.⁶⁹

Opposing Leese's divisions was Col-Gen. Vietinghoff's Tenth German Army consisting of LI Mountain Corps and LXXVI Panzer Corps. Lt-General T. Herr's Panzer Corps was armoured in name only, as it possessed no actual tank divisions. It was this corps that was assigned to guard the coastal corridor and would thus bear the brunt of Eighth Army's attack. Herr deployed three divisions

⁶⁸ The Desert Air Force was the name given to the Royal Air Force fighter and fighter/bomber squadrons that supported the ground forces in Italy. The name is a carry over from the days in North Africa.

⁶⁹ W.D. I Cdn Corps, Report on Air Operations 24 August- 22 September; Jackson, Mediterranean pp. 134-138.

forward, holding his formidable 1st Parachute Division in reserve. This corps had conducted a gradual withdrawal up the coast in the face of pressure from the Polish Corps. By 19 August, Polish operations to close up to the advance positions of the Gothic Line were in full swing, but it appears that Von Vietinghoff's headquarters was still unaware of the massive Allied buildup taking place behind the Poles.⁷⁰ For largely the same reasons that General Leese desired to attack in the Adriatic sector, the Germans suspected that this would be the centre of gravity of the Allied attack on the Gothic Line, given that it was the only place that enemy superiority in tanks and guns could be taken advantage of.⁷¹ While the Tenth German Army predicted that they would face the next major offensive, they had no idea when. Above Vietinghoff's command, Army Group "C" was even more unprepared for the impending storm. Field Marshall Kesselring was more concerned with developments in southern France.⁷² For now, Lt-Gen Herr's LXXVI Panzer Corps would have to make do with the strength it had. It would not be until the Canadian, British, Indian and Polish soldiers came racing across the Metuaro that higher German headquarters would dispatch help to the Adriatic flank.

The plan had been put into motion that would see I Canadian

⁷⁰ Hist Sect Rpt #27, p. 11.

⁷¹ Pretzell Rpt, p. 3.

⁷² As late as 27 August, Kesselring believed that any operations in the Adriatic sector would be diversionary, to prevent a German attack into the flank of the American and French forces advancing in southern France. Hist Sect Rpt # 27 pp. 12, 25.

Corps embark upon its most successful battle of the entire war. Before examining the planning and execution of Operation Olive in the Canadian area of responsibility, a closer look must be directed at the Corps itself.

Chapter II: Preparation for Battle

Historians Terry Copp and William McAndrew claim that "One of the paradoxes of military affairs is that a unit needs battle experience to complete its training, but the inherent strain of operations begins a wearing down process, which if not arrested, leaves the unit impotent."⁷³ When the time came for Eighth Army to burst out across the Metauro River and charge the Gothic Line, the I Canadian Corps was at a peak of combat effectiveness. The soldiers and their leaders of the Canadian Corps had been honed by a combination of training and battle experience, but had also had sufficient time after the Liri Valley battles in the spring to rest, absorb reinforcements. The senior leadership of the Corps had gone through a major operation together which provided an opportunity to become familiar with one another and correct problems that had become apparent during Operation "Diadem".

When Operation "Olive" was launched the corps was composed of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division, 5th Canadian Armoured Division and the 21 British Army Tank Brigade.⁷⁴ 1st Division was well seasoned, having been active in the theatre since landing in Sicily as one of the Operation "Husky" assault divisions. After over a full year of combat, the division had gained experience in nearly every type of battle that could be found in Italy. Their first

⁷³ Terry Copp, Bill McAndrew; Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945 (Montreal: 1990) p. 63.

⁷⁴ For Detailed Order of Battle, see Table I.

experience in fighting Germans came in Sicily where the "Red Patch Devils" pursued enemy rearguards on foot, overcoming a series of delaying positions before being pulled out of the line to prepare for the invasion of the Italian mainland. After landing at Reggio the division mounted vehicles of every sort, and chased the German demolition engineers up the Calabrian peninsula in a dazzling display of mobile warfare. They also fought through the bitter, wet and muddy Italian winter, enduring a number of river crossings closely supported by artillery. 1st Division wrote the book on urban warfare during its fight to clear Ortona, known as "Little Stalingrad".⁷⁵ They had fought with tanks and artillery in close support, and with little more than their own organic infantry weapons. They had faced every kind of enemy soldier the Germans had to offer, from grenadiers to parachutists to panzer troops. These actions had given the division time to get to know itself and thin out weak links in the system. Officers and senior NCO's that could not handle their jobs had been replaced by younger keener men, hardened by months in action. In 1944, the division was commanded by Major-General Chris Vokes, a permanent force officer who had commanded 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade in Sicily and had taken command of the Division shortly after the landing on the mainland.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Shaun Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment: The Loyal Edmonton Regiment at Ortona", Canadian Military History Autumn 1993: pp. 10-23.

⁷⁶ The full story of 1st Canadian Division's long and distinguished record in the Italian Campaign is described in G.W.L. Nicholson's volume of the official army history, The Canadians In

5 Division and the Corps Headquarters were a different matter. These organizations had arrived in theatre late in 1943 and prior to the Liri Valley, had little battle experience. There was some opportunity for the formations to "shake out" when the Corps was deployed to cover the frontline north of Ortona in early 1944, although 5 Armoured Brigade was still without tanks. The only significant event occurring during this period was the action near the Areilli River. The armoured division's 11 Infantry Brigade was tasked with relieving 3 Brigade guarding a section of front. The relief came at a time when Eighth Army was ordered to conduct diversionary attacks in the Adriatic region to draw attention away from Fifth Army's offensive in the Monte Cassino area. 11 Brigade was thus committed to the night attack before it was fully trained.⁷⁷ The result was disastrous; heavy losses and total confusion causing some men to drop their weapons and flee. Far from being a success at blooding the new Brigade, after the Areilli, it had to be carefully nursed and retrained to recover the confidence lost by the men in their leaders.⁷⁸ This task was carried out by the new divisional commander, Major-General B.M."Bert" Hoffmeister. Hoffmeister, known as the best Canadian division commander of the war, had led his own militia unit, the Seaforth Highlanders, through Sicily. When Maj-Gen Vokes took command of 1st Division, he appointed Hoffmeister as his

Italy, 1943-45

⁷⁷ Nicholson, Italy pp. 364-366.

⁷⁸ Interview with Hoffmeister.

replacement to command 2 Brigade. Thus when he took over 5th Canadian Armoured Division just prior to the attack on the Hitler Line, Hoffmeister was one of the few Canadian officers to have combat experience in this war, both at the junior and senior levels.⁷⁹

Operation "Diadem" was the first real test of 5 Canadian Armoured Division as well as the headquarters of 1st Canadian Corps and its new commander, Lieutenant-General E.L.M. "Tommy" Burns, a permanent force officer with experience in the previous war, but none yet in this one. Many valuable lessons were learned in this battle that would be put to good use in late summer. Diadem was a set-piece battle in the Eighth Army tradition, born in the North African Desert. The formula of closing to the main line of resistance, pounding it with artillery and punching a hole in with infantry, through which the armoured exploitation force could pour had been proven on a number of occasions by Eighth Army and it served the Canadians well in their attack on the Hitler Line.⁸⁰ Overall, the operation was a success, but several problems arose as the fighting developed that prevented it from being a decisive victory.⁸¹ By the time the Canadians attacked the Gothic Line, these problems had been analyzed and their lessons absorbed by the

⁷⁹ J.L. Granatstein, The Generals (Toronto: 1993) p. 189.

⁸⁰ E.L.M. Burns, General Mud (Toronto: 1970) p. 141

⁸¹ W.J. McAndrew, "Fifth Canadian Armoured Division: Introduction to Battle", Canadian Military History Autumn 1993: pp. 52-54.

Corps. It was partly due to this experience that the breaking of the Gothic Line was so successful.

The two most important problems with the Canadian role in the Hitler Line, identified by General Burns, involved assault frontage and the related issue of traffic control. In a report made after the battle, Burns suggested that a corps should attack fixed fortifications with two divisions. Tanks should factor into this "break-in" phase of the battle as well as the breakout. Both divisions should then make their assault with two brigades forward each deploying one battalion up with tanks while the others followed close behind ready to drive the attack deep into the rear of the main line of resistance in order to seize the troublesome enemy mortar locations.⁸²

The narrow attack frontage also meant enormous traffic congestion. This became a particular problem during the pursuit from the Hitler Line when the Canadian 5th and British 6th Armoured Divisions were both competing for the limited road space available in the Liri Valley.⁸³ Burns recommended that greater emphasis must be put on traffic control both in the planning and execution of operations. In the Gothic Line, the Canadians would tackle this problem by creating special traffic control units⁸⁴ and by making

⁸² Report by Lt-Gen. Burns, The Set-Piece Attack: Lessons from the Breakthrough of the Hitler Line, W.D. I Cdn Corps, June 1944.

⁸³ Jackson, Battle p. 243.

⁸⁴ 35th Battery, 1st Cdn LAA Regt. became No. 35 Canadian Traffic Control Unit as of 15 June. Nicholson, Italy p. 481.

the primary task of the supporting engineers to follow close behind the attacking waves in order to develop and maintain roads back to the battle area as soon, and often sooner than it was possible.⁸⁵

Other problems encountered in the Liri Valley were tied to inexperience. General Burns himself point out that 5th Armoured Division's pursuit from the Hitler Line had at times been overly cautious. Burns also faults himself for not recognizing this timidity and driving the division on.⁸⁶ Neither Burns nor the men of the "Mighty Maroon Machine" were to make that mistake again when the opportunity to exploit a breach presented itself again in the Gothic Line.

Calling on his First World War experience, General Burns appreciated that the bulk of his casualties had been caused by artillery and mortar fire in spite of the tremendous weight of shot delivered on German positions. This problem was addressed by making counter-battery shoots the primary mission of the heavy and medium guns. The gunners would also cut down on the preparatory barrage so as not to give the enemy any warning of a pending attack. Known enemy defenses and gun positions would only be engaged after H-hour to prevent the defenders from withdrawing to unknown alternate locations.⁸⁷

The issue of experience, attack frontage and the associated traffic congestion raises the question of leadership. There had

⁸⁵ W.D. CCRE I Cdn Corps, Aug 1944.

⁸⁶ Burns, p. 158.

⁸⁷ Burns, Lessons.

not been enough room in the Liri Valley for two corps and their administrative tails to function. Maj-Gen. Vokes suggested that this problem could easily have been dealt with in the Hitler Line if General Leese had placed all the attacking divisions under Burns' command.⁸⁸ However, Leese was apparently unwilling to place an extra formation under the command of an inexperienced corps commander. Leese's confidence in Burns was not improved after his trial by fire either. In spite of satisfactory performance of the Canadian Corps in its first battle, the Eighth Army commander had not been impressed by Burns' leadership and did not believe that he was fit to command. How much this assessment was based upon Leese's own dislike of Burns' cold, sarcastic personality is debatable.⁸⁹ It is also quite likely that Leese was also trying to justify his decision not to give Burns an extra division. Blaming Burns for his incompetent handling of the pursuit drew attention away from the fact that it was Leese's decision to cram two corps in to a space that could barely fit one that caused most of the delays that prevented Diadem from being a decisive victory. Tommy Burns did not endear himself to his Army commander when he pointed out Leese's mistake in his after action report.⁹⁰ "His[Burns'] critique was candid and well-founded; it was also not the sort to establish helpful communications with Leese whose capacity for

⁸⁸ Chris Vokes, Vokes: My Story (Ottawa: 1985) p. 159.

⁸⁹ Granatstein, pp. 132-133.

⁹⁰ Burns, Lessons.

self-criticism does not seem to be well developed."⁹¹ The expanding rift between Leese and Burns would cause significant problems in the Gothic Line.

Considering that he led I Canadian Corps to victory in its two biggest battles, Lt-Gen. E.L.M. Burns has not been granted much attention in Canadian military history. Part of this is due to the overall neglect of the Italian campaign, but more significant is Burns' personality. His cold, introverted, intellect did not inspire confidence in his subordinates or, as we have seen, his superiors. In spite of his military ability, Burns did not fit in socially with the British Eighth Army "club". "He made no effort that I could see to become a member of the club. And I must say I think half of one's military ability is bound up in one's ability to garner and hold a position of trust with one's pals and peers."⁹²

Burns' grating personality was noticed by his fellow Canadians as well. His mid-1943 performance assessment notes: "Difficult man to approach, cold and most sarcastic. Will never secure the devotion of his followers." This report goes on to report that while Burns' personality hampers his leadership potential, he is still an outstanding officer. "Has probably one of the best staff brains in the Army and whilst he will lead his division successfully he would give greater service as a high staff

⁹¹ McAndrew, "Commanders and Plans", p. 54.

⁹² Vokes, p. 158.

officer."⁹³ The report presents the heart of the problem. Tommy Burns is undoubtedly one of Canada's greatest military thinkers of the Second World War, yet his inability to lead and inspire men in battle denied him the glory of a victorious corps commander.

How was it then that such a man presided over two of Canada's greatest battles? General Burns was blessed with two very able divisional commanders, each of which more than made up for his leadership deficiencies. Bert Hoffmeister had been an outstanding militia officer before the war as well as a businessman in spite of his lack of university education. Most importantly, the Vancouver born infantryman possessed those natural qualities of leadership that Burns did not. "A man of powerful personality and striking magnetism, Hoffmeister was the classic leader, someone men wanted to follow."⁹⁴ The militia general chose to lead by example whether in training or in battle, the most famous instance being his training of 11 Infantry Brigade after their Areilli River debacle. Hoffmeister personally led each company through a live fire exercise in which the troops were expected to follow dangerously close to a creeping barrage. Hoffmeister had first demonstrated his abilities as a trainer when he was given command of his own regiment, the Seaforth Highlanders after completing staff college in 1942. At the time of his appointment the regiment was in poor condition and the Brigade commander, none other than Chris Vokes, gave Hoffmeister the difficult task of bringing up the standard.

⁹³ Granatstein, p. 130.

⁹⁴ Granatstein, p. 194.

The superb combat performance of the Seaforth Highlanders in Sicily and Italy is the evidence of Hoffmeister's success. His personal belief in keeping his soldiers informed down to the lowest private, corresponded with Eighth Army policy and his highly motivated and inspiring personality made him the ideal commander of an armoured division designed for aggressive pursuit action.⁹⁵ In a letter to General Crerar back in England, Burns wrote that the difficulties encountered by 5th Canadian Armoured Division in the Liri Valley were in no way a reflection of its hard driving commander but on the inexperienced troops.⁹⁶

General Burns could also count on Maj-Gen. Chris Vokes. Vokes has not been treated well by historians. He was labelled by Field Marshall Montgomery as being a satisfactory division commander, but unsuitable for any higher formation. This view seems to have been taken up by General Crerar.⁹⁷ Whether or not Vokes was corps commander material or not should not get in the way of evaluations of how he performed leading 1st Canadian Division.

Chris, and his younger brother Fred Vokes, were born in Ireland to a professional soldier of the Royal Engineers. While the boys were still young, their father was seconded to the Royal Canadian Engineers and posted to the Royal Military College in Kingston. Both sons would enter the college and go on to careers

⁹⁵ Unpublished Interview with General B.M. Hoffmeister by B. Greenhous and Dr. W. McAndrew. DHist.

⁹⁶ Daniel G. Dancocks, The D-Day Dodgers (Toronto: 1991) p. 290.

⁹⁷ Granatstein, p. 134.

in Canada's tiny Permanent Force. The older Chris chose the path of his father and became an engineer while Fred became a cavalry officer. General Vokes' engineer background would serve him well in the Italian campaign which was very much a sapper's war. To round out his career, Vokes attended the full length peace time staff college course at Fort Frontenac in Kingston and had served briefly as the commanding officer of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry before taking over 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade in 1942.⁹⁸ When General Guy Simonds was evacuated from southern Italy in 1943 with jaundice, Vokes was appointed to relieve him and went on to lead the division in the tough battles around Ortona and the Moro River. Vokes had a reputation for being a foul mouthed, hot tempered bully. He trained and commanded by using the more traditional military style of instilling fear in subordinates, but nevertheless, he took good care of his soldiers needs and most importantly, he got the job done.⁹⁹

He was a steady force in times of crisis and was tough enough to make the kind of decisions that made weaker men break. Another key to the success of I Canadian Corps was that Hoffmeister and Vokes made a very good team. They had a long history of service together in 1st Division and a healthy respect for each other's ability.¹⁰⁰

Between the corps commanders grasp of the principles of war and the leadership abilities of the division commanders, I Canadian

⁹⁸ Vokes, pp. 1-10, 15-16, 33, 65, 86.

⁹⁹ Interview with Maj-Gen. M.P. Bogert, GSO 1, 1st CID.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Hoffmeister; Vokes, p. 134.

Corps struck an effective balance that would serve it well in the Gothic Line. During the summer months while the Canadians rested and trained for the next major operation, General Burns put his energies into identifying and correcting his corps' shortcomings in staff work. General's Hoffmeister and Vokes concentrated on training to ensure that the junior leaders would not repeat the mistakes of the Liri Valley and that the lessons of that battle would be disseminated down through the ranks. This preparation could only take the corps so far in its next major battle. General Burns himself pointed out that the senior leaders job was largely completed by the time a plan was executed. From there on in, the most important leadership would be provided by the Brigade and Battalion commanders.¹⁰¹

I Canadian Corps that prepared to smash the Gothic Line in the late summer of 1944 possessed a wealth of talented brigade level officers. Two of the three brigade commanders in 1st Division had led their formations successfully in the Liri Valley. Bdr. J.P.E. "Paul" Bernatchez, former commanding officer of the Permanent Force, French Canadian Royal 22e Regiment had served with particular distinction leading 3 Infantry Brigade in its highly successful assault on the Hitler Line.¹⁰² Toronto born Bdr. G.T. "Graeme" Gibson led 2 Canadian Brigade in their difficult battle in the Liri and had before that had commanded 3 Brigade on the Sangro and Moro River actions the previous fall. Although not an RMC

¹⁰¹ Burns, pp.150-151.

¹⁰² Nicholson, Italy pp. 420-421.

type, Gibson was a Permanent Force officer from the Royal Canadian Regiment and graduate of the British Staff College at Camberley. Bdr. J.A. "Allen" Calder was the only one of the three 1st Division commanders to go into the Gothic Line with no prior experience commanding a Brigade, although he had plenty of action leading the divisional support group, the Saskatoon Light Infantry(MG).¹⁰³

In contrast, all of the brigadiers in 5th Division that participated in Operation Olive were leading brigades for the first time, although like Allen Calder, they had all had logged a large amount of time commanding battalions. In 11 Brigade, Bdr. T.E. Snow was fired for his failure to drive his men forward in the Liri. Snow was replaced by one of the top Canadian brigadiers of the war, I.S. "Ian" Johnston. Johnston was a prewar militiaman and Toronto lawyer. He had also served as the director of Maple Leaf Gardens making him popular with the countless hockey fans under his command. He had joined the famous 48th Highlanders in 1930 and had risen to command them by the time they landing in Sicily. The officer commanding 5 Armoured Brigade was equally promising. Bdr. J.D.B."Desmond" Smith, who had led the Brigade in the Liri, was moved up to corps headquarters to take over the Brigadier, General Staff's chair. Bdr. I.H. "Ian" Cumberland was chosen as his successor. After graduating from RMC in 1927, this native of Port Hope Ontario, went into the civilian autoparts industry and joined the militia Governor General's Horse Guards. He rose to command

¹⁰³ Nicholson, Italy; The Canadian Who's Who, Volume 34, 1944 (Toronto: 1944).

his unit just after the outbreak of war and led them during their very successful operations on the 5th Division flanks in the Liri Valley. The man he replaced, Desmond Smith, was a Permanent Force Royal Canadian Dragoon and RMC graduate. He would perform well in his new job as BGS. It is interesting to note that when Operation Olive was launched, the commander of 1st Division and his three brigadiers were all Permanent Force, while their 5th Division counterparts were all militia.¹⁰⁴

The other individuals that would play a significant role in the planning and execution of Operation Olive were the corps and divisional representatives of the Royal Canadian Artillery and Engineers. The Corps Commander, Royal Artillery(CCRA), Bdr. E.C. Plow, the 1st Division CRA, Bdr. W.S. Zeigler, and the 5th Division CRA, Bdr.H.A. Sparling, were all RMC graduates and Permanent Force officers of the Royal Canadian Artillery.¹⁰⁵ By August of 1944 they all had considerable experience in their highly technical craft. The detailed preparation of these skilled gunners for a set-piece battle in the Foglia Valley would have a significant impact on the outcome of the battle. The Corps and Divisional engineering officers were equally competent and experienced.¹⁰⁶

Over the summer, a new position for a brigadier was created in I Canadian Corps. The operations of armoured divisions consisting of one infantry and one armoured brigade in Italy up to and

¹⁰⁴ Canadian Who's Who.

¹⁰⁵ Who's Who.

¹⁰⁶ Nicholson, Italy p. 500.

including Diadem had shown that this combination was unbalanced. A second infantry brigade was required so that when one had reached the limit of its endurance, the other could pass through and carry on alongside the fast moving armour. The reorganization was initiated by General Leese, but in order for the Canadian Armoured Division to be altered, General Burns first had to get permission from Canadian Military Headquarters in London. CMHQ approved, but did not assign any resources. Therefore, 12 Canadian Infantry Brigade had to be created out of forces already existing in the theatre.¹⁰⁷ 5 Armoured Brigade's motor rifle battalion, The Westminster Regiment, would form the core of the new brigade. To this would be added the 4th Princess Louise's Dragoon Guards, former corps reconnaissance regiment. Burns chose them because they already had some infantry experience.¹⁰⁸ Armoured recce soldiers are often called upon to dismount from their armoured cars to make foot patrols and to launch small scale infantry attacks on isolated enemy positions. That left only one more battalion to round the brigade out. With Allied air superiority no longer contested by the Luftwaffe, new uses for the numerous anti-aircraft artillery units in theatre were being developed. Some were turned into traffic control units. Heavy 3.7 inch units were employed as counter-battery artillery, but one group had its 40mm Bofors guns taken away and was re-equipped as infantry. The 89th and 109th Batteries of the 1st Canadian Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment were

¹⁰⁷ Burns, p. 169.

¹⁰⁸ Dancocks, p. 292.

transformed into the Lanark and Renfrew Scottish Regiment.¹⁰⁹ This motley crew was first commanded by the veteran Brigadier Dan Spry during its training period, but was taken over by the former commander of the Perth Regiment, Bdr. J.S.H. Lind after Spry was sent to Northwest Europe just before the start of Olive. With only a few short weeks to prepare before attacking the Gothic Line, the new brigade was not up to the standard of the other formations in the corps and would have to be used cautiously.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, the presence of an extra infantry brigade would ease the burden on Bdr. Johnston's three regiments during the coming battle.

The time spent between the Liri Valley battle and the next offensive on the Adriatic coast was well spent by I Canadian Corps. After getting a good rest, new uniforms, a dental check up, a chance to replace broken equipment and recover from the tough battles of the winter and spring, the troops settled into the task of training to break the Gothic Line. At first the emphasis was on basic combined arms skills. All infantry officers down to the level of platoon commander was taught how to direct artillery fire by observation so that the lack of artillery forward observers would not prevent the employment of the guns.¹¹¹ The field engineers practiced mine lifting and bridge construction drills by

¹⁰⁹ Nicholson, Italy pp. 480-481.

¹¹⁰ By 23 August, only five days before they would be committed, the Lanarks had no Medium Machinegun tripods and only three 6 pounder anti-tank guns. The Divisional War Diarist expressed his concern on that day that the Brigade would not be ready for the coming action. W.D. 5 CAD, 23 August 1944.

¹¹¹ Nicholson, Italy. p. 479.

day and by night. The riflemen and tankers of 5th Division rehearsed infantry-tank tactics, alternating which arm was to be dominant depending on terrain. The infantry of 1st Division practiced with the British 21 Army Tank Brigade with their slower and heavier Churchill "Infantry" tanks. The 6 pounder gun of the Churchill IV was virtually obsolete by 1944, although still useful for smashing bunkers and houses. To give the brigade a better edge, the field workshops carried refitted over 100 tanks with the guns and mantelets off of wrecked Sherman tanks. New shipments of Churchill IV's had also arrived from England equipped with a new British version of the American 75mm gun found on Shermans. The brigade even had a few Sherman and light Stuart "Honey" tanks employed in command, recce, and fire support roles. The result was a mixed bag of armoured vehicles requiring a range of parts and ammunition from the brigade quartermaster.¹¹² Even with this supply clerks nightmare, the regiments comprising Bdr. Dawnay's 21 Tank Brigade were still able to render sterling service to Vokes' men when the time came.

The training emphasis took a different turn on 9 August, when corps headquarters was first made aware of the Eighth Army change of plan after it had already begun to deploy in the central Apennines near Florence.¹¹³ While the senior Canadian staffs were put to work in planning the corps' move to the Adriatic and

¹¹² M.A. Bellis, British Tanks and Formations: 1939-1945 (Cheshire: 1986) p. 56.

¹¹³ Jackson, Mediterranean p. 127.

subsequent assault, the soldiers tested their skills on a series of exercises. The schemes were designed to practice infantry attacks across rivers at night without artillery to cover the work of engineers constructing vehicle crossings so that when the sun rose, the supporting armour would be across the river with the infantry and ready to push forward.¹¹⁴ The Canadian soldiers would not have to wait long to put these procedures into practice.

From the first day of planning at the headquarters of I Canadian Corps, the emphasis for Operation Olive was on speed and surprise. Security was also the watchword. The men were told to remove all insignia from their uniforms identifying them as Canadian as well as any formation signs on vehicles. They were also under strict instructions not to talk to any locals, a difficult task for Canadians who were well known for their womanizing and scrounging.¹¹⁵ Operations orders were issued verbally and on a need to know basis. The final written Operations Instruction was not issued until 21 August, a mere four days before the startdate. Operation Olive was conceived by the Eighth Army planners as having four distinct phases. The first would involve the establishment of a bridgehead over the Metuaro river. The next would be a rapid closing of the distance between the Metuaro and the Foglia. Phase III was to be the most crucial component and would consist of operations to break the Gothic Line itself while

¹¹⁴ Notes on Exercise Grampion and Canyon, W.D. 1 CID; 5 CAD, Aug 1944.

¹¹⁵ The Canadians had the highest rate of venereal disease in all of Eighth Army. Copp; McAndrew, Exhaustion p. 91.

phase IV would be the exploitation to Rimini and beyond.¹¹⁶ With the emphasis on the rapid approach to and breaching of the Gothic Line, it is evident that Eighth Army believed that the Germans would make their stand along the Foglia and once that line had been broken there was nothing to stop them from ranging north into the Po region. There is little evidence to suggest that General Leese and his staff had knowledge of any German depth positions or switch lines.¹¹⁷ The Eighth Army directive issued to General Burns was that his primary task was to break the Gothic Line.

Two alternative plans were prepared by General Burns and his staff for breaking the main line of resistance. Maj-Gen. Vokes' 1st Infantry Division would form up behind a Polish screen on the south bank of the Metauro River and then pass through to carry out a silent crossing of the Metauro on the night of 25/26 August, just as they practiced earlier in the month. The artillery would remain silent until 1 and 2 Canadian Infantry Brigades each had two assault battalions established in the bridgehead. At this point the guns would open up to cover the work of the engineers and the movement of the British tanks. At dawn on 26 August, the four Canadian battalions each supported by a Churchill squadron would drive north with all possible speed. The aim was to close up to the Gothic Line before the Germans could effectively man in and "bounce" it. As his Vokes' formations neared the Foglia River, they were to send patrols across to determine the nature of enemy

¹¹⁶ Operations Instruction No. 22, W.D. I Cdn Corps, 21 Aug.

¹¹⁷ Jackson, Mediterranean p. 127.

resistance.¹¹⁸

It was here that the two alternatives would come into play. If the line was found to be lightly manned, Vokes was to keep right on going and secure crossings over the river and penetrate the defence line. Once this was achieved, Maj-Gen Hoffmeister would bring his division up and pass it through Vokes' infantry and exploit north to the coast road pinching out the Polish Corps masking Pesaro and hopefully trapping the German garrison in the port and then driving on to Rimini. If Vokes' patrols discovered that the Germans had manned the Gothic Line in strength, then Hoffmeister was to bring his division up on the left in preparation for a set-piece attack.¹¹⁹ The second plan satisfied General Burns' recommendation made after the Hitler Line that set piece attacks should be delivered by two divisions on a broader front than had been the case in the Liri. Ideally it would have been best to deliver the set-piece attack with two infantry divisions while the armoured division waited in reserve to exploit any breaches. The unbalanced Canadian Corps had to make do with what it had on the ground however. General Leese would not release an extra infantry division to work under Burns' command as he had no confidence in him after Diadem and the subsequent political wranglings.¹²⁰

The Gothic Line, originally called the "Apeninne Position" by

¹¹⁸ Ops Instr #22.

¹¹⁹ Ops Instr # 22.

¹²⁰ McAndrew, "Commanders and Plans", p. 52.

the Germans was renamed in June to the Green Line, on the same principle that Hitler did not want to have his name attached to the Liri Valley switch line, he did not want to have a defence line with such a dramatic sounding name be associated with defeat. The Green Line ran roughly from Pisa on the Arno River in the west over to Pesaro in the east. The Adriatic sector was the most heavily developed, if not very deep, sector as it did not have the same natural defenses to count on that could be found further west. Work on the line had begun back in 1943 but had not proceeded very quickly until the defenses south of Rome had been pierced. In June, Field Marshall Kesselring issued what is known to the Allies as "The Gothic Order".¹²¹ Work on the defenses was to be accelerated dramatically using the German Todt engineering organization, a Slovak engineer brigade and 15 000 Italian labourers impressed into service by the Italian Fascists.¹²² Italian partisans were increasing their activity in 1944, partly in reaction to the kind of forced labour conscription carried out in the summer. To counter the partisan sabotage threat while the defenses were under construction, the German high command was forced to commit several German SS and police units to the area, supported by the Italian Fascist Blackshirt Militia.¹²³ These organizations, particularly the Blackshirts, dealt with the

¹²¹ Order Nos. 1 + 2 for Strengthening the Gothic Position, W.D. H.Q. Corps Witthoeft, Venetian Coast Command, 14, 21 June, 1944.

¹²² Orgill, p. 28.

¹²³ Gothic Order No. 1, p. 4.

partisan problem using the tools of brutality, torture, and fear, which even the Germans admitted probably only added to the problem by convincing more Italians to take up arms to avenge the terrorism of the Germans and their Italian puppets.¹²⁴

The section of Green Line faced by Eighth Army actually consisted of a number of lines in front and behind the main line of resistance along the Foglia. The first position was an advanced outpost line or "Vorfeld" set up on the north bank of the Foglia with the mission of providing early warning of an attack. Approximately 10 kilometres behind the Vorfeld was the Red Line sited in the Canadian zone, along the Arzilla River. The Red Line was intended as a delaying position manned by one third to one half of the main force. This line would not be powerful enough to resist indefinitely, but it would be strong enough to halt the Allied vanguard and force the enemy to bring up receiver formations and artillery to mount a proper attack as was their custom. This would give the main German force the time they needed to man the Green Line. When this was completed, the forces in the Red Line would make a fighting withdraw back across the Foglia.¹²⁵

The main line of resistance on the north bank of the Foglia River as known to the Germans as Green Line I. The position possessed a good deal of natural strength as the attacker would have to descend into the Foglia valley, cross the river and

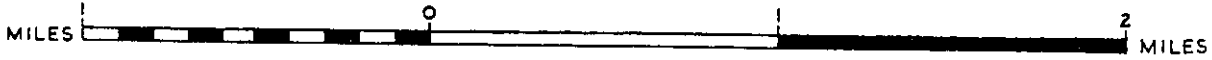
¹²⁴ F. Von Senger und Etterlin, Neither Fear Nor Hope (Novato: 1963) p. 269.

¹²⁵ Pretzell Rpt, pp. 32-34.

anywhere from 1000 to 1500 metres of open flats under full observation of defenses sited in the hills which rose sharply on the north side of the main lateral road running from the interior to Pesaro on the coast. German engineers had liberally planted mines on the river flats, crossing points and all the approaches leading up to the heights on the north side. Along with the mines was plenty of barbed wire and an Anti-tank ditch, although this was incomplete in the Canadian area. On the heights, concrete machinegun emplacements had been prepared complete with deep dugouts to protect the crews from the usual Eighth Army artillery barrage. Mortar and anti-tank gun, and assault gun pits were also developed and surrounded by covering infantry positions. Fortunately for the Canadians, the fixed defenses in their area were not sited in very much depth. The spurs running up from the river bank did have several of the deadly Panther turrets dug in to cover draws and roads, but most of these were incomplete in the end of August. While the fixed fortifications were not very deep, the spurs running north onto the Tomba Di Pesaro feature commanded all the approaches from the valley. A few 88mm anti-tank guns protected by automatic weapons had the potential to inflict severe casualties on an attacker and hold his rear echelons in the valley exposed to shell and mortar fire.¹²⁶ The high ground of the Tomba Di Pesaro feature would have to be secured quickly by the Canadians if they expected to avoid a costly, drawn out battle.

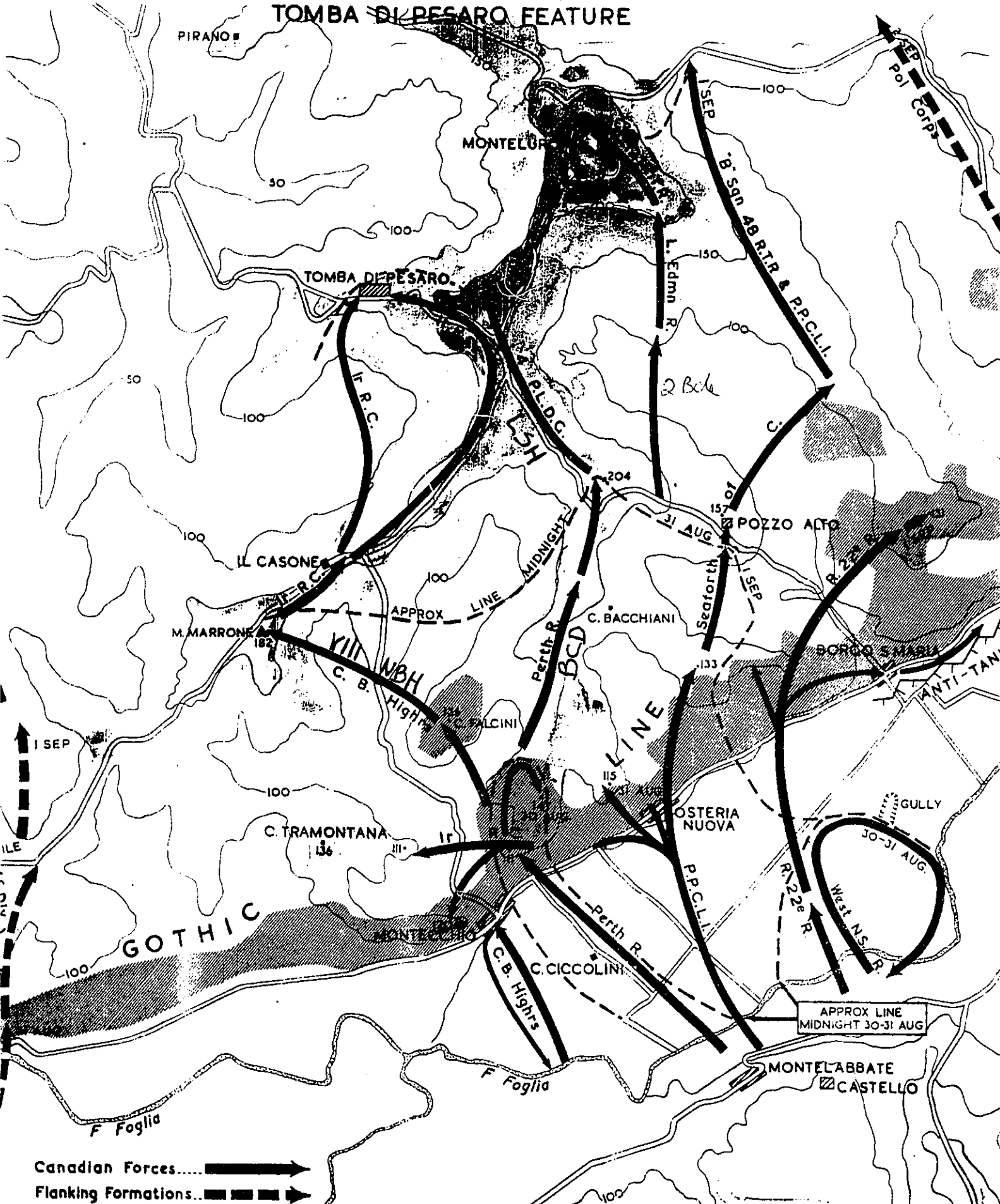
¹²⁶ Nicholson, Italy p. 497.

30 AUGUST-1 SEPTEMBER 1944



CONTOUR INTERVAL 50 METRES

TOMBA DI PESARO FEATURE



Canadian Forces.....>>>>
Flanking Formations...>>>>

Chapter III: The Race is On

On 23 and 24 August General Leese issued a final briefing to his three corps, his own staff and a memorandum to be circulated to all the soldiers. The tone of the briefing and the message was extremely enthusiastic and optimistic. After recapping the successes of his army over the past year, Leese suggested that this offensive would be "the last lap" and "the beginning of the end of the German Armies in Italy" and hinted that once the Gothic Line was broken, there would be nothing to stop them from driving to Venice and beyond. Leese's spirit was infectious and soon spread throughout the entire army, lifting morale to a new height.¹²⁷ A road sign placed on a major supply route by the engineers shortly after the battle begun read "Drive carefully if you want to see Vienna."¹²⁸ The planning was complete, the men and machines were in position, Operation Olive was on.

Phase I of the Canadian plan was pulled off without a hitch. On the night of 25 August, 1 and 2 Canadian Infantry Brigades slipped across the Metauro and secured the crossing sites for the armour to follow up. The artillery opened up shortly thereafter in preparation for Phase II, the drive to the Foglia. The opening of Allied operations on the Adriatic flank coincided with a German withdrawal from the "Vorfeld" to the Red Line. This had meant

¹²⁷ Nicholson, Italy pp. 498-499.

¹²⁸ W.D. 1st Cdn Corps, Aug 1944.

that while the Metuaro crossing was completed without loss, the massive artillery barrage delivered in the early morning hours of 26 August fell on empty enemy positions.¹²⁹ German engineers had performed their usual tasks of mine laying and demolition preventing the tanks from keeping pace with the leading infantry of 1st Division. No significant resistance was encountered until the evening of 27 August when the Seaforth Highlanders and the 48th Highlanders reached the high ground on the south side of the Arzilla River. Elements of the German 71st Infantry Division were driven out off of these hills in a night attack after three more Canadian infantry battalions were brought up along with the supporting British tanks.¹³⁰ The action south of the Arzilla had hardly slowed the Canadians a beat and by dawn on 27 August, they were advancing again.

Maj-Gen. Vokes ordered his brigadiers to follow on the heels of the retreating Germans in keeping with the plan to bounce the Gothic Line or at least arrive at it at the same time as the Germans tasked with defending it. Brigadiers Calder and Gibson were to close up to the Foglia River by any means they chose, Vokes' only stipulation being that they do it fast.¹³¹ The leading battalions had crossed the nearly dry Arzilla River by late afternoon and were working their way up the hills on the northern bank. On top of this ridge stood the villages of Monteciccardo,

¹²⁹ Pretzell Rpt, p. 9.

¹³⁰ W.D. 1 CID, 27-28 Aug.

¹³¹ Operations Log, W.D. 1 CID, 27 Aug.

Sant Angelo, and Ginestreto. Once these villages were secure, I Canadian Corps could launch its main attack across the Foglia. This point was not lost on the Germans who prepared to defend the Monteciccardo-Ginestreto position and bring the Canadians to a halt. The fight for what the Germans called the Red Line lasted throughout the night of 27/28 August and all the next day. Each forward brigade prepared to launch a full scale two battalion attack for the evening of 28 August supported by a substantial artillery program and Brig. D. Dawnay's British tanks.¹³² In accordance with standard German delaying tactics, a full scale Allied attack was exactly what Red Line defenders had been attempting to encourage, yet they had no intention of resisting it.

General Herr's LXXVI Panzer Corps needed time to man Green Line I and bring up reinforcements. Heavy air and artillery bombardment in the Adriatic sector coupled with the identification of the Canadians and General Keightley's V British Corps had finally convinced Kesselring's headquarters that Vietinghoff's Tenth Army, and Herr's Corps in particular, were being hit by a major Allied offensive. Somehow, a copy of Leese's message for the troops had found its way into German hands. Based on this information, a clear picture of Allied intentions was emerging at the Headquarters of both Army Group "C" and Tenth Army. The Tenth Army War Diary records the German appreciation of Allied intentions on the night of 28 August. "By committing fresh formations and by superior weight of armoured and air formations, he[Eighth Army] is

¹³² W.D. 1 CID, 28 Aug.

seeking to destroy our formations forward of the Green Line, with the objective of then quickly passing through the Green Line in the Direction of Rimini."¹³³ The men of the German 71st Infantry Division and the 1st Parachute Division, dug in on the Red Line, had accomplished their task of delaying the enemy advance by forcing them to deploy for a major attack well in front of the main line of resistance, but with that attack about to be delivered, they had outlived their value south of the Foglia. Orders were issued on the night of 28/29 August for a general withdrawal back to Green Line I.¹³⁴ 1st Canadian Division attacked the hills south of the Foglia that night to find that the enemy had vanished. The Germans had anticipated that the centre of gravity of any major Allied operation in this area would be along the coastal road where their defenses were the strongest. The identification of strong British and Canadian formations working further inland along the boundary between 71st Division and the Paratroopers came as a surprise. Tenth Army headquarters responded by ordering fresh units from the 26th Panzer and 98th Infantry Divisions forward from the Tenth Army Reserve to strengthen the Green Line west of the Pesaro area. General von Vietinghoff and Major-General Heidrich of the Parachute Division were also recalled from leave in Germany now that the situation had been deemed

¹³³ Hist Sect Rpt #27, p. 28.

¹³⁴ Historical Section Report # 27 Army General Staff Headquarters. The Italian Campaign: The Battle of Rimini Information for German Military Documents pp. 22-28.

serious.¹³⁵

In spite of the threat developing along LXXVI Panzer Corps' front, the German Senior leadership still felt that it could contain the Allied attack now that Eighth Army had been delayed on the Red Line. Kesselring and his staff believed that the characteristic overcautiousness of Allied offensive operations meant that once the centre of gravity had been identified, the threatened sector could be reinforced and counter-attacks launched long before the Allies could take advantage of any tactical surprise they managed to achieve.¹³⁶ In the Adriatic, Tenth Army worked under the assumption that after deploying for a major attack on the Red Line, Eighth Army would pause for several days to bring up its administrative tail just as it had in Calabria in 1943, and at Anzio and the Liri Valley in 1944. It could take a week for artillery to be moved forward, ammunition stockpiled, fireplans prepared and patrols to be conducted. This would give Tenth Army plenty of time to transfer reserves to Green Line I.¹³⁷ The Germans did not know that every soldier in Eighth Army had been impressed by the need to keep rolling forward even if it meant open flanks and strained supply lines if the Po was to be reached before winter. The period between the German abandonment of the Red Line and the Allied attack on Green Line I turned into a race to see

¹³⁵ Pretzell Rpt, pp. 11-15.

¹³⁶ Post War interview with Kesselring and Westphal on Army Group "C" and Italian Strategy.

¹³⁷ Hist Sect Rpt #27

which army could reach the north bank of the Foglia first and in strength.

The significant resistance encountered in front of the Foglia across the Eighth Army's front began to convince Leese and his Corps commanders that the alternative plan would have to be used and a set-piece attack launched. Orders were issued for 5 Division to take its place in the line. During the night of 28/29 August, 5 Division's 11 Infantry Brigade was ordered to relieve 2 Brigade in the Ginestreto- Monteciccardo area while 1 Division's 3 Brigade moved up to relieve 1 Brigade on the right. By nightfall on 29 August the three battalions of Bdr. Ian Johnston's 11 Brigade plus the attached Princess Louise's Dragoon Guards from 12 Brigade were in position in the high ground overlooking the Foglia. They were to conduct patrols and prepare for the set piece assault that was to be delivered on the night of 2/3 September.¹³⁸ The forward Canadian units wasted no time in pushing patrols up to the Foglia and over. The Irish Regiment of Canada and the PLDG were to send one company each to Castello and Apsella in order to secure those two villages as firm bases for patrols across the river.¹³⁹

On the morning of 30 August, a conference was held between General Burns, General Anders of the Polish Corps and General Leese. In spite of General Anders' concern that his corps would not be ready, it was agreed to accelerate the time table and have

¹³⁸ W.D. 11 CIB, September 1944, Report on Operations, 30 August - 14 September.

¹³⁹ W.D., 11 CIB, 29 August.

the Canadian and British Corps attack on the night of 1/2 September.¹⁴⁰ Burns returned to his Headquarters around 1000 that morning. On his return he was informed that there was no sign of enemy activity across the river based on the reports of a number of patrols. By early evening on 29 August, the Cape Breton Highlanders had two patrols across the river. These two patrols located a good crossing point and managed to bag an unsuspecting German prisoner who seemed quite surprised to see the enemy that far north. With this one exception the only enemy positions that were identified as being manned were the strong defenses on top of point 120.¹⁴¹ Two more patrols were sent out the following morning which included field engineer officers who were to ensure that the crossing site was suitable for infantry and tanks. The Cape Breton scouts also discovered that one of the three northward running roads in their area was free of mines and obstacles. Apparently it had been left open for German use.¹⁴² Between the surprised prisoner and the unobstructed road it seemed as though the German defenders in this portion of the Gothic Line were quite unaware of the danger to their front.

To the right of the "Capers", the Perth Regiment put one patrol across the river shortly before midnight on 29 August. It returned some hours later to report that no enemy had been sighted but that large numbers of mines had been encountered.

¹⁴⁰ W.D. 1 Canadian Corps, Operations Log 1070, 30 Aug 44.

¹⁴¹ W.D. CBH, Patrol Report 29 August.

¹⁴² W.D. CBH, Patrol Report 30 August.

The Perth CO, Lt-Col. Reid went forward himself to recce a crossing near Montelabbate at 0930 while the Corps Commander was still conferring with Generals Lesse and Anders. While in the vicinity of this crossing Reid's party came very near to becoming victims of their own air force when a flight of four Desert Air Force Kittyhawks unloaded their ordnance in the area.¹⁴³ It seems that neither the Perth Regiment or the Cape Bretoners had been informed of the air plan for that day until after they had sent more patrols out.¹⁴⁴ West Nova Scotia Regiment patrols in the eastern part of the Canadian Corps area also failed to locate any enemy positions although like the Perths they detected plenty of mines.¹⁴⁵

Over the course of 30 August the intelligence picture became clearer as more reports came in from infantry and engineer patrols as well as from air observers. The decision was taken at a number of different headquarters to move immediately to establish a bridgehead over the Foglia. The sequence of which headquarters were the first to act is not entirely clear as orders to advance were issued by battalion commanders right up to General Lesse almost at the same time. It would seem that there was a general recognition by all parties that there if they acted immediately, the Gothic Line could still be "Gate-Crashed". This scenario is that quite plausible given that it was Eighth Army policy to keep every soldier informed right down to the lowest trooper, private,

¹⁴³ W.D. The Perth Regiment, 30 August.

¹⁴⁴ W.D. 11 CIB Operations Log, 30 August.

¹⁴⁵ W.D. WNSR, 30 August.

gunner and sapper.¹⁴⁶ Everyone knew that the faster they advanced, the greater the chance that they would not have to slug it out with the Germans in a set-piece battle.

All across Eighth Army's front units were ordered to push strong fighting patrols of company strength across the Foglia. Even though this meant calling a halt to the bombing of the Gothic Line by the Desert Air Force. If the company fighting patrols were successful they were to be reinforced by battalions until a lodgement had been secured.¹⁴⁷ This would be followed by a drive to the coastal road and on to Rimini.

In the Canadian Corps sector, these patrols were to begin crossing at 1700 on 30 August. To call them patrols is somewhat misleading. In effect there were to be four company probing attacks across the Canadian front. If these leading companies encountered significant resistance than the remainder of their parent units would be close enough behind that a battalion attack could be immediately teed up complete with a squadron of armour and supporting artillery. The hastily issued order caught some units unprepared. The 11 Brigade support group, the Princess Louise's Fusiliers had allotted positions for its medium machine-gun platoons and 4.2 inch mortar batteries, but when the orders for the quick attack were received at 1515 on 30 August, those positions

¹⁴⁶ W.D. 5 CAD, History of Operations, Lessons Learned Part IV. "The importance of putting everyone in the picture to at least crew commander and section leader level was again proven." , See also, PPCLI After Action Report, September, 1944.

¹⁴⁷ W.D. Lt-Gen. E.L.M. Burns, 30 August.

had not even been surveyed much less occupied.¹⁴⁸ In spite of the initial confusion, the participating units managed to reach their jumping off points on time, although zero hour was pushed back to 1730.¹⁴⁹

The timings for the attack are interesting to note. By starting at 1730 there was a possibility that the objectives could be taken before sunset. It also meant that if the Germans tried to stand then any Canadian battalion attacks supported by artillery would not be delivered until after dark. This plan was reflective of the Corps' policy for conducting river crossing operations at night which was developed during the training period earlier in the summer. The bridgehead was to be secured at night by infantry with engineers echeloned behind to prepare tank crossings and clear mines under cover of darkness. Supporting armour was to cross the river at dawn so that the next leg of the advance could begin with infantry and armour together.¹⁵⁰ After the war General Burns noted,

From this point on, it may be said that the battle to get through the Gothic Line and to seize the commanding high ground about two and a half miles beyond it... was mainly a battalion and regimental commander's battle.. The way this gate-crash battle had to be fought laid the responsibility mainly on the lieutenant-colonels, who rose to the occasion and gave notable examples of leadership.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ W.D. 11th Independent Machine-Gun Company (Princess Louise's Fusiliers), 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁴⁹ W.D. 5 CAR (VIII New Brunswick Hussars), 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁵⁰ W.D. 5 CAD, Outline for Exercise Canyon, 10 Aug 1944.

¹⁵¹ Burns, General Mud p. 185.

The attack plan was generally an accelerated version of the set-piece attack laid on for the night of 1/2 September. Unit tasks and boundaries were the same. On the right, in 1st Divisions area, the West Nova Scotia Regiment was to attack towards Borgo Sant Maria along the lateral road and then seize the high ground above the village. To their left, the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry of 2 Brigade were given Osteria Nouva and the surrounding heights as their objective. While 1100 metres left of Osteria Nouva, the Perth Regiment of 11 Brigade was to capture Hill 111 overlooking a pass through which the main road to Tomba Di Pesaro ran. The Cape Breton Highlanders were to take Montecchio and Hill 120 which would secure the junction of the main lateral road and the Tomba Di Pesaro road inside the village as well as the western shoulder of the pass.

The 5th Division infantry units would each have a squadron of the VIII New Brunswick Hussars in support while the 1st Divisions assaulting battalions would each have a squadron from the 48th Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment.¹⁵² The inclusion of 2 Brigade was the only major change from the original set-piece plan. Major-General Vokes ordered the brigade to come up into the line on 30 August. Traffic congestion slowed its advance so that the PPCLI attack would not be delivered until well after the other three units were on their way.¹⁵³

The probing attacks would not be preceded by an artillery

¹⁵² W.D. 1 CID; 5 CAD, 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁵³ W.D. 2 CIB, 30 Aug 1944.

barrage, but if difficulty was encountered then support fire could be brought down rapidly. Canadian staff officers had been preparing a detailed fire plan for breaking a fully manned Gothic Line since the night of 27/28 August. These plans involved the identification from aerial photographs of all known and suspected enemy positions. These potential targets were all given short map reference numbers and recorded on gridded air photos, which were in the hands of both the assaulting units on 30 August and the gunners behind them. Even though the attack was not preceded by a massive barrage, the numbered air photos enabled forward units to bring down fire on trouble spots much faster than by normal means.¹⁵⁴

* * *

After a morning of watching and waiting, the time to move finally arrived on the afternoon of 30 August. The West Novas were the first to cross the Foglia. Their Commanding officer, Lt-Col. Ron Waterman, Issued orders at 1400 for "B" company to cross the river and proceed to the high ground at point 133. Once "B" company, under Captain J.H. Jones, was snug on this hill the remainder of the battalion was to join up and consolidate this bridgehead.¹⁵⁵ "B" Company was already across the river by 1630, almost an hour before 11 Brigade's battalions started their advance. This lead did not last long for ten minutes after

¹⁵⁴ W.D. HQ RCA, I Cdn Corps, Aug 1944.

¹⁵⁵ W.D. WNSR, 30 Aug 1944.

crossing the river the Jones' company ran into a minefield. This problem was not unexpected as this minefield had been identified by reconnaissance patrols on the night of 29/30 August. After looking unsuccessfully for a gap, the company continued picking its way directly through the mines. As the lead platoons neared what they thought was the main lateral road they came under intense machine-gun and mortar fire. When the young soldiers dove for cover many detonated "Schu" mines.¹⁵⁶ The men inched forward on their bellies and reached the road but the enemy fire increased pinning them in the ditch on the south side.

The road was actually a secondary track about halfway between the river and the main lateral. Over the next two hours Jones' men tried repeatedly to push forward but remained pinned along the road. With dusk approaching, Lt-Col Waterman ordered his three remaining companies to cross the river and join "B" company along what was still thought to be the main road. By midnight this move had been completed and Waterman had come forward himself to direct the battle. He ordered "D" company to pass through "B" and take the battalion's objective. "C" company would follow behind in depth. As these orders were being issued the battalion position was under machine-gun and mortar fire.

Dawn was breaking when the two assault companies slipped

¹⁵⁶ A Schu-Mine consists of a small charge packed in a wooden casing making it immune to electronic mine detectors. The mine is buried just below the soil surface and is triggered when stepped on. The charge is powerful enough to blow the foot off the victim but not kill him on the principle that it takes more men to look after a wounded soldier than a dead one. U.S. War Department, Handbook on German Military Forces (Baton Rouge: 1990) p. 487.

northwards along a gully. "D" and "C" companies had not managed to get much past the road when they were driven to the ground by intense enemy fire.¹⁵⁷ Unfortunately, the West Novas had played right into German hands. They were attempting to advance through a carefully prepared German killing zone designed to first pin and then bleed unsuspecting prey. Only 30 minutes after beginning their advance "D" and "C" companies were ordered to return to the gully under the cover of smoke fired by 2 Field Regiment.¹⁵⁸ This order was carried out with extreme difficulty as even more soldiers were injured by mines as they tried to make their way to the rear. Casualties included Major A. Nicholson and Captain S.D. Smith, the commanders of the two leading companies, which further added to the confusion. By 0900, 31 August the battalion was reunited in the gully where it remained pinned until it was ordered to return to the south bank of the river at 1430.¹⁵⁹

The hopes that the Gothic Line in this sector would not yet be manned were dashed. The German paratroopers of the 1st Parachute Division inflicted 76 casualties on the West Novas of whom 20 were killed.¹⁶⁰ For this loss, the men from the Annapolis Valley had little to show. Several thousand metres to the left, 11 Brigade was faring only slightly better.

Over on the western edge of the Canadian sector another Nova

¹⁵⁷ W.D. WNSR, 31 Aug 1944.

¹⁵⁸ W.D. 2 Fd Regt RCA, 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁵⁹ W.D. WNSR, 31 Aug 1944.

¹⁶⁰ Nicholson, Italy p. 515

Scotian Regiment ran into difficulty. The German soldiers facing the Cape Breton Highlander's were also well prepared and snug in very strong fortifications. Lt-Col. R.B. Somerville issued his orders at 1515 on 30 August, over an hour after the West Novas were briefed. "B" company was ordered to make the probe. They crossed the river at 1730 and immediately deployed two platoons forward in the open ground in front of the steep face of point 120. The lead platoons stopped short of the base of the hill to cover the leapfrogging reserve platoon as it passed through and then proceeded up the slope.

Sometime around 1830, as the point section was nearing the saddle, less than 100 metres left of point 120 when the storm broke. German machine-gun fire poured into the young Nova Scotians from what seemed like all sides and various ranges shredding the point section. The quick thinking platoon commander led another of his sections to the right under the cover fire of the platoons at the base of the hill and took the highest point on the crest from which much of the fire was coming. After killing two Germans the flanking section took the last hapless machine-gunner prisoner, but this brought little respite. Not only was heavy fire coming from other positions on the crest, but also from behind the platoon and from across the valley from Hill 111, the Perth objective.¹⁶¹

The left hand platoon tried to work its way up the hill while German attention was directed on the lead platoon, but as it got halfway up the slope it was pinned to the dirt. As the platoon

¹⁶¹ W.D. CBH, After Action Report, 30 Aug 1944.

leader attempted to direct the platoon two inch mortar crew on a German position, all three were hit, adding to the confusion. The remaining "B" company riflemen at the base of the slope, including three dismounted sections from the battalion's carrier platoon, could not bring any effective fire to bear to ease the pressure on the forward elements. "B" company was stopped cold and would need help if it was going to extricate itself.

Shortly after it became apparent that flanking fire from Hill 111 was causing particular problems, Lt-Col. Somerville put in a request to brigade for the position to be smoked off by the artillery.¹⁶² This helped to some extent, but there were still plenty of Germans in front of the Highlanders and they were far too close for artillery to help. "A" company, which had been following behind, was in no position to help either as it was pinned in what little cover it could find in the ditches of the main lateral road, 100 metres in front of where the slope became very steep. Behind them "C", "D", and Support companies established a base of fire in the relative protection of the river gully, 700 metres south of the road. From this position, Lt-Col. Somerville directed the fire of the supporting Vickers medium machine-guns of the Princess Louise's Fusiliers. He also brought up his 6 pounder anti-tank gun platoon and set them up on the lip of the gully.¹⁶³ Given the confusion on the hill in front though, these weapons could not be effectively employed. German artillery contributed further to their

¹⁶² W.D. 11 CIB, Operations Log, 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁶³ W.D. CBH, 30 Aug 1944.

helplessness by shelling the area heavily. The predicament was made worse when the "B" company wireless was knocked out. This challenge was overcome by the forward company commanders who established their headquarters together near the road as darkness fell and informed Somerville of the situation using "A" company's still functioning radio.

Upon learning of the fate of his lead companies, Somerville requested permission to withdraw his forward troops so he could mount a proper battalion attack. It was 2230 so the darkness protected the withdrawing soldiers from accurate machine-gun fire, but they were still harassed by German artillery. The returning companies brought five prisoners with them, all from 26 Panzer Division. This came as quite a shock to the soldiers of 5 Division who thought their opponents would be members of the tired 71 Infantry Division. The prisoners said that their unit had just relieved the 71st that day.¹⁶⁴ This division was at full strength, fresh and made up of well trained soldiers.¹⁶⁵

Lt-Col. Somerville managed to consolidate all his companies back at the firm base along the river gully. From this location another attack was scheduled to go in at 0115, 31 August. The attack would be preceded by a 30 minutes stonk of Hill 120 by every weapon capable of firing on it. The tanks of "B" squadron, 8th New Brunswick Hussars and a troop of M-10 tank destroyers added their

¹⁶⁴ After Action Rpt, W.D. CBH, 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁶⁵ 1st Para had just received a draft of 2000 trained replacements. Pretzell Rpt, p. 9.

fire to the barrage along with the 25 pounder field-guns, the medium-machine guns of the Fusiliers, and the mortars and anti-tank guns of the Cape Breton support company. The tanks would be unable to provide much more than fire support though as they found themselves stuck in a rather precarious position in the middle of a minefield.

In the hours after the Cape Bretoners first crossed the river, the sappers of 1 Field Squadron, Royal Canadian Engineers, had worked to prepare a clear path for the tanks across the river and the minefields on the other side. The tanks of the Hussars and the vehicles of other supporting units were late in reaching this crossing and all these units were caught in a traffic jam caused by a misinterpretation of orders by the traffic control unit. Early reports of 11 Brigade success had let Maj.-Gen Hoffmeister to order his divisional reconnaissance unit, the Governor General's Horse Guards, to concentrate behind the leading units to be prepared to break out. The Guards were to have priority over other formations only the traffic control unit took this to mean that they had priority over the vehicles of 11 Brigade.¹⁶⁶ The problem was eventually sorted out though and did not hamper operations significantly. That the tangle was unclogged so quickly is another indication of the cool professionalism of the Canadians at this point in the war.

For "B" squadron of the Hussars and their accompanying troop of M-10 tank destroyers from 98 Anti-Tank Battery, the problems

¹⁶⁶ W.D. 11 CIB, After Action Report 30 Aug-14 Sep 1944.

were just beginning. The traffic delay meant that they had to cross the river in darkness, not altogether a bad thing given that German artillery fire was increasing. After climbing the river bank on the north side the Hussars somehow missed the marked route through the mines and drove right into them, losing two Shermans. It was decided to remain tight until dawn and support the Cape Breton attack from this position on the river flats.¹⁶⁷

The second Cape Breton attack was made with two companies forward. "A" company was to take point 120 while "D" company advanced on point 119 on the left. Point 111 on the right would no longer be a problem as the Perth Regiment had secured it by 2030, 30 August. Again both companies managed to get onto the slope of the hill before the Germans opened fire. Because of the darkness and of the proximity of the forward troops to the German positions, close fire support from the Shermans and M-10's was impossible. Rather than risk further casualties in an unnecessary frontal attack, Brigadier Johnston ordered the Cape Bretoners to withdraw again. This withdrawal took some time as the area was under continuous shellfire and all companies had not returned until dawn on 31 August.¹⁶⁸

On the other side of Montecchio, the Perth Regiment was able to secure a toehold in the German line. Lt-Col Reid's battalion moved across the river about the same time as the Highlanders on their left. The Foglia river bends away from the lateral road

¹⁶⁷ W.D. VIII NBH, After Action Report 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁶⁸ W.D. CBH, After Action Report, 31 Aug 1944.

between the line of advance of the two 11 Brigade battalions. Thus the Perths had about 500 metres more ground to cover between the river and its objective. "B" Company of the Perths had just reached the lateral road at the time that the Germans opened up on the Capers to the left.¹⁶⁹ Heavy mortar and machine-gun fire drove the leading Perth Company back to the river. Lt-Col. Reid called for an artillery fire mission on his objective to screen the withdrawal of his soldiers.¹⁷⁰ The greater distance the Perths had to cover probably saved the lives of many soldiers in the lead company as they were not as far into the German killing zone as were the Highlanders when the fire storm erupted from the mutually supporting German positions on either side of Montecchio. However, the comparatively easy withdrawal of the Perths to the river left the German machine-gunners and mortarmen on Hill 111 without an immediate threat to their front and enabled them to concentrate on laying down flanking fire into the Highlanders.

This situation would not be allowed to last for long and Lt-Col Reid wasted little time in teeing up another assault. This time "A" squadron of the New Brunswick Hussars would take part. "D" company of the Perths, cracked off at 2030 under the cover fire of the Hussars, with "A" company following in depth.¹⁷¹ With darkness limiting their vision and 75mm shells from the Hussar's Shermans pounding the hillside all around them, the German machine

¹⁶⁹ W.D. The Perth Regiment, 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁷⁰ W.D. 11 CIB, Operations Log, 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁷¹ W.D. Perth Regt, 30 Aug 1944.

gunners were not able to bring effective fire down on the Perth advance. Nor could they expect help from the supporting position on point 120 as the Germans on that hill were fully occupied with the men of Cape Breton.

The Germans on Hill 111 held the eastern flank of 26 Panzer Division's position.¹⁷² Further to the east was 1 Parachute and due to the poor co-ordination between those two units, the potential to bring devastating fire into the Perth right flanks was lost. Just to be sure, the Hussars pased the hills both to the right and left of the Perth objective, firing directly into the muzzle flashes from German automatic weapons.¹⁷³ The men from Stratford Ontario reached the lateral road very quickly and clambered up the hill to seize the crest by 2200. Without giving the German defenders a chance to breath and assess their predicament, "A" company of the Perths quickly passed through "D" as it consolidated on Hill 111. "D" company worked its way in the darkness around the northern edge of the hill in behind the German depth position on Hill 147, 500 metres northeast of 111. Only an hour after 111 was secure, "A" company reported that it has seized 147.¹⁷⁴

Hoffmeister's division had carved itself a toehold in the German main line of resistance. Fortunately for the Canadians, the one attack that did succeed in the last hours of 30 August had been

¹⁷² Intelligence Summary, W.D. PLF, 1 Sept 1944.

¹⁷³ W.D. VIII NBH, After Action Report, 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁷⁴ W.D. Perth Regt, After Action Report, 30 Aug 1944.

delivered at a critical point. Lt-Col. Reid's men had won their victory along the boundary between the Parachute and Panzer divisions, creating a very dangerous situation for the Germans and an important opportunity for the Canadians. The narrow penetration was far from secure though and a quick response from the Germans could seal off and destroy the Perth bridgehead.

In order to widen the breach and secure the right flank, "C" company of the Perths was ordered cross the small draw to the west and seize Hill 115. The Germans had strong positions at the head of the draw and on the opposite side sighted to stop any advance coming up. These positions were equally effective in pouring fire into the exposed left flank of "C" company which hustled back to the main Perth position and dug in. "B" company had also come up to 111 and Lt-Col Reid dug his soldiers in and prepared as best as he could to repel any counter-attack.¹⁷⁵ The Gothic Line had been breached but whether this hole could be taken advantage of by the Canadians remained to be seen. It would take another 36 hours of hard fighting for the outcome to be certain.

When it was decided within the Canadian Corps that the line could still be bounced by taking quick action on 30 August, each of the two Canadian divisions had one Brigade forward. Previous experience in the Hitler Line suggested that an attacking corps should have at least two brigades up each with one battalion attacking. This method ensured that the fortifications would be attacked with enough momentum to penetrate into the enemy mortar

¹⁷⁵ W.D. Perth Regt, 30 Aug 1944.

and depth positions, but also on a broad enough front so that the defenders would be unable to concentrate fire at any one point as happened in the Liri Valley when German flanking fire inflicted severe casualties in 1 Canadian Infantry Division.¹⁷⁶ Within 5 Armoured Division, the problem was dealt with by reinforcing 11 Brigade with two extra battalions, the Princess Louise's Dragoon Guards and the Westminster Regiment both of the newly created 12 Brigade. Thus the Brigade was still able to attack with the suggested two battalions yet have enough reserves to exploit any penetration.

In the 1st division area, Major-General Vokes handled the rapidly changing situation by ordering his 2 Brigade to come into the line on the left of 3 Brigade. 1 Brigade had born the brunt of the fighting in the first phase of the battle. 2 Brigade while still recuperating from the fighting during the approach to the Foglia, was in much better shape to go back into the line ahead of schedule.

Regardless of 2 Brigade's condition, when Brigadier Gibson received his orders he was well behind the front line. Road congestion meant that the 10 kilometre trip to the assembly area took five hours.¹⁷⁷ The result was that 2 brigade was not in a position to launch a battalion into the line until well after the other Canadian regiments were in action. By 1800 on 30 August , Maj-Gen. Vokes was urging 2 Brigade to catch up to the other

¹⁷⁶ Burns, Lessons.

¹⁷⁷ W.D. 2 CIB, 30 Aug 1944.

battalions that had already crossed the river. Brigadier Gibson arrived at the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry area at 2130 to find that the unit had still not commenced operations and that the commanding officer Lt-Col. Rosser was ill with malaria. Major R.P. Clark, the second in command, had taken over the battalion and had already issued orders for an attack to commence in the morning.¹⁷⁸ Gibson informed Clark of the progress of the other battalions and ordered the Patricias to get cracking across the river and seize their objectives as soon as possible.¹⁷⁹

It was five minutes past midnight when "C" company started off. The unit splashed through the river very close to the Perth crossing at Montelabbate. "C" company reached the intermediate objective on a road junction 900 metres from the main lateral road at 0430 on the morning of 31 August. "D" Company advanced to the same road, 700 metres to the right. This was the same road that the West Novas had reached when they mistakenly reported that they were on the main lateral road. From these positions, using textbook fire and movement drills, "C" and "D" companies as well as the Battalion medium machine-gun platoon remained firm and covered "B" company as it leapfrogged past towards Osteria Nuova.¹⁸⁰

The sun was beginning to rise when "B" company encountered a deep minefield complete with wire entanglements. The Patricia company, under command of Major Colin McDougall pressed on through

¹⁷⁸ W.D. PPCLI, After Action Report, Aug-Sep 1944.

¹⁷⁹ W.D. 2 CIB, 30 Aug 1944.

¹⁸⁰ W.D. PPCLI, 31 Aug 1944.

the defenses, perhaps fearing the daylight and German observation more than the mines. Maj. McDougall recalls,

This is a nerve wracking experience. We moved off in single file, 11 platoon leading. We had to go down a path which, like the area on both sides of it was heavily mined. After we got through that, with some casualties [3], we crossed the anti-tank ditch, also mined, which runs parallel with the river for some distance.¹⁸¹

The German defenders must have thought there was only a small patrol to the front. When they finally realized the Canadians were making a grab for the town, "B" company had already reached the comparative safety of the rubble.¹⁸² Lieutenant Egan Chambers had led the rush after being wounded when one of his men triggered a Schu-Mine. Ignoring his wounds Chambers formed his platoon up near the anti-tank ditch and charged into the ruins. For his efforts, Chambers was awarded the Military Cross.¹⁸³

Osteria Nuova, like all other built up areas in the Foglia valley, had been leveled in so that the German positions on the heights above would have clear fields of fire out on the river flats.¹⁸⁴ The opportunity for the Germans to repel 2 Brigade's penetration with heavy losses had been lost. Perhaps the paratroopers had more faith in their minefields and wire

¹⁸¹ Report by Maj. C. McDougall, OC "B" Coy, PPCLI. After the war Major McDougall wrote the novel Execution about a fictitious Canadian battalion in Italy, based largely on his personal experiences.

¹⁸² W.D. PPCLI, After Action Report, Aug-Sep; Report by OC B coy, PPCLI 31 Aug 1944.

¹⁸³ Recommendation for the Military Cross for Lt. E.E. Chambers, W.D. PPCLI, Aug 1944.

¹⁸⁴ Gothic Order #1, p. 6.

entanglements than was warranted. The Princess Patricia's had broken into the Gothic Line.

At dawn on 31 August, two Canadian battalions waited impatiently inside their toehold into the Gothic Line. The Canadian Corps' attack had fallen on a German divisional boundary precisely at the moment when the 67th Grenadier Regiment of 26 Panzer Division began to take over a section of the line. The senior leadership of the German Tenth Army had been aware of this weak spot, recognizing that advance units of the new division would not reach the line until 30 August.¹⁸⁵ Once in position it would take time for the soldiers to familiarize themselves with the ground they were to defend. The Germans could only hope that the attacking Canadian, Polish and British formations would pause in front of the Foglia to bring up their administrative tails. Had Eighth Army kept to its schedule and launched its attack on the night of 1/2 September, 26 Panzer Division would have ample time to deploy all its formations and to become well "acquainted with its positions".¹⁸⁶

In the Canadian sector, the penetration was significant on the morning of 31 August, but still very small. A dramatic opportunity lay open to the Canadian Corps on that morning. Just as aggressive action on the part of the Germans could still contain

¹⁸⁵ W.D. German 10th Army, 29 Aug 1944 in Hist Sect Rpt #27.

¹⁸⁶ Hist Sect Rpt # 27. The Commander of the German 76 Panzer Corps identified the chief reason for the quick penetration of Green Line I was that the Allied attack was delivered before 26 Panzer Division was familiar with its positions.

the bridgehead, a determined thrust through this weak point could crack the Gothic Line beyond repair. Throughout the action of the next 48 hours, confusion was to be the dominant sensation among the participants, German and Canadian, but it was the latter who overcame their confusion and acted resolutely. The units engaged in this battle always kept one goal in sight; the high ground around Tomba Di Pesaro. The soldiers had been told that this high feature was the key to the battlefield and it needed to be seized swiftly while the Germans were off balance. This mission oriented approach, demanding maximum initiative from junior commanders has seldom been documented in Canadian military history and is often described as a unique characteristic of the German Army known as "Auftragstaktik".¹⁸⁷

Well before dawn, steps were being taken to secure the bridgehead. The 11 Brigade reserve battalion, the Irish Regiment of Canada was originally echeloned behind the Cape Breton Highlanders to be ready to pass through them and take Mont Marrone.¹⁸⁸ Rather than reinforce the floundering Highlanders Brig. Johnston decided to shuffle the Irish to the right and bring them up through the Perth bridgehead to attack point 120 from the right flank with "C" squadron of the New Brunswick Hussars in support. The Irish, under Lt-Col. R.C."Bobby" Clark, received their orders sometime after 0300 on the morning of 31 August.

¹⁸⁷ Glen Scott, "British And German Operational Styles in World War II", Military Review October 1985: pp. 39-41.

¹⁸⁸ After Action Rpt, W.D. 11 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

Shortly thereafter, Lt-Col. Reid was informed over wireless that Hill 111 would serve as the firm base for the Irish attack and the Perths would provide what ever fire support they could.¹⁸⁹

The Irish movement into the Perth position took quite some time. In preparation for the drive on Mont Marrone, the Irish Regiment had concentrated at their patrol base in Apsella. The order to shift to the right meant that they had to travel along the lateral traffic choked road south of the river and cross at Montelabbate. The formation was further delayed by a blown bridge over a creek just east of Montelabbate. The lead company, along with the Hussar squadron did not reach the Perths until 0800 on 31 August.¹⁹⁰ With the sun well up, the battalion had to cross the river flats under observation of the strong enemy positions on Hill 120. The German grenadiers were quick to direct the fire of every weapon they could on the Irish.

Once on Hill 111 the companies took what cover from a German artillery stonk caught which "A" company in the open blowing many of the men from Sudbury into small pieces and ripping limbs off of others. Throughout the destruction, Private Gorden Joseph Hickson, an "A" company stretcher bearer exposed himself to the spraying shell fragments tending to the wounded, earning himself a Mention in Despatches. When the barrage was finished only 50 men were left

¹⁸⁹ Operations Log, W.D. 11 CIB, 31 Aug 1944

¹⁹⁰ After Action Report, W.D. 11 CIB, Aug 1944.

standing in the company.¹⁹¹

The Irish attack was finally arranged to go in at noon on 31 August. Even though it took almost nine hours to get ready, that the movement was carried out at all is reflective of the professionalism and perseverance of the Canadian Army and of the Irish Regiment in particular. To move five kilometres in darkness, fighting through traffic, bypassing numerous obstacles, dodging artillery and mortar shells as well as machine-gun bullets, then reaching the forming up place only to be pounded by some of the heaviest concentrations of high explosives encountered in the Italian campaign and then launch an attack is a tribute to Canadian Arms.

Prior to the Irish attack, point 120 was subjected to a furious bombardment. This barrage included the fire of all four 4.2 inch mortar platoons of the Princess Louise's Fusiliers which dumped a total of 300 bombs on the hillside in only seven minutes.¹⁹² The field artillery also stonked the hill along with the 75mm guns of the Hussars and the 17 pounder anti-tank guns of the M-10 troop. In addition to laying on the heavy concentration immediately prior to the Irish attack, the field guns of the divisional artillery had been harassing the German positions throughout the morning.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ W.D. Irish Regiment of Canada, After Action Report, 31 August.

¹⁹² W.D. 11 Independent MG Coy (PLF), 31 Aug 1944.

¹⁹³ W.D. HQ RCA 5 CAD, 31 Aug 1944.

In spite of all the weight of shot and shell that was blasted at the hill it is unlikely that it did more than shake the defenders up as they were well protected in the strongest fortifications in the Canadian sector. Deep concrete bunkers and dugouts shielded the German machine-gun and mortar crews from all but the most direct hits from the heaviest guns. Yet while the defenders may physically have been unharmed, the mental strain on them would be significant. Crouching in a dark confined space while deafening blasts shook the walls violently would not have been easy to endure.

Prior to the attack, "C" Squadron of the Hussars positioned itself to the on western slope of point 111 on the right flank of the Irish who were deployed with two companies up. "A" company cracked off first, with part of Major McEwen's Hussar squadron moving with the riflemen for close support while the balance of the squadron remained on the startline laying down heavy covering fire on Hill 120. "A" company was aimed not for Hill 120 but for Casa Checchi, at the tip of another finger 700 metres behind the one on which 120 sits. This move immediately drew the fire of most of the German weapons on and around the main position. A pair of enemy self-propelled guns located some distance to the northeast also opened up on the group. McEwen's Shermans took these guns on and fire from them ceased although it is difficult to confirm a kill at 1000 yds range.¹⁹⁴

If the Canadians were to take the high ground behind Hill 120

¹⁹⁴ After Action Report, "C" sqn VIII NBH, 31 Aug 1944.

then the German avenue of retreat would be cut off. In fact, "A" company's advance occupied the Germans so much that they failed to notice "D" company creeping directly up the slope of point 120. In minutes the German grenadiers were face to face with the Toronto Irish. Sergeant F.J. Johnston, commanding the leading platoon, personally took out several machine-guns posts. The recommendation for his Military Medal states that his action was "instrumental in the capture of point 120". Sergeant Johnston was wounded during this action at which point one of the section leaders took over as platoon commander. Private R.L. Dawson took command of that section, driving it forward and destroying several more German positions thus securing the platoons objective. Dawson was also recommended for a Military Medal.¹⁹⁵

These displays of superb junior leadership are but two examples of the aggressive soldiering that enabled the Irish regiment to quickly overcome all German resistance on Hill 120. The Irish took four German officers and 117 others ranks prisoner. There were few Canadian casualties in the actual attack, though 18 had been killed and a further 32 wounded during the approach to the startline. The Irish success paid handsome dividends. With the Germans winkled out of point 120, the Canadian bridgehead was secure. The next task would be to push the Germans out of their depth positions on the heights of Tomba Di Pesaro. This mission was already underway before the Irish began their attack.

¹⁹⁵ W.D. IRC, August Appendices, Recommendations of Sgt. F.R. Johnston and Pte. R.L. Dawson for the Military Medal.

Early on the morning of 31 August, just after the Irish were ordered to pass through the Perths, Maj-Gen. Hoffmeister made a fateful decision. He recognized that his division had its foot in the door and that at the moment the Germans were off balance. Hoffmeister also realized he would have to act quickly if he were to take advantage of the situation before the Germans slammed the door. The decision was thus taken to commit 5 Armoured Brigade to not only push the door open, but knock the whole house down. The high ground around Tomba Di Pesaro was the identified by both sides as the key to this sector of the Gothic Line. If it fell to the Canadians, the German position would become wholly untenable and they would be forced to withdraw. The plan for taking these hills appears simple, but in reality the rapidly changing circumstances rendered plans obsolete only a short time after being conceived. In such conditions, the junior commanders would have to relied on to ensure that their actions conformed to the principle goal of capturing Tomba di Pesaro.

Brigadier Cumberland issued his first set of orders for the coming operations at an "O" group at 1630 on 30 August. Lt-Col. F.A. Vokes of the British Columbia Dragoons and Lt-Col. J.M. McAvity of the Lord Strathcona's Horse, were informed that 11 Brigade patrols had penetrated the Gothic Line and the possibility of a breakout existed.¹⁹⁶ The divisional reconnaissance unit, the Horse Guards, was already concentrating just behind the river and would lead the breakout. In preparation for this plan the Dragoons

¹⁹⁶ W.D. BCD, 30 Aug 1944.

and the Strathcona's were to concentrate just north of the river in a draw between two fingers running north from the river. The western side of this draw was formed by Hills 111 and 147 which were to be captured by the Perth Regiment that night. The eastern side consisted of Hill 115 and was to be taken by the PPCLI. There the tanks of 5 Brigade would break into the open and seize a crossing over the Conca river.¹⁹⁷ This was the plan as it was understood by the armoured crewmen of the British Columbia Dragoons as they drove through the night of 30/31 August to reach the draw codenamed "Erindale".¹⁹⁸ The Dragoons were to come up with their own name for it; "Death Valley"

Brigadier Cumberland's plan was based on the assumption that 11 Brigade would be able to punch through the main line of resistance and secure the dominating high ground around Tomba Di Pesaro. This perception gradually changed over the course of the evening of 30/31 August as it became clear that while the Germans had been caught off guard, they were by no means giving up the Gothic Line easily. Brigadier Cumberland changed his plan when it became apparent that 11 Brigade would not be able to capture the Tomba Di Pesaro feature. The Horse Guards were to move off the road and make way for the Dragoons to lead the brigade into Erindale. At the base of the draw, the Dragoons were to marry up with the Perth Regiment as soon as possible and tee up an attack on

¹⁹⁷ W.D. 5 CAB, After Action Report. 30 Aug-14 Sep 1944.

¹⁹⁸ Personal Accounts of the BCD operations in the Gothic Line related to unit historian R.H. Roy, September 1962.

point 204, the first of three key peaks on the Tomba Di Pesaro feature. The Strathcona's were to link up with the Westminster and follow up behind being prepared to deploy as the situation warranted.¹⁹⁹

This plan was prepared and the orders for it issued while the Dragoons were still on the move from their concentration far to the south. It is not clear how the change in orders was received by Vokes but sometime during the approach he was made aware of the change in plan. To Lt-Col Vokes the need for rapid movement seems to have overridden the usual Eighth Army practice of putting everyone in the know prior to going into action. Instead Vokes issued his orders over the radio while on the move to Erindale. By necessity, these orders had to be brief. With the exception of the squadron commanders and battle captains, the Dragoons still thought they were on their way to a harbour area where they would be fed breakfast and perhaps get a few hours rest as they had been driving hard for some time. The orders were received so late in the move that most of the tanks still had the muzzle covers fixed on the end of their main guns as they covered the last few hundred yards into the forming up area.²⁰⁰

A recce party under Captain Jack Letcher had gone forward to Erindale to check for mines and obstacles. The group turned left of the main lateral road into the assembly area where they set to

¹⁹⁹ W.D. 5 CAB After Action Report, Aug-Sep 1944.

²⁰⁰ BCD Personal Accounts, G.E. Eastman; R.W. Green; D.F.B. Kinloch; J.G. Turnley, 1962.

work clearing mines and cutting through the wire entanglements they found there. Just as the first squadron was coming into sight, two soldiers from the PPCLI approached and explained that they had some badly wounded men back across the road that needed attention. Capt. Letcher and Lieutenant Russell went along with them to see if they could help. As they neared the wounded Patricia, he howled in agony causing Russell to dash forward to his aid. He ran right onto a Schumine that tore his leg from his body. Lt. Russell would die hours later of his wounds. A fragment from the mine caught Capt. Letcher in the head and knocked him out. Letcher regained consciousness to find that Russell had been evacuated and that firing had broken out back in Erindale.²⁰¹

"A" squadron was leading the column as it approached the area where the recce party was working. The squadron leader, Major G.E. Eastman, was rather dangerously travelling at the head of the column, for when the tanks originally formed up he was expecting to enter a safe harbour area. The plan was for "A" and "C" squadrons to move into Erindale and form up for battle. "B" squadron and the RHQ group would follow behind in a regimental box formation. Major Eastman had not advanced very far into the open area at the bottom of the draw when a rocket from a "Faustpatrone", or bazooka crashed into the tank behind him. The Sherman burst into flames and rolled backwards, locking tracks with the tank behind it and causing it to

²⁰¹ BCD Personal Accounts, J. Letcher, 1962.

burn also.²⁰²

The tank that had been hit was commanded by the squadron battle captain, Captain Dick Sellars who was the only member of the crew that was not been wounded by the blast. After helping his crew escape the "brewing" tank, Sellars grabbed his Thompson sub-machine gun and charged the German trench in front of him from which the rocket had been fired. Major Eastman's Sherman sitting just in front of the trench but was unable to depress the gun mantle enough to fire at it. Eastman had his driver manoeuvre forward and to the right of the end of the trench while he exchanged hand grenades with the German infantry. The squadron leader pitched number 36's out of his hatch while the Germans hurled "potato masher" stick grenades back. Once he had his tank alongside the trench Eastman had his gunner traverse the turret so the gun pointed down the length of it. From this point on it only took two bursts from the 75mm gun to convince the German defenders that their war was over.²⁰³

A white flag was stuck out of the mouth of a dugout from which a whole platoon of Germans came streaming out with their hands in the air. The group was led by a rather outspoken Sergeant who spouted loudly as the prisoners were searched by dismounted Dragoons. Major Eastman put an end to the Feldwebel's protests by removing his belt, forcing him to hang on to his pants. The

²⁰² W.D. BCD, 31 Aug 1944; BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman, Letcher, 1962.

²⁰³ Medal Recommendation, Captain R.B. Sellars, W.D. BCD, 31 Aug 1944; BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman, 1962.

Dragoons assumed that the Germans had let the recce party go about its business hoping to catch an unsuspecting rifle battalion as it formed up.²⁰⁴ They probably did not count on dealing with more than 50 medium tanks manned by some very resourceful British Columbians.

It must be kept in mind that until Captain Sellars had his tank shot out from under him, the unit still expected to be moving into to secure harbour to have breakfast. But the battle to secure the "Erindale" concentration area did not end there. Major Eastmans's squadron came under fire from German positions at the head of the draw and from the right side on which point 115 sat, thick with German paratroopers.²⁰⁵ Yet when the Perths had seized the right side of the draw, the Germans they captured were Grenadiers of 26 Panzer Division. Although they had no real idea of the significance during the confusion in Death Valley on the morning of 31 August, the west coast armoured soldiers had concentrated precisely along the German Divisional boundary. This was by no means accidental however, the senior Canadian leadership was very aware that a strong thrust along this boundary could turn the Germans on their heads.²⁰⁶

Taking advantage of this opportunity was not going to be easy

²⁰⁴ BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman; Green; Letcher; Turnley 1962.

²⁰⁵ BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman; Kinloch, 1962.

²⁰⁶ The Canadians knew that their axis of advance fell along the German boundary as prisoners from both divisions were taken on 30 Aug. Intelligence Summary #99, W.D. I Cdn Corps, 31 Aug 1944.

as there was still no sign of the supporting infantry from the Perth Regiment. In addition to the direct fire coming from the high ground above "Erindale", German artillery and mortar rounds started to fall in the vicinity no doubt directed by forward observers on the hill to the right. The heavy shelling forced the Dragoons in the lead squadron to "button up" which only added to the confusion as the unit was unaccustomed to advancing with all hatches locked down. Because of the poor visibility offered by the tank periscopes, Allied crew commanders adopted the practice of directing their vehicles with there hatches open. While this practice resulted in more casualties among vehicle commanders, it was considered to be more dangerous to go into action with the hatches down leaving the tank practically blind. However, there was too much metal being hurled around the area to think about that for now.²⁰⁷

Eastman's squadron had not had time to adopt any formation or transmit orders to individual tanks before the battle of "Death Valley" began, thus when Major Turnley's "C" squadron pulled off the road into the harbour area shortly after the first batch of German paratroopers had surrendered, they found chaos. Lt-Col. Vokes was trying to regain control of the situation and sort out his lead sub-unit over the radio. This was impossible however, as only the battle-captain's tank was netted on the regimental frequency and at that moment, Captain Sellars tank was burning

²⁰⁷ BCD Personal Accounts, Green, 1962; R.H. Roy, Sinews of Steel: The History of the British Columbia Dragoons (Kelowna: 1965) p. 294.

quite fiercely. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to raise "A" squadron, Major Turnley's battle-captain, Captain Stubbs, came on the air and informed Lt-Col Vokes that "C" squadron was intact and ready to move. Vokes ordered Turnley to take his tanks immediately up to Hill 204 with all haste and to hold onto the hill until relieved by the Perth Regiment, which they were assured, would follow very shortly.²⁰⁸ None of the survivors remember exactly whose idea it was for the Dragoons to attack without infantry, nor can it be found in the written record. This has led many to speculate that Lt-Col. "Freddy" Vokes made the decision on his own without orders from Brigadier Cumberland. Both the Dragoons regimental historian, Reginald Roy and Vokes' Brother Chris, commanding 1 Division agree that it was probably the former recce officers call. In his post-war memoirs, Christopher Vokes wrote the following commentary on his brother's charge.

He always had to be in the lead where things were happening. Another thing: he had come from commanding a reconnaissance regiment(GGHG) and was used to pushing off in front. And there was another circumstance: He was under pressure from his brigade headquarters to "get on with it", to burst through the Gothic Line if at all possible. This may have led to his chance taking this time, the final chance he shouldn't have taken.²⁰⁹

Reginald Roy also suggests that "pressure from the top to go full

²⁰⁸ Fereley Z.M. Personal Account of the break into the Gothic Line, 30-31 Aug 1944 by the BCD. Interview with R.H. Roy, 1962.; BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman, Turnley, 1962; W.D., BCD's 31 August.

²⁰⁹ Major-General Chris Vokes, Vokes: My Story (Ottawa: 1985) p. 165.

tilt must have overruled in some measure normal military caution."²¹⁰ It will become clear that the risk paid off.

Major Turnley quickly passed these orders over the radio to his troop leaders who in turn issued orders to their individual tanks. "C" squadron was quickly moving through the carnage at the bottom of the valley and making way to their first intermediate objective on the high ground at the northern end of the draw. One tank was missed in this passage of information though. As the radio orders were being issued Eric Waldron, the 4th troop sergeant, was directing his Sherman off the road into Erindale when a German mortar bomb exploded on the front of the vehicle knocking him into a dazed heap on the turret floor. Major Turnley hopped aboard the stalled Sherman to check on the crew. When Waldron's bloody and bruised head emerged from the commander's hatch and reported that all was well with the exception of his broken nose, Turnley directed him to his troop's position at the end of the draw.²¹¹

Seeing Turnley's squadron successfully climb the slope leading to point 204, Major Eastman acted without orders from regimental headquarters and proceeded first to re-organize his scattered tanks into formation and then on his own initiative, crack off to the north based on information he had received at the unit briefing given the day before by Lt-Col. Vokes identifying Tomba Di Pesaro

²¹⁰ Roy, Sinews p. 307.

²¹¹ Interview with Fereley; BCD Personal Accounts, E. Waldron, 1962.

as the key feature in the divisional area.²¹²

By the time "A" squadron had shaken itself out and got moving, "C" squadron was well on its way to the objective. Turnley pushed his remaining tanks forward in box formation with two troops forward and two troops covering with the Headquarters troop in the middle. Shortly after starting off, 3rd troop under Lieutenant Zeke Fereley spotted the muzzle flash from a German "Nashorn" self-propelled 88mm anti-tank gun straight in front of them. The concussion of the shot knocked part of the camouflaging off the German vehicle exposing its thinly armoured flank to the tankers. It was apparently firing on some target over to the left and given its location it was likely part of the duo that fired on the New Brunswick Hussars supporting the Irish attack which was going in about this same time.²¹³ The gunners of 3rd troop took their time in zeroing in, but once they found the range, the 75mm guns of three Shermans pounded the German gun into metal splinters while the machine-guns laced the area all around the position to catch any supporting infantry.²¹⁴

Major Turnley consolidated his squadron on the intermediate objective, artillery reference point 244 and reported his status back to Regimental Headquarters. Lt-Col. Vokes again ordered the squadron to press on to 204 and wait for there for the Perths.

²¹² Interview with Fereley; BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman, 1962.

²¹³ After Action Report, "C" Sqn, VIII NBH, 31 Aug 1944.

²¹⁴ Fereley Rpt.

Turnley, perhaps in reaction to Fereley's encounter, had his 1st troop bound forward while the balance of his machines covered and scanned the ground for enemy movement. Not only did they fail to spot any Germans, they also quickly lost sight of 1st troop which had strayed off course to the left. Attempts to locate them by flare and radio failed and the squadron was forced to carry on without them. Later all three Shermans of 1st troop would be smashed by German anti-tank guns covering the main north-south road to Tomba Di Pesaro. Thirteen men out of the fifteen British Columbians that crewed them were killed, several being burned alive inside their crippled tanks. Most of the tanks were so thoroughly destroyed that the bodies of the dead crewman were never recovered.²¹⁵

Before embarking on the next bound, Turnley was joined by the remainder of Eastman's squadron, including Capt Sellars who had commandeered another tank. "C" squadron then led off with Eastman's tanks following.²¹⁶ The advance was made under scattered shellfire but the greater enemy at this point in the morning was terrain. The ground in between the major high points was cut with countless, irregular rises and falls that limited the view of any one of the Dragoon's Shermans to only tens of metres making command and control difficult. The broken ground with its steep slopes and loose rocky soil also pushed the engines and tracks of the

²¹⁵ BCD Personal Accounts, G.T. Dodd; Fereley; Turnley; Waldron, 1962; W.D. BCD, 31 Aug 1944.

²¹⁶ W.D. BCD, 31 Aug 1944.

Shermans, not to mention the skill of the drivers, to their extreme limits. Indeed, that the Dragoons could get forward at all was due to the excellent work of the drivers and to the impressive offroad performance of the Sherman tank.²¹⁷ Its wide track and powerful engine gave the Allies some degree of tank superiority over the less manoeuvrable German machines in the rugged terrain of the Italian peninsula.

In spite of the good equipment and superb driving skill, the path followed by the Dragoons up to 204 was most arduous resulting in a large number of slipped or broken tracks and even some rolled tanks.²¹⁸ Major Eastman's "A" squadron command tank slid into a large hole and rolled onto its side followed quickly by another. In Lieutenant Zeke Fereley's troop, two tanks out of the three threw their tracks in loose soil almost simultaneously. The problems for the crews of the immobilized vehicles did not end there. It was the duty of the crew to remain with a repairable tank and await the recovery teams. These stranded Dragoon tanks were deep into the German defence line and made ideal targets for German artillery forward observers to take their time and zero in on. One of Fereley's tanks was blasted into scrap iron by a heavy German shell that landed square on top of it, pulverizing the five men that served it.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Interview with Fereley; BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman; Turnley; Waldron, 1962.

²¹⁸ BCD Personal Accounts, Green, 1962.

²¹⁹ Interview with Fereley.

With 1st troop hopelessly lost, and only one tank left out of two others, Turnley led his headquarters group and his last intact troop, commanded by Lieutenant R.W. "Bud" Green to Casa Bachiania, 700 metres short of the final objective. Only six tanks were still running. Eastman and Sellars joined them after having detached a troop to cover the left flank from Casa Montessco, another farm 500 metres to the east. Turnley's personal example of bravery and leadership had enabled the British Columbians to make it as far as the Casa. Dragoons in his squadron recall that in the thick of this charge, Turnley was leaning out of his hatch from the waist up issuing new orders to his sub-units by radio and gesturing with his hands at the same time.²²⁰

Zeke Fereley, with only his own tank left running in his troop, had almost made it to the objective as well. On Turnley's orders Fereley was advancing some distance to the right of the rest of squadron in order to give advance warning of any German threat that developed in that area. Fereley had just reached the main ridge and turned west towards Hill 204 when one of the tracks slipped off in the gravelly soil. The crew knew that once immobilized, they had lost one of the Sherman Tank's most important defensive weapons, speed. They had hardly the time to think there predicament through when the first high-velocity German shell, either a 75 or 88 millimetre glanced off the side of the tank. Fereley ordered everyone to bail out because it would only be a matter of seconds before the next armour-piercing shell found its

²²⁰ Interview with Fereley.

mark. The last of five men had just jumped free when the second shell struck and the Sherman burst into flames. Six more shells pummeled the tank so violently that by the time the German anti-tank gunners had had enough, the turret of Fereley's tank had been lifted out of the hull and thrown onto the ground. The unforgiving hills of Tomba di Pesaro yielded another victim.²²¹

As the mixed "A" and "C" squadron force covered the last few yards below the crest of Hill 204, Capt Sellars spotted one of the deadly *Panzertrum*. These Panther Tank turrets were set into a concrete base connected to a bunker complex for the crew and ammunition. *Panzertrum* were usually also protected by infantry and other mobile anti-tank guns, but there did not seem to be any other Germans nearby. Much to the relief of the Canadian tankers, the long barreled 75mm high velocity gun on the Panther turret never did open fire on them. If it had, it is probable that none of the Dragoons would have made it onto the hill. Luckily, the crew of the *Panzertrum* were all snug inside their bunker, no doubt seeking shelter from the Canadian artillery which had pounded the area earlier in the day. Thus the crew and their potentially devastating weapon were captured without a fight by Capt Sellars who had again dismounted from his "horse" to play infantryman, this time accompanied by Major Eastman. This action along with his other unhorsed foray back in Erindale earned Sellars the Military

²²¹ Interview with Fereley. BCD Personal Accounts, Turnley; Waldron, 1962.

Cross.²²²

After winking the German gun crew out of their bunker squadron deployed hull-down along the crest facing north west, towards the village of Tomba Di Pesaro. The village, and Mont Peloso slightly east of it, were the next objectives of 5 Canadian Armoured Division and considered to be the key to the Adriatic wing of the Gothic Line. All together by 1330, the British Columbia Dragoons had a total of 12 tanks on and around Hill 204. Eastman still had one of his troops several hundred metres back at Casa Montesco to cover the left rear of the position.²²³ By sighting the majority of their tanks to cover the left front, the Dragoons atop 204 clearly perceived that any German counter-attacks would develop from Tomba Di Pesaro only 2000 metres away. While preparing for a German counter-attack and waiting for their supporting infantry, the British Columbians had to dismount and clean their area out with their Thompson sub-machineguns and grenades as it was thick with snipers. One German soldier managed to lob a grenade into the hatch of an "A" squadron tank, blowing apart its commander, Sergeant Warman and his gunner. The tank was still mobile and had to be driven back off the crest, complete with its grisly contents, to clear the field of fire of the others. That same German scored six hits with his pistol around the commanders hatch of Eric Waldron's tank before Waldron traversed

²²² Medal Recommendation, Captain Richard Bartley Sellars, W.D. BCD, 31 Aug.

²²³ BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman; Turnley, 1962. W.D. BCD, 31 Aug 1944.

his turret around and let him have it with the coaxial machinegun and a handful of grenades.²²⁴

It was extremely difficult for tank soldiers to do their own job of manning their 75mm guns and watching for enemy counter-attacks as well as acting as infantry to secure their position from marauding German snipers. The German Artillery made the Dragoon's stay on 204 even more unpleasant by hurling an increasing number of shells in their vicinity. Fortunately, most of these shells were of flat trajectory, no doubt from anti-tank guns and assault guns firing from Tomba Di Pesaro, and either burst on the slope in front of 204 or passed overhead and burst further down in the draw behind it.²²⁵

Over the next few hours, events began to develop that convinced the Dragoons on the hilltop that the Germans now realized that this small Canadian armoured group had outrun the rest of its parent division. The armoured soldiers believed that the Germans were about to react very strongly to wipe their little band off the map. This perception is quite understandable given the Dragoons apparently forlorn position but it is not quite accurate. In reality, it is quite safe to say that the Germans in this area were more confused than the Canadians and quite unaware that 5 Canadian Division had penetrated so deeply into their lines. The evidence to support this claim has always existed but no historian has yet looked closely enough at the small unit actions to fully understand

²²⁴ BCD Personal Accounts, Waldron, 1962.

²²⁵ BCD Personal Accounts, Dodd; Eastman; Turnley, 1962.

the significance of "The Battle of Hill 204."

Not long after the grenade killed Sgt. Warman and wrecked his tank, Sgt. Waldron happened to look behind him towards a low stone wall approximately 300 metres east of his position on the road to Pozzo Alto. What he spotted was a most unusual sight indeed. An unsuspecting platoon of 40 odd German infantry came marching from around the far side of the wall completely oblivious to the 12 Sherman tanks concealed close by. The marching soldiers were most likely coming from Pozzo Alto to set up defenses around the Panzertrum, not knowing that it had already been neutralized by the British Columbians. Waldron's gunner traversed the turret to the rear and took careful aim at the prey. The muzzle flash of Waldron's main gun was the first indication those Germans had that anything was wrong but before they could react, 75mm high explosive shells knocked the platoon over like bowling pins. Several other tanks from "C" squadron joined in the turkey shoot.²²⁶

Only moments later, dust clouds on the road from Tomba Di Pesaro alerted the Dragoons to another threat. Major Turnley ordered his men to hold their fire until they could identify the oncoming vehicles as it was quite possible that they were from the New Brunswick Hussars which were operating on the left rear around Hill 136. About the same time that the Dragoons determined that two German self-propelled guns and a Panther tank were bearing down on them, the Germans realized that Hill 204 was no longer in German hands and they quickly cut down off the road and in behind a knoll

²²⁶ BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman; Turnley; Waldron, 1962.

about 500 metres north east, near the location of another Panzertrum.²²⁷

It is most probable that the German armoured vehicles and the platoon of infantry were on their way to take up positions on Hill 204 in support of the two fixed Panther turrets. The Dragoons had beat them to the critical piece of real estate and yet they had no idea of the precarious situation the Germans now faced. Post-war accounts of the action by witnesses are filled with references to the British Columbia position being surrounded and how it seemed that the Germans had let the Dragoons get on to 204 so they could be isolated and destroyed.²²⁸ With petrol running low, shells raining all around them, snipers taking pot-shots, Germans advancing from all sides and no help in sight, it is easy to see why the Dragoons would believe themselves to be on the receiving end of a colossal error on the part of higher headquarters. Yet when all the scattered pieces of evidence are put together, it appears that the charge of the British Columbia Dragoons with the loss of so many men and machines had accomplished far more than most students of the battle give credit.

What is more important is than just getting to Hill 204 was that "A" and "C" squadrons held on to it in spite of how bleak their situation appeared in the middle of the afternoon on 31 August. Their trials were not yet over however. As the afternoon

²²⁷ BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman; Turnley; Waldron, 1962; W.D. BCD, 31 Aug 1944; Ops Log, W.D. I Cdn Corps, 31 Aug 1944.

²²⁸ BCD Personal Accounts, Dodd; Eastman; Green; Turnley; Waldron, 1962.

wore on the Germans became increasingly aware that a vital piece of ground was in the hands of the Canadians and every effort possible must be made to push them off. Unless the tiny foothold was reinforced soon, it was quite likely that the Germans would do just that.

When another dust cloud appeared to the southeast, the defenders thought that help might have finally arrived in the form of the New Brunswick Hussars or Lord Strathcona's Horse. As the column neared them the Dragoons made out that it was their own regimental headquarters group of four Shermans, two of them being command tanks with dummy guns. Lt-Col. Vokes' group was travelling along the eastern exposed side of the finger on which 204 rested. The tanks appeared to have missed the objective and were heading towards Mont Peloso and the muzzles of the German armour hiding behind the knoll. Before the Dragoons on 204 could convince Vokes over the radio that the hill he was heading for was not the objective, the column was engulfed in a blanket of dust and smoke.²²⁹ Three out of the four headquarters tanks were destroyed by German guns.

Vokes and his crew managed to escape their brewing vehicle at which point the commanding officer climbed aboard the last tank in the group which was far enough back as to be out of the line of fire of the German armour. Vokes and this tank, commanded by Corporal E.E. Mather were able to make their way up to the crest bringing the total number of Shermans on the hill back up to 12.

²²⁹ BCD Personal Accounts, Green, 1962.

From this point on the Germans maintained a high volume of flat trajectory fire at the crest of Hill 204 preventing any kind of movement. Fortunately the surviving headquarters tank was equipped with a radio netted to the 5 Brigade frequency, which was quickly put to use to inform higher headquarters of the situation as well as to call in several artillery concentrations. One of these mixed field and medium artillery stonks destroyed the Panther tank on the left that had taken up residence in a nearby barn from where it took pot shots at the Dragoon position.²³⁰

While Lt-Col. Vokes conferred with his two squadron commanders on a cutbank road, an extremely heavy concentration of German mortar fire slammed into the hillside. The high angled trajectory of mortars meant that the steep crest would no longer protect the Dragoons from the plunging bombs. One round landed only metres away from the three officers, knocking them all down. The two majors escaped with only minor injuries but the blast ripped open the stomach of the commanding officer leaving those around him with little hope for his survival. The mortar stonk also wrecked radio antennas and hampered communications to the rear. Trooper Bonnefant, from Turnley's squadron, volunteered to run across the fire swept ground to the rear to bring forward a light "Honey" tank to evacuate Vokes to the rear where he would die soon after. Before leaving the position, Vokes made it clear to his men that under no circumstances were they to abandon their hill until

²³⁰ BCD Personal Accounts, Turnley; Mather; Eastman; Dodd; Waldron, Green, 1962. Ops Log, W.D., HQ RCA 5 CAD, 31 Aug 1944.

relieved by the Perth Regiment which he insisted would arrive shortly.²³¹

For sometime after Majors Eastman and Turnley had led their Shermans up the draw and into the fray, Major Kinloch waited anxiously back at "Erindale" for the Lt-Col Reid's Perth Regiment. Midway through the morning, Lt-Col Vokes suggested to Kinloch that the Perths must have missed the rendezvous point and gone on to follow up the leading Dragoons. Vokes thus ordered his remaining sub-unit to move on towards 204, pick up the lost Perths and support them onto the objective. The sleepy German anti-tank gunners on the northeast side of the draw that had let Eastman and Turnley's squadrons pass comparatively unmolested, were now well awake. Several of Kinloch's tanks were hit and brewed up on this ascent. When "B" squadron radioed its situation report at the top of the draw, Vokes barked that the Perths were not out in front after all and they had just arrived back in Erindale. Kinloch was to bring his remaining tanks back to the startline to tee up a proper infantry-cum-tank attack. The trip back into the draw was almost as bad as the drive out. Major Kinloch felt the crack of several 88mm shells passing as close as ten feet from his Sherman as it hustled to the rear.²³²

The Perth Regiment was filing into the bottom of the draw at the same time that the tanks returned from their foray about

²³¹ BCD Personal Accounts, Eastman; Turnley, 1962.

²³² BCD Personal Accounts, Kinloch, 1962.

1230.²³³ The infantrymen from southwestern Ontario had been either marching, fighting or being shelled for over 24 hours. They had not yet been resupplied with food and water as the battalion's 2nd echelon and support weapons were still behind the Foglia. To make matters worse, the midday heat of the late Italian summer was nearly unbearable.²³⁴ Lt-Col Reid of the Perths, informed Major Kinloch that he could not lead his battalion anywhere until they had a few hours rest, some food and most importantly, water. It was obvious to Kinloch that Reid's men were exhausted thus he had no choice but to wait in the bottom of the draw while the rest of his regiment clung to the top of their hill.²³⁵

While the Dragoons waited for reinforcements, events were developing on their flanks that would widen the hole that the Canadians had punched in the German defenses. The tank troopers from British Columbia were not the only armoured soldiers to be thrust out "into the Blue", without infantry support on 31 August. Cavalrymen from Canada's other coast were also operating inside the Gothic Line.

At 0800 that morning, while preparations were being made for the Irish attack on Hill 120, Brigadier Johnston came up with an idea. In light of the fact that the Perths were soon to be working with the BCD's, Johnston suggested to Lt-Col Robinson, commanding the New Brunswick Hussars, that his "A" squadron, which had

²³³ Ops Log, W.D., I Cdn Corps, 31 Aug 1944.

²³⁴ W.D. PLF, 31 Aug 1944; BCD Personal Accounts, Green, 1962.

²³⁵ BCD Personal Accounts, Kinloch, 1962.

supported the Perths onto Hill 111, attempt to thrust up to the original Irish objective of Mt. Marrone.²³⁶ The two remaining squadrons could provide plenty of support for the coming attack on Hill 120. Bdr. Johnston, like Cumberland and Hoffmeister, recognized that the Germans were off balance and every effort must be made to take advantage of that. The extra squadron would otherwise have to sit idle until Hill 120 had been cleared. If no resistance was encountered then the gamble would pay off, but even if the Hussars did encounter German troops then it could hold up and keep those Germans from reinforcing 120. Lt-Col Robinson agreed and by 0830 "A" squadron was rolling north along the Tomba Di Pesaro road.²³⁷

Within three quarters of an hour the New Brunswicks had covered about 800 metres up the valley leading to Mont Marrone. It was when the leading two troops began to move past Casa Checchi that trouble began. One tank shuddered as an anti-tank round fired from the farm, slammed into its thin side armour, while German infantry managed to lob a grenade into the hatch of another. As the crew bailed from the disabled tank they were cut down by machine-gun fire. Two wounded New Brunswick crewman were then finished off with bayonets. The other "A" squadron Shermans, their crews now in a frenzy, proceeded to eliminate the German troops whose trenches they had driven into collecting payback for their fallen comrades. The unit's after action report records that one

²³⁶ W.D. VIII NBH, 31 Aug 1944.

²³⁷ Operations Log, W.D. 11 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

young tank commander, so angered by the sight of his wounded mates being bayoneted, killed an enemy soldier closing his hands around the German's neck. When the Hussars were finished, 25 German bodies and a wrecked 75mm anti-tank gun were strewn around them.²³⁸ This little battle helped to ensure the success of Lt-Col. Clark's battalion in destroying the Panzer Grenadiers on Hill 120 as the farm lay directly along the approach of the Irish diversionary attack that would be delivered shortly after noon. After cleaning out the enemy infantry, Major Blanchet ordered his lead troops to push on to their intermediate objective, Hill 136.²³⁹ This spur was reached without further incident but when the first two tanks moved over its crest for the next bound, they both were hit by anti-tank gun fire from positions around Mont Marrone and a farm in the bottom of the valley. Fortunately no injuries resulted from either hit. Major Blanchet halted his squadron on the reverse slope of Hill 136 until he could size up the situation.²⁴⁰

The squadron commander dismounted from his 33 ton "horse" and crawled up to the crest from where he surveyed the ground and directed the supporting artillery in several "Mike" targets²⁴¹ on the German positions on the next ridge and at the farm. After the

²³⁸ After Action Report, W.D. VIII NBH, 31 Aug 1944.

²³⁹ After Action Reports, W.D.'s 5 CAB, VIII NBH, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁴⁰ After Action Report, "A" sqn, VIII NBH, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁴¹ A "Mike" target involves the concentration of all the guns of one full artillery regiment on a single target. All guns postpone whatever harassing or other lesser missions they are engaged in, to participate in the "Mike" shoot.

smoke had cleared, the squadron roared forward again, hoping that the artillery had smashed the German anti-tank guns. Unfortunately, the barrage either missed the target or the Germans were too well dug in for when the first tank exposed itself over the crest it was immediately hit by another high velocity shell. At this point, Blanchet decided to sit tight and wait for infantry support. If he attempted to dash across 1700 metres of open ground with his remaining tanks then their would not likely be Hussars left to consolidate on the objective.

Nevertheless, "A" squadron's location on Hill 136 put them in a good position to cover the Canadian left flank and to cut the road between Mt Marrone and Tomba Di Pesaro by fire. The tanks remained their in turret down positions, firing on targets of opportunity for the rest of the day. They stayed on the spur until the late afternoon when the Cape Breton Highlanders arrived with "B" squadron.²⁴² Even though Blanchet's men did not secure their objective they did contribute a great deal to the overall battle. Their action cut off II Battalion of the 67th Panzer Grenadier and sealed it to the fate that the Toronto Irish would visit upon them in the early afternoon. This point is missed in Major Wrinch's historical report in which he describes both "A" squadron's mission and that of the BCD's as "failures".²⁴³ The event did not even warrant a sentence in the official history. Back on "Dragoon Hill", the grim situation began to improve as the sun set on 31

²⁴² After Action Reports, 5 CAB; VIII NBH, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁴³ Historical Officer's Narrative, p. 65

August. The plan at the start of the day had been for the British Columbia Dragoons supported by the Perth Regiment, to take Hill 204 before pushing on to Mont Peloso and Tomba Di Pesaro. This combat team was to be followed closely by another made up of Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) supported by the motorized infantry of the Westminster Regiment. The second group would be in position to either exploit any gains made by the Perth/Dragon force, or to leapfrog it and take over the advance if the initial spearhead was blunted by heavy German resistance.²⁴⁴ While this plan was obviously not adhered to absolutely, the basic concept behind it, can be traced throughout the developing battle.

At 0845, 31 August in keeping with the original plan, the Shermans of Lord Strathcona's Horse under command of Lt-Col J.M. "Jim" McAvity, were ordered to cross the river and concentrate in Erindale. Delays began almost immediately as the tanks clattered down the road from the heights overlooking the Foglia valley. German shellfire caused a large traffic jam in this area forcing the Strathcona's to halt on the steep road from where they had a spectacular view of the efforts of their sister regiment, the BCD's, as they cleared "Erindale".

With his lead tanks very close to the river, Lt-Col. McAvity was not about to sit and wait for the traffic to clear. On McAvity's orders, the Second in Command and the Recce Troop leader

²⁴⁴ This Plan was outlined during an "O" group held at 5 CAB HQ at 0200, 31 Aug. W.D. 5 CAB, 31 Aug 1944.

found a fording place further east.²⁴⁵ The Strathcona's turned off the road and drove some distance to the right before swinging down into the Foglia where the powerful Chrysler Multi-bank engines of the M4A4 Shermans²⁴⁶ pushed the tanks easily across the river bottom and up the north bank onto the flats above. On the other side of the river, at the Strathcona crossing point, was a northward running road which led directly to the forming up area in Erindale.

Because the British Columbia's were still fighting to clear their forming up area, Lt-Col McAvity and Brigadier Cumberland decided that it would be better for the Strathcona's to hang back until "Erindale" was secure, rather than add to the confusion.²⁴⁷ This delay was put to use by refueling the tanks and feeding the men. While this was going on, Lt. Brunet's Recce Troop went to work clearing mines and rooting out snipers on the road the Strathcona's intended to use when the order to advance was received.

The versatile recce soldiers were nearly finished their task and about to blow the sides of the anti-tank ditch to make it passible when a troop of Churchill tanks from 48 RTR came lumbering up the road. Despite Brunet's warning that the last few mines had not yet been cleared, the British tankers attempted to cross the

²⁴⁵ Lord Strathcona's Horse After Action Report by Lt-Col McAvity, W.D. 5 CAB, 1 Sep 1944.

²⁴⁶ Peter Chamberlain; Chris Ellis, British and American Tanks of World War II (New York: 1981) p. 116

²⁴⁷ Ops Log, 5 CAB, 31 Aug 1944.

ditch. As the 45 ton machines neared the ditch, each one hit an anti-tank mine, effectively blocking this route to the Strathcona's. When the order to move up to Erindale came in at 1400, McAvity's "Horsemen" were forced to back track to the river and slip over to Montecchio and then double back east along the lateral road losing a good deal of time in the process.²⁴⁸

Recce Troop now took up its more traditional role leading the regiment into action. The cut down Stuart "Honey" tanks, bristling with machine-guns, scurried up to the top of the draw while the Shermans poured into the bottom, near the German trenches that had given the Dragoons such trouble earlier in the day.²⁴⁹ By this time, units from 1st Canadian Division had secured the spur that made up the right side of the draw so the Strathcona's were free to form up for battle in comparative safety. "A" and "B" squadrons moved to the top of the draw taking up covering positions on the left and right respectively. They had settled in by 1600 at which point "C" squadron bound past them, making for the next crest. Only minutes after Major C.A. McEwen's "C" squadron cracked off, a message came down from 5th Canadian Division headquarters that the Germans were preparing to counter-attack the Canadian left flank and all advancing units in the area were to halt and take up

²⁴⁸ LSH After Action Report, W.D. 5 CAB, 1 Sep 1944.

²⁴⁹ "The Recce Troop of an armoured regiment consists of 11 light American General Stuart or "Honey" tanks. From these the turrets have been removed and instead a .50 Browning machinegun is mounted. The vehicle carries a crew of five and its firepower also includes a .30 Browning, a Bren Gun, a Piat and four Tommyguns." Lt. E.J. Perkins. "Crossing the Melfa River", Canadian Military History Autumn 1993: p. 35.

defensive positions.²⁵⁰

Between 1335 and 1600, artillery observers flying in light aircraft over the battle area were able to pinpoint the location of a total of ten German "tanks" scattered along the road leading northwest out of Tomba Di Pesaro and in the village itself.²⁵¹ A concentration of enemy troops was also spotted further up the road.²⁵² At first it seemed as though this force was on the move, but later it appeared stationary.²⁵³ The presence of ten German tanks accompanied by infantry so close to a very fragile Canadian bridgehead was enough for General Hoffmeister to hit the panic button and prepare his division to repel a counter-attack. To begin with, all units in the area were advised of the situation and told to stop whatever they were doing and firm up. For the two Dragoon squadrons on 204 and the Hussar squadron hull down on 136 this meant little more than staying put and keeping their eyes peeled to the northwest.

The Strathcona's were a different story. The report caught them in the middle of a squadron bound. Lt-Col. McAvity was ordered to hold his lead squadron on the intermediate crest at 1000

²⁵⁰ Ops Log, 5 CAB, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁵¹ It is doubtful that the vehicles spotted by the Air Observer were German tanks. German order of battle documents report no units in the area at that time capable of fielding that many tanks. A battalion of Panther tanks from 4 Panzer Regiment was detailed to reinforce 1 Parachute Division on 31 August but would not arrive until two days later. Hist Sect Rpt #27, pp.36-37.

²⁵² Ops Log, 1 Cdn Corps, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁵³ Ops Log, 5 CAD, 31 Aug 1944.

metres behind point 204 and lend support to the BCD's. To strengthen his position, McAvity deployed his M-10 tank destroyers with their powerful three-inch, high velocity guns along the intermediate ridge to the left of "C" squadron. From there the gunners from 82 Anti-Tank Battery RCA could cover the open ground to the northwest and deal with any German armour threat.²⁵⁴

The Perth Regiment was ordered to stand fast in its positions on the high ground surrounding Erindale. Also in the area were the Cape Breton Highlanders who had been ordered to pass through the Irish Regiment, link up with the Hussars at Hill 136 and push out to Mt Marrone. The Capers received notice of the potential German counter-attack ten minutes after they set off for their objective at 1615 at which point Lt-Col Somerville ordered his battalion back to their defensive positions at their startline near Hill 120. On top of Hill 120, the Irish prepared to defend their newly won prize.²⁵⁵

With his infantry and armour preparing for the worst, Hoffmeister's gunners swung into action to pound the Germans into dust before their attack could get started. The divisional field artillery as well as the medium guns of the AGRA had conducted a number of shoots in the Tomba Di Pesaro area throughout the morning. One of these shoots had started a large fire in the village itself which could be seen for miles away. The medium and heavy guns tasked to work in 5th Division's area had been

²⁵⁴ Ops Log, 5 CAD; After-Action Report, 5 CAB, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁵⁵ Ops Log, 11 CIB, 5 5CAD; W.D. CBH, IRC, 31 Aug 1944.

ordered to ceasefire around noon in preparation for a move forward. This order was countermanded as the threat to the Canadian left developed and the guns of 1 and 2 Canadian Medium Regiments again went into action firing on Tomba Di Pesaro.²⁵⁶ In addition to the field and medium shoot being directed at German positions by the forward observers, the Air Observer also joined in, calling for a "Mike" target on the German tanks that he spotted on the Tomba Di Pesaro road. 2 Canadian Medium Regiment was at the disposal of the air observer for this portion of the battle and all sixteen of the regiments 4.5 inch guns proceeded to pump heavy shells into the last reported location of the German tanks. Two dozen 25 pounders of 11 Field Regiment also added their weight to the barrage.²⁵⁷

Given the nature of the target and its proximity to the thin Canadian forward position, the senior gunners in the Canadian Corps decided to add more weight to the barrage already being directed against the German vehicles. The target was upgraded first to "Uncle" in which all of the 5th divisional artillery takes it on and then to a "Victor" where all the guns available to the Canadian Corps opened up not just once but four times in succession at the direction of the air OP. To make life even more difficult for the Germans, two flights of fighter-bombers were directed onto the

²⁵⁶ After-Action Report, 1 Cdn Md Regt, 25 Aug- 28 Oct 1944.

²⁵⁷ After Action Report, 1 Cdn AGRA, Operation "Olive". Ops Log, 5 CAD, 31 Aug 1944.

target by Rover David.²⁵⁸

In retrospect, the vehicles probably were not tanks but self-propelled artillery pieces which would from the air could easily be mistaken for tanks. As well as being base areas for 4 Parachute Regiment, Tomba Di Pesaro and Monteluro were the concentration points for much of anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery on the Parachute right flank, both towed and self-propelled.²⁵⁹ Whatever the case, the threat of counter attack had cleared by 1700 and all units were ordered to carry on with their missions.²⁶⁰

During the lull in which the Canadians prepared for the possible German counter-attack, Lt-Col McAvity met up with Lt-Col. Reid of the Perth Regiment and made arrangements for the infantry to follow the tanks up to Hill 204. The events of the next several hours have given rise to a serious misunderstanding of the struggle to penetrate the Gothic Line. Both Lt-Col. Nicholson, in the official history²⁶¹ and the distinguished historians Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham²⁶², relying on the "unofficial

²⁵⁸ Operations Log, 1 Cdn Corps, 31 Aug. Rover David was the name for the Desert Air Force forward air controller group that operated with the Canadian and Polish Corps in the Gothic Line. It consisted of pilots travelling in armoured vehicles equipped with radio links to the ground forces and the fighter bombers circling overhead. Alan Wilt, "Allied Air Cooperation in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1945", in Case Studies in the Development of Close Air Support (Washington: 1990) pp. 208-209.

²⁵⁹ Counter Battery Office Intelligence Report # 8, 1 Sep.; W.D. VIII NBH, 31 Aug-1 Sep 1944.

²⁶⁰ Ops Log, 5 CAD, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁶¹ Nicholson, Italy pp. 517-518.

²⁶² Bidwell; Graham, p. 212.

narrative" written by the I Canadian Corps' Historical officer²⁶³ have offered accounts of the events which picture the Strathcona/Perth Force as advancing against heavy resistance, to rescue the isolated BCD squadrons who "accomplished very little" while taking heavy losses.²⁶⁴ This judgement appears to be based upon the mistaken assumption that the Strathcona's, together with the Perth Regiment had to fight a difficult action to reach the two Dragoon squadrons on Hill 204 during which they captured the 50 prisoners.²⁶⁵ In fact, the main body of the Strathcona's faced virtually no enemy resistance aside from sporadic mortaring and the odd snap shot from the small concentration of German armour behind the spur to the west. The 50 prisoners were snipers and stragglers captured by Lt Burnet's Recce Troop over the course of the entire day from their mine clearing operations near the anti-tank ditch to their final run to 204 along the right side of the spur.²⁶⁶ The recce soldiers also mopped up the crews of the guns that had been infiltrated in behind the BCD's.²⁶⁷ The events are further confused by the poorly recorded Perth War Diary which makes mention of the unit being held up by heavy machinegun fire from the right side of Erindale and coming under heavy shellfire both from

²⁶³ Historical Officer's Narrative, p. 64.

²⁶⁴ Historical Officer's Narrative, p. 64.

²⁶⁵ Hist Offr's Narrative. p.64.

²⁶⁶ LSH After Action Report, W.D. 5 CAB, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁶⁷ W.D. LSH, 31 Aug 1944.

German and Canadian Artillery.²⁶⁸ While these events did all happen, they occurred during the *morning*, before Hill 115 and the right side of Erindale had been secured by 1st Canadian Division and while Major Kinloch's "B" squadron was attempting to return to the bottom of the draw after their abortive attempt to link up with the other British Columbia squadrons.²⁶⁹ Closer inspection of this relief operation demonstrates that the bloody charge of the British Columbia Dragoons on 31 August, in spite of the heavy losses incurred, ripped a decisive gap in the Gothic Line. The tanks of Lord Strathcona's Horse and the infantry of the Perths did have to face a good deal of shelling and sniper fire as they moved up to 204, but they did not have to fight their way up as has been suggested.²⁷⁰

Once the Recce Troop and "B" squadron had arrived on the objective, "C" squadron was ordered up to join them. The M-10's of 82 battery were then moved ahead to the intermediate objective to obtain a better field of fire over the open ground on the left. It now seemed that the left and front were secure. The only real problem for the Strathcona's in the late afternoon came from Pozzo Alto, to the east. Lt-Col. McAvity claims that he was told that by that point in the day that the village had been already taken the

²⁶⁸ W.D. Perth Regt, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁶⁹ The Perth War Diary records that the BCD's outran them. No doubt this view was taken because the Perths entered the draw as Kinloch's squadron was fighting its way up to the intermediate objective. W.D. Perth Regt., 31 Aug 1944.

²⁷⁰ After Action Report, W.D. 5 CAB, 31 Aug 1944.

infantry of 1st Canadian Division. In fact, elements of the Seaforth Highlanders from 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade were pinned in front of the town and could do little to prevent the paratroopers from firing into the right flank of the advancing Perths and Strathcona's.²⁷¹

To cover this trouble spot, McAvity positioned Major J.S. Ussher's "A" squadron hull down along the spur running southwest to point 133.²⁷² From here the 75 mm guns of the Shermans could give direct fire support to the Seaforths and keep the defenders of PozzoAlto bottled up. At 1744, the Strathcona's report that they are snug on Hill 204 with the BCD's. The tired Perth's arrived on foot at the objective by 2035, albeit still without their support weapons, and immediately set to work digging in.²⁷³ "D" and "B" companies dug in on the forward slope of 204 in front of the Strathcona tanks. All together the Perths had lost 41 men thus far. This number would be much higher by dawn.²⁷⁴ The bruised and battered tankers of the British Columbia Dragoons had been effectively relieved and were allowed to go to the rear where they could get some hot food before drifting off into the deep sleep of exhaustion.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ W.D. Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁷² After Action Report, Lt-Col. McAvity; W.D. SeafHofC, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁷³ Ops Log, 5 CAD, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁷⁴ W.D. Perth Regt, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁷⁵ W.D. BCDs, 31 Aug.; BCD Personal Accounts, 1962.

It would be a stretch to say that the flanking positions around Hill 204 that evening were secure, but the Canadians did have enough combat power on both the right and left of the hill to provide some flank protection, or at least early warning of any potential threat. On the left flank, the Cape Breton Highlanders were ordered back into action after their tough battle the night before. They had been ordered to link up with the New Brunswick Hussars and push out to Mt Marrone on the late afternoon of 31 August. A combination of soldier's fatigue and the counter-attack false alarm had delayed the Highlander's advance, but by midnight they had married up with their supporting Hussar Squadron and were preparing for a night march to the objective which would be assaulted at dawn on 1 September.²⁷⁶

On Hill 204, the situation looked hopeful in spite of the fact that the Perth's supporting anti-tank, mortar and machinegun platoons had not been able to make it up. The Strathcona's were ordered to remain on the position through the night and be ready to continue the advance at daybreak. The Shermans of the Strathconas possessed a massive amount of defensive firepower that would more than make up for the lack of infantry support weapons. each Sherman mounted a medium .30 calibre Browning machine-gun and a heavy .50 Calibre machinegun in addition to the 75 mm maingun which could fire high explosive shells that could be devastating to enemy infantry. Many of the machineguns were dismounted from the tanks

²⁷⁶ W.D. CBH, 1 Sep 1944.

and dug in just behind the infantry.²⁷⁷ Several British Columbia tanks that had been damaged and were unable to move back down the hill under their own power were ordered to remain on the hill with their crews to help defend the position.

The overall command of the position, as was standard Canadian Army practice, went to the infantry commander, Lt-Col. Reid. Reid wasted no time in sending out patrols and setting up a hasty defensive fire plan with the artillery forward observer. With complete darkness just minutes away, tank commanders and rifle section leaders got acquainted with each others positions as best they could.²⁷⁸ In spite of the fact that his men had to dig in in darkness and there had been little time to co-ordinate defensive arrangements, Reid's command was well armed, situated in depth on dominating terrain and ready for whatever was in store for them. The new defenders of Hill 204 would not have to wait long.

On the Canadian right, the battalions of 1st Canadian Division also made important gains on 31 August, although not quite as deep as on the left. The German paratroopers defending this area were much better prepared to meet the Canadian attack than 26th Panzer Division. Another factor that may have contributed to 1st Division's slightly slower rate of advance, other than already having been in action for five days, was that 21st Tank Brigade was trained and equipped to support infantry operations, rather than to

²⁷⁷ LSH After Action Report, W.D. 5 CAB, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁷⁸ J.M. McAvity, Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians): A Record of Achievement (Toronto: 1947) p. 121.

take the leading role as they were ordered to do on 31 August. The bulk of the brigade's tanks were heavy Churchill "Infantry" tanks with a maximum speed of 15 miles per hour and a short range of 90 miles, best suited to advancing at the pace of the infantry. The Sherman "Cruiser" tanks that made up the Canadian armoured regiments, traveled to a maximum range of 150 miles, at speeds of up to 29 mph. At 23 tons, the Sherman also weighed a full 12 tons less than the awkward Churchills yet the Sherman was pushed forward by a 370 horse power engine compared to the Churchills' 350.²⁷⁹ The Sherman's superior mobility in the rugged Italian hills made it far more suitable for operations in which armour was the dominant partner and thus setting the pace of advance.

It is also worth noting that the infanters and cavalymen of 5th Canadian Division had trained closely together and knew each other well in contrast to the mix of Canadian riflemen and British tankers, which had only trained together for two months prior to "Olive".²⁸⁰ The kind of combined arms teamwork found in Hoffmeister's formation, together with a strong desire to not repeat the mistakes the Hitler Line pursuit, gave I Canadian Corps a flexible and very aggressive weapon. The combination of the slower moving, but very powerful infantry division to occupy the attention of the fully manned fortifications on the right, while the armoured division took advantage of the gap on the left, proved to be the ideal formula for success. With the outcome on the right

²⁷⁹ Chamberlain and Ellis, p. 67, p. 115.

²⁸⁰ Nicholson, Italy p. 479.

so closely linked to the speed of the armour, it is possible that had the Canadian sector been assaulted with two infantry divisions, the end result could have been very different.

The German LXXVI Panzer Corps was hard pressed to contain 5th Canadian Armoured Division's deep penetration, as well as the advance of 1st Canadian Infantry Division. To compensate for the destruction of II Battalion, 67th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, 1st Parachute Division was forced to extend west to take on both Canadian Divisions. While Hoffmeister's men may have thrust deeper into the German defenses, Vokes' steady progress, supported by Brig. Dawnay's heavy Churchill tanks, would prevent the Parachute Division from diverting its full attention to the more dangerous threat on Hill 204. The actions of 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade in particular, helped to secure the right shoulder of the deep gash ripped into the German line by the British Columbia Dragoons.

During the morning of 31 August, the companies of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, supported by British tanks from 48 Royal Tank Regiment, struck out northwards to secure the high ground overlooking Osteria Nuova.²⁸¹ The first task of the Patricia's was to clear their left and make contact with the armoured division. This task was made easier by the presence of the British Columbia tanks in "Erindale". After taking casualties crossing the minefields, "C" company mopped up the German positions long the lateral road at a junction near the mouth of the draw that the Dragoons had previously fought their way into, rounding up 96

²⁸¹ W.D. 2 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

prisoners.²⁸²

With the road junction cleared, the next step would be to leapfrog a fresh company forward to clear out the strong enemy positions on Hill 115. Fire coming from this area had caused much trouble for the British Columbia Dragoons earlier in the day, especially Major Kinloch's squadron.²⁸³ A squadron of Churchill tanks from 48th Royal Tank Regiment would assist "D" company in this difficult task. Orders for this attack were issued at 1030, but it was 1230 before the Patricia company was near the objective.

The German paratroopers on Hill 115 laid down a high volume of small arms fire on their attackers at the same time that more paratroopers attempted to infiltrate into the PPCLI area on the right. The acting Patricia CO, Major Clark, quickly dispersed the threat on his right by directing a strong concentration of artillery on it. Meanwhile, the British tanks blasted away at the peak of Hill 115, covering the movement of the Canadian rifleman.²⁸⁴ Once on the crest, the Patricia's used grenades and tommy guns to clean the enemy paratroopers out of their trenches. It took an hour of close-in fighting on the spur, before "D" company secured its objective at 1350, taking 23 more prisoners at a cost of six casualties.

²⁸² W.D. PPCLI, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁸³ BCD Personal Accounts, Kinloch, 1962; W.D. BCD, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁸⁴ W.D. PPCLI; Ops Log, 2 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

With the Patricia's left flank now secure and the immediate threat to 5 Division's penetration removed, Major Clark was free to shift his effort to clearing out his right. Indeed, he was already preparing to do this while "D" company was still fighting its way up to Hill 115. The defensive artillery fire Clark called down on German positions around noon, served as a screen behind which "A" company along with "B" squadron of the 48 RTR could form up for their assault and as a preliminary bombardment on their objective, Hill 133.²⁸⁵

In textbook fashion, "A" company and their accompanying Churchill's cracked off as soon as Hill 115 was reported snug.²⁸⁶ The unit war diary records that the Patricia's crawling up the long bald slope to Hill 133 faced a "murderous" rain of mortar and shellfire that added six more names to the casualty list. "Murderous" as the German defensive fire may have been, it was not enough to stop the attack and by 1445, Major Clark was able to report to Brigadier Gibson that "JohnBull" (Hill 133), and thus all the high ground overlooking the Foglia in 2 Brigade's area was in Canadian hands.²⁸⁷

The Patricia's had done well so far, but they were reaching the limits of their endurance and it was time for another battalion to take over 2 Brigade's advance. Late on the morning of 31

²⁸⁵ W.D. PPCLI, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁸⁶ The basic principle of Fire and Movement calls for an advancing force to always maintain one "foot" or subunit on the ground to cover with fire, the movement of another.

²⁸⁷ W.D. PPCLI; Ops Log, 2 CIB; W.D. 2 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

August, General Vokes ordered Brigadier Gibson to be ready, along with 21 Tank Brigade, for a breakout dash to the coast if the German resistance crumbled. The Loyal Edmonton Regiment along with 12th Royal Tank Regiment were alerted for this task. As a preliminary, as well as to firm up 5th Division's penetration, the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, and the 145th Battalion, Royal Armoured Corps were ordered to capture the village of Pozzo Alto located 1000 metres east and slightly south of Hill 204.²⁸⁸ The village was very strongly defended by elements from 1 and 2 Battalions of 4 Parachute Regiment.²⁸⁹ The 1st Parachute Division on the whole was weak in armour and anti-tank weapons, but the paratroopers in Pozzo Alto nonetheless posed a threat to the Dragoon position on 204.²⁹⁰ It was up to the Seaforths, also from British Columbia, to ensure that 4 Para would be too busy fighting off the threat to themselves to bother the Dragoons to the west.

Before Seaforths could move, something had to be done about the heavy concentrations of German mortar fire coming from positions on the right in 3 Brigade's area of responsibility. Due to a combination of strong resistance to the initial West Nova attack and the good progress made by 2 Brigade and the units of 5th Canadian Armoured Division, General Vokes decided to abandon further daylight attacks in the Borgo S. Maria and Hill 131 areas on 31 August. Instead, Brigadier J.P.E. "Paul" Bernatchez's 3

²⁸⁸ W.D. 2 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁸⁹ W.D. PLF, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁹⁰ Pretzell Rpt p. 8.

Brigade was to move its remaining two infantry battalions, the Royal 22e Regiment and the Carleton and Yorks, into the bridgehead to be ready to clean out the Corps' right flank during the early morning of 1 September. In addition, Bernatchez was ordered to place two companies of his former regiment, the Royal 22e or Vandoos, under the command of the Corps' Armoured Reconnaissance unit, the Royal Canadian Dragoons, to be ready to dash north to the coastal road and cut off the German paratroopers holding back the Polish Corps on the coastal belt around Pesaro.²⁹¹

While it made sense not to reinforce the failed West Nova attempt in this area, the 3 Brigade plan meant that the German mortars around Borgo S. Maria and Hill 131 would be free to fire at will throughout the day on 31 August on 2 Brigade as well as on the right flank river crossing areas which would slow the rate of the build up of men and material for 1st Division's drive to the sea. In order to minimize the German threat, a major counter-mortar mission was arranged utilizing all 16 of the 4.2 inch heavy mortars available to both 2 and 3 Brigades as well as the 25 pounders of 3 Field Regiment.²⁹²

Planning for this mission was made that much easier as 1st Canadian Army Group, Royal Artillery was responsible for the Counter-Battery program for the entire Eighth Army front.²⁹³ The

²⁹¹ W.D. 3 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁹² W.D. 2 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁹³ An Army Group, Royal Artillery was the organization tasked with controlling the medium and heavy artillery. Each army corps had an AGRA which provided a centralized structure for command and

Counter-Mortar section alone had at its disposal, 40 4.2 inch mortar, two regiments of self-propelled 105mm guns and two troops of 3.7 inch heavy anti-aircraft guns. The 105's and 3.7 HAA guns were particularly useful because their airbursting shells could detonate over top of the enemy's usually deep mortar pits, raining shrapnel down on the crew and hopefully wrecking the mortar.

Also deployed were several "four-pen" recorders and three sound ranging and flash spotting observation posts operated by 1 Canadian Field Survey Regiment, RCA. These would assist the gunners and mortarmen in locating hostile batteries along with frequent shell reports from the forward troops.²⁹⁴ Even with all these resources the job was difficult because the weapons signature of infantry mortars is slight and difficult to detect and the weapons themselves are very light and man portable allowing them to be moved to from position to position with ease. While a great deal of success was achieved in limiting the effectiveness of the German guns, his mortars still managed to kill and wound large numbers of Canadians.²⁹⁵

Pressure from General Burns for 1st Division to cut the coast road as soon as possible dictated that 145th Armoured would lead

control of all the artillery resources of the entire corps in set-piece operations.

²⁹⁴ W.D., Seaf H of C, appendix, Rough Counter-Mortar Plan, 1st Cdn AGRA, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁹⁵ 66% of casualties during the period from 25 August to 30 September were caused by mortar and shellfire. Quarterly Report, July-September 1944, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps History of the War in Italy.

the advance to Pozzo Alto with the Seaforths in support. The two units had concentrated south of the Foglia during the morning where they had been briefed on the developing situation at the front. Orders to move up and commence the assault on Pozzo Alto were finally issued at 1430 shortly after the Princess Patricia's reported that Hill 115 was secure and that German defenses on Hill 133 were about to crack.²⁹⁶ The plan was quite simple. Two squadrons of 145th Armoured, each accompanied by a Seaforth company were to cross the river into the PPCLI area and push north over the hills to Pozzo Alto and then, depending on the nature of enemy resistance, keep going on to Hill 119, 1500 metres northeast, while the remaining tank squadron and two rifle companies moved up to consolidate the village.²⁹⁷

Simple as this plan may sound, after the lead companies and squadrons crossed the river into the smoke, dust, shell bursts and general confusion of the battle area, the plan began to break down. "D" company and one Churchill squadron successfully passed through the PPCLI positions in Osteria Nuova and formed up for battle behind Hill 133. This all took time, however, and the sun was beginning to set as the small force crossed the shallow draw between the Patricia's forward slit trenches and the village of Pozzo Alto. German artillery observers used the last remaining light of the day to direct plenty of shell and mortar fire onto the approaching troops, forcing them to seek cover until darkness.

²⁹⁶ W.D. PPCLI; Seaf H of C; 2 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁹⁷ W.D. 2 CIB; SeafHofC, 31 Aug 1944.

German heavy machine gunners added to the deluge of the fire directed against the Seaforths. Even though "D" company was pinned down by the heavy enemy fire, it was fulfilling its greater mission of holding the attention of the German paratroopers.²⁹⁸

"B" company of the Vancouver militia battalion was having a much tougher time. They had crossed the river at Castello and like "D" company, they met up with their tanks, climbed aboard and rode them up to the lateral road east of Osteria Nuova. From there the infantry dismounted and, together with the armour, travelled some distance up the road so they could take their place as the right wing of the advance.

Osteria Nuova is only two kilometres from Borgo S. Maria and in no time "B" company had gone too far and reached the outskirts of that village, which was still occupied by the enemy. It was not the defenders of Borgo S. Maria that stopped the Highlander advance though. 1st Division's counter-mortar program was still underway and heavy 4.2 inch mortar bombs began falling among the exposed infantry who quickly made for cover, but not before four men had been struck down by fragments.²⁹⁹ Not realizing that his unit was so far east, the company commander reported that "friendly" mortar fire was hitting his troops in Osteria Nuova instead of Borgo S. Maria, thus the barrage continued.³⁰⁰

The tanks of "A" squadron, 145th Armoured were in no danger

²⁹⁸ W.D. SeafHofC; 2 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

²⁹⁹ After Action Report, "B" coy, W.D. SeafHofC, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁰⁰ Ops Log, 2 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

from the mortar fire and so with only a few hours of daylight left, the squadron commander decided to carry on with his mission and turn north. 400 metres from the top of Hill 131 sat a lone enemy towed anti-tank gun. This gun and its protecting infantry were able to fire into the flank of the Seaforths advancing on Pozzo Alto and thus had to be eliminated. After some textbook armoured fire and movement, the tankers managed to shoot one troop right onto the position where it destroyed the anti-tank gun. Dismounted British tankers rounded up 50 shaken up paratroopers, all dazed from having been under heavy shellfire for most of the day.

Darkness was too close for the tankers to think about going on though, and unlike the Canadians on Hill 204, the British tankers had no intention of holding a hillside position through the night with no infantry especially when the Germans were still holding the crest in strength only a short distance away.³⁰¹ The squadron made its way back to Borgo where it picked up the Seaforth company before moving to a harbour area. The group paused briefly in the fading light to clean out a German machine-gun platoon from Hill 109 just east of Hill 133 on the same spur. The 20 man enemy platoon had seven medium machine-guns between them yet it only took one Seaforth platoon and one tank to convince them that the war was over.³⁰²

³⁰¹ The Seaforth War Diary wrongly reports that Hill 131 was secured. As the Royal 22e Regt found out the next day, the defences on this hill were among the toughest in the Gothic Line and the defenders had no ideas about giving up easily. W.D. SeafHC, 31 Aug 1944.

³⁰² After Action Report, "B" coy, SeafHofC, 1 Sep 1944.

When it became apparent that "D" company of the Seaforths would remain at its position just short of Pozzo Alto until sundown, the commanding officer of 145 Armoured ordered his two squadrons to consolidate back in the safety of their harbour area.³⁰³ This left "D" company alone to face the defenders of Pozzo Alto through the night.

At 2045 on the night of 31 August that a recce patrol from the forlorn band of Seaforths penetrated the edge of the town and determined that the village was defended by a full company of paratroopers. The "D" company commander decided to make an attempt to rush the defenders whom he hoped had been broken by the severe shelling visited upon them for the last several hours but the German parachutists were not yet ready to abandon their positions. They managed to repel two Seaforth attempts to rush into the town with rifles and Bren guns blazing. One of the platoon commanders, Lieutenant F. Henderson, was wounded in each of the two rushes yet he ran back into the village a third time to rescue one of his wounded soldiers.³⁰⁴

Rather than giving up their toehold at the edge of town Lt-Col. Syd Thomson ordered "D" company to lie "Doggo" for the remainder of the night until the tanks arrived in the morning to finish the job.³⁰⁵ In addition to making the task of assaulting the town easier in the morning, keeping the Seaforths in this

³⁰³ Ops Log, 2 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

³⁰⁴ W.D. SeafHofC, 31 Aug 1944.

³⁰⁵ Ops Log, 2 CIB, 1 Sep 1944.

forward position would also maintain a firm right shoulder for the defenders to the west on Hill 204. In a tactic often used by the Germans, the proximity of the opposing positions also made it difficult for German gunners to shell the Canadians without endangering the paratroopers, a tactic often employed by the German Army.

LXXVI Panzer Corps faced a difficult situation on the evening of 31 August, made worse because General Herr's HQ knew very little of what was happening on his left wing, facing the Canadians. 1st Parachute Division, notorious for its failure to pass information about its action to higher headquarters at the best of times, was particularly negligent in the last week of August, no doubt partly due to the absence of the divisional commander, Major-General Richard Heidrich.³⁰⁶

Just how little information LXXVI Panzer Corps HQ possessed on 31 August is suggested by its report to Tenth Army that the corps had contained the initial British and Canadian advances.³⁰⁷ At the Headquarters of 1st Parachute Division, the picture of events was only slightly clearer. It was apparent that contact had been lost with 26th Panzer Division on the right, largely due to the presence of a handful of Canadian tanks on Hill 204. 4th Parachute Regiment was ordered to restore the line in this area and eliminate the

³⁰⁶ Jackson, Mediterranean pp.247-248.

³⁰⁷ Pretzell Report p. 13. 76 Corps Reported that it had halted Eighth Army's advance along a line Montegrifaldo-Mt. Marrone-Pozzo Alto by 31 August.

minor armoured threat.³⁰⁸

To the right of the paratroopers, I Battalion of 67 Panzer Grenadier Regiment had virtually ceased to exist. All the Grenadiers of 5, 6, and 7 companies of this battalion were dead or making their way to Canadian prisoner of war cages. A score of scattered survivors of 8 Company were all that was left, and they were incapable of effective resistance.³⁰⁹ The other battalion of 67th Panzer Grenadiers that was in action on 31 August was fully engaged fighting the British 138th Brigade further to the west, leaving the Paratroopers to face the Canadians on their own.³¹⁰

In spite of the gap in front of the Canadians, the situation looked quite promising on Herr's flanks. On the left in the coastal belt, Polish mechanized patrols were putting some pressure on the port of Pesaro, but the defences there were the strongest of the entire Gothic Line and the Poles were being held at bay.³¹¹ On the German right, the powerful V British Corps had pushed almost as deep into the German defences as the Canadians, but in this area the Gothic positions were much less linear than those facing Burns' men. Instead, they consisted of a series of fortified hill positions all mutually supporting and making maximum use of the rugged terrain. "All major tactical features had been fortified,

³⁰⁸ I Canadian Corps Intelligence Summary # 100, 1 Sept; Pretzell Report, p. 13.

³⁰⁹ W.D., I Cdn Corps Int Sum #100, 1 Sep 1944.

³¹⁰ Jackson, Mediterranean p. 243.

³¹¹ W.D. 1 CID, Aug 1944.

mined and wired with lay-back positions thought out, and sometimes dug, behind them."³¹² Thus even though Lt-Gen Keightley's V Corps had advanced as far as the two Canadian divisions, they still had several more belts of enemy lay-back positions, manned by fresh reserves, to deal with before they could break out beyond the Gothic Line.

None of this would matter though if the gap between 26th Panzer and 1st Parachute Divisions was not sealed off. Over the next fifteen hours, Hill 204 would be the focus of the German defensive effort on the left wing. The German Tenth Army was quite ignorant of these events. Not until late in the day on 1 September that gravity of the situation was fully realized in by the General Vietinghoff and his Chief of Staff, General Wentzell. It was only then that they gave orders for LXXVI Panzer Corps to withdraw back across the Conca river to escape complete annihilation.³¹³ Prior to this realization, the German leadership continued to believe that Green Line I was defensible.

The Desert Air Force was doing its part to ensure that the Germans stayed in the dark about the developing battle. In order to offset the advantages of observation held by the Germans on the high ground overlooking the Foglia, all Allied aircraft that pass the Tomba Di Pesaro feature on returning from any mission were ordered to strafe it. An after action report completed by Canadian Corps headquarters on air action during Operation Olive, admitted

³¹² Jackson, Mediterranean p. 243.

³¹³ Pretzell Rpt p. 15.

that this strafing probably did little material damage. The report also points out that the purpose was not necessarily to destroy targets but instead to keep German observers' heads down.³¹⁴

In preparation for the first counter-attack on Hill 204, German mortars and artillery began ranging in as soon as the sun went down on 31 August. This shelling added to the aggravation caused by a rather large number of snipers. The latter problem was quickly dealt with by a Perth patrol which rounded up a total of 12 prisoners.³¹⁵ By 0100 on 1 September the German gunners had finished ranging and zeroing. The Strathconas and Perths report that about that time the shelling changed from being "heavy" to "very intense" as if to indicate something big was about to happen.³¹⁶ Fortunately, the Canadian defenders were well dug in when the barrage began and casualties were comparatively light although as a final farewell to the British Columbias, at least two of their damaged Shermans on the hill were finished off by direct shell hits. One of these, on the west side of the peak, burned intensely for some time lighting up much of the battle area.³¹⁷

The noise of the bursting shells concealed the movement of German armour. When the noise stopped, two German STUG III assault guns lumbered into the middle of the position, behind "B" squadron,

³¹⁴ Report on Air Operations: 24 Aug - 22 Sep 1944, HQ 1 Cdn Corps, p. 4.

³¹⁵ McAvity, Strathcona p. 122.

³¹⁶ W.D. Perth Regt; LSH After Action Report, Lt-Col. McAvity, 1 Sep 1944.

³¹⁷ BCD Personal Accounts, 1962; W.D. LSH, 1 Sep 1944.

but in front of the M-10 troop. The enemy armoured vehicles began to pump shells into the rear of the "A" squadron positions overlooking Pozzo Alto.³¹⁸ The vehicles approached from the direction of the knoll in between Tomba di Pesaro and the Canadian line and were perhaps the same two armoured vehicles that had been driven off the road earlier in the afternoon and subsequently destroyed Lt-Col Vokes four RHQ tanks.

The fire from these guns also signaled the start of the infantry assault. A force of about 100 paratroopers had crept forward under the protection of the barrage and then rushed Perth trenches on the left side of the hill. Some of the paratroopers managed to get into the Perth trench line on the forward slope, in the "B" company area. A vicious, hand to hand fight ensued, during which the forward "B" company platoons were forced out of their slit trenches back up to the crest where the dismounted Strathcona machineguns were situated with the depth platoon.³¹⁹ Lance - Sergeant K.M. Rowe commanding one of "B" companies' platoons, led his men back down the hill to recover the forward positions three times before finally succeeding. In doing so, Rowe's men destroyed a German platoon, killing twenty outright and capturing the remaining ten. For his efforts, the young NCO was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Several more medals would be won during the course of this vicious close-quarter battle.

³¹⁸ LSH After Action Report, W.D. 5 CAB, 1 Sep 1944.

³¹⁹ Company defensive battle drill calls for the deployment of two platoons forward and the third behind in a reserve or depth position, W.D. Perth Regt, 1 Sep 1944.

The close nature of the fighting made it difficult to call in the help of the artillery which was ready to back the defenders up at a moments notice. The medium guns of 1 Canadian AGRA never did get the call to fire, but the 25 pounders of 17th Field Regiment did fire several missions under the direct control of the forward observer, Captain J.A. Wolfe. One of those strikes was directed at the two STUG III's near Lt-Col Reid's headquarters. In order to get the shells on target, Wolfe had to call them down directly onto his own position.³²⁰

Another Perth rifleman, Pte. R.D. Saunders, took over after his section leader and 2IC were both wounded. Saunders held his handful of men together against repeated rushes by the paratroopers, the best the German Army had to offer, earning for himself the Military Medal.³²¹ The Canadian Corps Historical Officer wrote in his report that the dismounted Strathcona machineguns were particularly decisive in sweeping the paratroopers from the slopes of Hill 204. One Strathcona tanker, Trooper Harold Boettcher, fought in vain with his .30 calibre bowgun and even his pistol to keep his tank from being overrun. When this proved futile due to the limited traverse of the bowgun, he hopped out of his tank and climbed aboard another "B" squadron tank commanded by his Troop Corporal, J.B. Matthews, another DCM winner who at the time was attempting to engage the German self-propelled guns.

³²⁰ W.D. 17 Fd Rgt, RCA, 1 Sep 1944.

³²¹ Medal Recommendations, Lance-Sergeant K.M. Rowe, DCM; Pte. R.D. Saunders, MM; W.D. Perth Regt, 1 Sep 1944.

Boettcher got behind the .50 calibre anti-aircraft machinegun on top of Matthews turret and opened fire. The .50 calibre Browning machinegun is an extremely powerful weapon, capable of engaging targets as far as 3000 metres away. At close range, the fire from this heaviest of automatic weapons would cut clean through much of the cover the paratroopers attempted to hide behind.³²² Trooper Boettcher held his position and no German soldier managed to get close to the Canadian line in his area. All this time, Boettcher made a perfect target for the Germans as he was silhouetted by the light of the flaming BCD Sherman. The tanker, who was wounded the next day, was awarded the Military Medal for his gallantry.³²³

To add to the confusion, the Germans moved two more "armoured vehicles" up the hill. This time they came up the north slope right between "B" and "C" squadrons. These "tanks" turned out to be farm tractors intended to make the Canadians believe they were being attacked on three sides. The ruse failed to have the desired effect though and the Canadian infantrymen and armoured crewmen quickly dealt with this empty threat. The Canadian troopers and riflemen on the north and west sides of Hill 204 were dealing with the German paratroopers, but something still had to be done with the two German self-propelled guns which had infiltrated into the dead ground between the reverse slope and the base of the hill.

³²² The .50 Calibre Browning M2 Heavy Machinegun is so powerful that it is considered to be an anti-armour weapon. It is also so effective that it is still in use by almost all western armies today, including Canada's.

³²³ McAvity, Strathcona pp. 123-4.

Neither tank nor M-10 fire could be employed without risking hits on their comrades so Lt-Col. Reid personally led a tank hunting team, armed with all available PIAT's.³²⁴ Reid and his bank of tank hunters crept through the darkness to the German guns which were protected by a halftrack load of German infantry. Reid himself scored a hit on each of the German guns although he was wounded twice by German's close enough to throw hand grenades, while doing so. He refused to be evacuated however, and continued to direct the defence of the hilltop.³²⁵

Isolated pockets of Germans continued to probe and snipe until 0600, 1 September when the position was finally reported quiet.³²⁶ The Canadians had held on to this precious piece of ground but not without cost. Two Strathcona's had been killed and another sixteen wounded, almost all from "B" squadron and including the Squadron commander, Major Milroy, the battle captain and three of the five troop leaders.³²⁷ The Perths lost another 64 men over the course of 31 August and the during the night battle bringing their total number of casualties in the Gothic Line to 105 all ranks including the commanding officer and six platoon commanders.³²⁸

³²⁴ After Action Report, Lt-Col. McAvity. PIAT, or Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank, is the British equivalent to the bazooka. It fired a large shaped charge that had to be delivered from only a few metres away to be effective.

³²⁵ W.D. Perth Regt; W.D. 11 CIB, 1 Sep 1944. Lt-Col. Reid was awarded the DSO for his actions.

³²⁶ W.D. 11 CIB, 1 Sep 1944.

³²⁷ McAvity, Strathcona p. 124.

³²⁸ Field Returns, W.D. Perth Regt. 2 Sep 1944.

As the sun exposed the battlefield the defenders of Hill 204 counted 40 enemy dead on the slopes, in addition to the 25 prisoners they had captured.³²⁹ An unusually large portion of the attackers had carried two types of German hand held anti-tank rocket launchers known as "Faustpatrone" and "Ofenrohr". In fact, the first German platoon to rush the position had no small arms at all and carried only the launchers and grenades.³³⁰ The faustpatrone, also known as the "Panzerfaust", was a one man weapon capable of reaching out only 30 metres. The ofenrohr or "Panzershreck", a copy of the American bazooka, operated with a two man crew and could only fire out to 120 metres.³³¹ Obviously the Germans had expected to infiltrate among the tanks. This discovery prompted the Corps Historical Officer, Captain L.A. Wrinch, to speculate the Germans did not see the Perths reach point 204 in the darkness and that their counter-attack force expected to find only tanks on the hilltop.³³² Whatever the German paratroopers expected to find or hoped to do, the Canadians stopped them cold.

During the night, the Canadian left was expanded by the Cape Breton Highlanders and the VIII New Brunswick Hussars. This operation had been stalled in the late afternoon by the false counter-attack alarm. But by 1730 on 31 August, the Capers were

³²⁹ W.D. Perth Regt; LSH; Corps Int Sum #99, 1 Sep 1944.

³³⁰ After-Action Report, W.D. 5 CAB, 31 Aug 1944.

³³¹ U.S. War Dept., Handbook on German Military Forces (Baton Rouge: 1990) pp. 317-318.

³³² Bi-monthly Summaries of Operations of I Canadian Corps by Capt. Wrinch, Hist Offr 31 Aug-31 Dec, 1944.

back on the move with "B" squadron of the New Brunswicks accompanying them.³³³ Not long after starting their march, the battalion had to hold up and dig in again and wait for their heavy weapons platoons and an attached M-10 troop which were tied up in traffic congestion in the build-up area on the north side of the river near Montecchio.³³⁴ The Royal Canadian Engineers of 5 Division were working round the clock to lift mines near the main crossing area and to build a 40 foot Bailey Bridge at Montelabbate. The German gunners were making these tasks very difficult by pounding the area with steady shellfire which increased at night when the threat of Desert Air Force fighter bombers flying counter-battery missions diminished.³³⁵

While German shellfire delayed the engineers and the Cape Breton support troops, it failed to stop them, and some time before midnight, Lt-Col. Somerville's force was concentrated around the twin hills, 1200 metres northwest of Hill 120. Somerville requested that his battle group be allowed to hold fast, get some rest and hit the objective in the morning. Brigadier Johnston informed him that was out of the question and that the Highlanders were to push on and take Mt. Marrone as soon as possible.³³⁶ Johnston understood, that in order to take advantage of the enemy

³³³ W.D. CBH, 31 Aug 1944.

³³⁴ W.D. 11 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

³³⁵ W.D. Commander Corps Royal Engineers, 31 Aug; Report On Air Operations, 24 Aug- 22 Sep 1944, HQ I Cdn Cps.

³³⁶ Ops Log, W.D. 11 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

confusion, his units would have to be ready to strike hard again in the morning to push the Germans off of the remainder of the Tomba Di Pesaro feature. His intention was to take Mt Marrone that night so it could serve as a firm base for the fighting Toronto Irishmen to push into the town of Tomba Di Pesaro on 1 September.³³⁷ The town itself, and its accompanying height, Mont Peloso, were the next objectives of 5th Division. Brig. Johnston made it clear to Lt-Col. Somerville that no matter how tired his men were or how many snipers were lurking in the darkness, the Cape Breton Highlanders would hold the top of the Mont Marrone when the sun rose. Johnston was no doubt inspired to push that much harder given that General Hoffmeister spent most of the day at 11 Brigades tactical headquarters observing the battle.³³⁸ General Hoffmeister's confidence and professionalism was contagious and his mere presence was often a contributing factor in the achievements of his soldiers.³³⁹ The night attack gamble paid off as the Cape Bretoners and the two Hussar squadrons secured Mt. Marrone after winking out a few snipers. Their firm base was established by 0600 on the first day of September, 1944.

31 August had been a great day for I Canadian Corps, but the next two days were to bring much greater acclaim as the British

³³⁷ W.D. 11 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

³³⁸ Ops Log; Appreciation by Brig Johnston, W.D. 11 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

³³⁹ Hoffmeister, more than any other Canadian general officer, gave much thought to the problems of leadership. He constantly sought new ways to motivate men at all levels of command. Granatstein, Generals pp. 194-199.

official history notes.

1st and 2nd September were proud days for I Canadian Corps. In spite of fatigue in the dust laden atmosphere and stifling heat which enveloped the battlefield in the first days of September, morale was unquestionably high as every man sensed that he was writing an important page in Canadian History.³⁴⁰

The British and Canadian official histories are quite correct in pointing out that the two Canadian divisions accomplished much on 1 September, but the official accounts do not emphasize that the bitter and confused fighting of 31 August made the large gains of the next day possible.

The capacity for General Richard Heidrich's 1st Parachute Division to halt the Canadian advance in the depth positions of the Gothic Line had been substantially reduced by the loss of Hill 204. It blocked observation of the Foglia Valley from the higher ground to the north. The steep peak also facilitated the buildup of Canadian combat power for the next phase of battle, in the relative safety of its reverse slope.

Even with the loss of 204, the Germans were not yet ready to abandon Green Line I. Heidrich's paratroopers still commanded all routes to the north from their strong defences on Mont Peloso and Monteluro. Also, the Germans also had yet to commit their sizable divisional reserve to the battle. The taking and holding of Hill 204 set the stage for the defeat of the Canadian nemesis in Italy, but the battle with 1st Parachute Division was not yet over. Both Canadian divisions would have to drive hard on 1 September to

³⁴⁰ Jackson, Mediterranean p. 246.

follow through the dramatic success of the day before.

* * *

Close examination of the heavy fighting that developed across the Canadian front on 1 September, reveals the German perception of events that had transpired in the previous 36 hours, and of what they still believed possible. General Herr and his staff at LXXVI Panzer Corps' headquarters apparently still clung to the notion that strong action could stabilize the front in the depth positions of the Gothic Line. Indeed, captured communications and reports for 31 August and for much of 1 September indicate that the Germans believed that the timely arrival of 26th Panzer Division had contained Eighth Army's surprise offensive.³⁴¹

1st Parachute Division's left wing, manning the powerful fortifications around Pesaro, had still not been threatened and reported only patrolling activity on the part of II Polish Corps.³⁴² On the German right, the British V Corps had initially made significant progress, but by the night of 31 August the German defenders were regaining their balance. 71st Infantry Division, reinforced by elements of 26th Panzer, slipped back onto the high ground around Mondaino during the night, forcing the British to retake the heights, consequently foiling Keightley's plan for a

³⁴¹ Hist Sect Rpt #27, pp. 35-36.

³⁴² Hist Sect Rpt #27, pp. 36-38.

renewal of his advance on 1 September.³⁴³ The gap created by the Canadian thrust around Tomba Di Pesaro gave cause for concern, but with 1st Parachute Division still in good shape, the situation did not appear desperate. General Herr's orders for 1 September were a mirror of what 4th Parachute Regiment had tried alone the night before. Heidrich's paratroopers were to halt the Canadians and restore communications with 26th Panzer Division.³⁴⁴

The German plan to stop the Canadian advance appears to hinge on two elements. In keeping with standard Wehrmacht defensive procedure, the most critical element involved a counter-attack on the enemy centre of gravity.³⁴⁵ The remnants of 4th Parachute Regiment were to re-organize for another onslaught on Hill 204, which was obviously the principle Canadian axis of advance. This time the Germans intended to attack in strength and avoid the mistakes of the night before. 4 Para planned a set-piece assault supported by mortars, nebelwerfers, self-propelled guns and even LXXVI Panzer Corps' medium artillery.³⁴⁶ The two battalions of

³⁴³ Jackson, Mediterranean pp. 249-250.

³⁴⁴ Pretzell Rpt, p. 13.

³⁴⁵ "The Germans prefer heavy concentrations of fire and powerful, co-ordinated counterattacks by mobile reserves of all arms.....the main effort being made opposite the point where the enemy is making his main attack." U.S. War Department, Handbook p. 233.

³⁴⁶ Intelligence reports from the Counter-Battery Office at I Cdn Corps reports that enemy heavy guns and nebelwerfers engaged Hill 204 on 1 September and were subsequently fired on by the Canadian medium artillery. Canadians on Hill 204 report heavy concentrations of all types of fire on that day as well. Counter Battery Intelligence Report #8, W.D. 1st Cdn AGRA; W.D. 4PLDG, W.D. LSH, 1 Sep, 1944.

that regiment had been notably weakened in the fighting of the previous day and would thus be reinforced with the divisional reserve consisting of the Parachute Engineer and Machinegun Battalions.³⁴⁷

The second element of the German plan called for the vigorous defence of Hill 131, in front of 1st Canadian Division. If Hill 204 could be recaptured and 131 held, then something of a frontline would be re-established in the LXXVI Corps' centre. Hill 131 would serve as an anchor connecting the paratroopers opposing the Canadians with those defending Pesaro. Hills 204 and 131 could also serve as a firm shoulder behind which the Pesaro garrison could withdraw if necessary.³⁴⁸ The Canadians had other ideas about where the frontline would be by the end of 1 September.

I Canadian Corps Operations Instruction 26, issued on the afternoon of 31 August, directs both Canadian divisions to exploit the gains made on that day by taking the rest of the high ground immediately in front of them, and then to drive down into the coastal plain, cutting off the left wing of the German Parachute Division in Pesaro. Hoffmeister's men were to take Mont Peloso and Tomba Di Pesaro before sweeping down from the hills to San Giovanni just south of the Conca. Vokes' infantry with Brig. Dawnay's tanks were to take Monteluro in conjunction with a Polish Corps attack on the right, and then drive to Gradara on the coastal plain. With

³⁴⁷ This information comes from the identification of bodies and interrogation of prisoners after the fighting ended on 1 Sep. Intelligence Summary, W.D. PLF, 2 Sep 1944.

³⁴⁸ Pretzell Rpt, p. 13.

both Canadian Divisions on the flats, the next step would be to cut the coastal highway as well as secure crossings over the Conca in preparation for the drive to Rimini.³⁴⁹

In preparation for the 1st Canadian Division's thrust to Monteluro, General Vokes' sought to firm up his right flank in the area that 3 Canadian Brigade had been repelled on 30 and 31 August.³⁵⁰ If the division's drive to the coast was to be sustained, then the main road running from Borgo St. Maria to Monteluro must be secured, as well as the nearby river crossings. The road and the crossings were commanded by the village of Borgo St. Maria and Hill 131, 1000 metres to the north.

The mission of capturing these two commanding points was given to Lt-Col. J.V. Allard's Royal 22e Regiment of 3 Canadian Infantry Brigade. Brig. Paul Bernatchez explained to Allard that resistance would be light, especially since the Seaforths were operating well to the north, at the edge of Pozzo Alto, and intended to take that village at dawn on 1 September.³⁵¹ The French Canadians had no idea that they were marching towards the critical hinge in the German defences. Far from being a mopping up operation to pave the way for 21 Tank Brigade to break out of the Gothic Line, the "Vandoo" attack on Hill 131 would be a bloody continuation of the break in battle, and the first step in the defeat of the German 1st Parachute Division.

³⁴⁹ Op Instr # 26, W.D. I Cdn Corps, 31 Aug 1944.

³⁵⁰ W.D. 3 CIB, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁵¹ W.D. 3 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

On 31 August, Lt-Col. Allard was ordered place two of his companies under command of the Royal Canadian Dragoons in preparation for the breakout. To reinforce the "Vandoos" for the attack on Hill 131, Allard was given a company of the Carleton and York Regiment from southern New Brunswick. No tanks would assist the French Canadians, although the sappers of 4 Field Engineer Company would assist in clearing mines and obstacles on the approach to the objective.³⁵²

The engineers finished lifting mines by 0415 on the morning of the 1st, in time for three companies of the Royal 22e Regiment to pass through the minefield without a casualty on their way to take Borgo St. Maria and then Hill 131. In addition to believing that enemy opposition would be light, the Quebecois also hoped for help from the Polish Corps' 3 Carpathian Division which was supposed to attack up the spur that ran parallel to the Hill 131 spur.³⁵³

The "Vandoos" moved first to Hill 109 which had been cleared the day before by the Seaforths. Captain Y. Dube, commanding "B" company, was unaware that the Seaforths had left a platoon on the hill so before his point section could identify the soldiers defending the position as friendly they had thrown a grenade and injured one of the Highlanders.³⁵⁴ From there "B" company moved into the village from the rear to the surprise of the defenders who

³⁵² W.D. 3 CIB, 31 Aug 1944.

³⁵³ W.D. 1 CID, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁵⁴ W.D. SeafHofC, 1 Sep 1944.

quickly made their retreat along the lateral road to the east.³⁵⁵

Brigadier Bernatchez's assumed that his infantry would face little opposition, but while the German Paratroopers had given up the forward positions around Borgo St. Maria without a fight, they were not going to let go of Hill 131. The defences on this hill were among the strongest of the Gothic Line, consisting of deep bombproof shelters and concrete machine-gun positions. On the Canadian right, the Polish Corps, tired from its long bitter pursuit of the German Army all the way from Ancona, was still restricting itself, on the morning of 1 September, to patrolling.³⁵⁶ This meant that 1 Para still held the Gothic Line along the Foglia River in the Polish sector. To protect the flank of the paratroopers in front of the Poles from being turned, Hill 131 would have to be held at all costs.

"D" company of the Vandoos, first reported that it was running into difficulty around 0630 when it came under fire from an enemy machinegun post in a fortified house on the forward slope of Hill 131. This was quickly silenced after the attached Forward Observation Officer, Captain W.H. Howarth, brought a salvo of 25 pounder shells down which smashed the house to rubble.³⁵⁷ The "mop-up" job seemed to be progressing smoothly as the Vandoos slipped around to the south of the crest.

³⁵⁵ After Action Report, "B" Company, R22eR, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁵⁶ W.D. 1 CID, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁵⁷ W.D. R22eR, 1 Sep 1944.

German machine-gunners, well protected in their concrete pillboxes, held their fire until "D" company was almost on top of Hill 131. At 0715 from only a few hundred metres away, a number of fast firing MG 42 medium machine-guns cut swaths in the Vandoo ranks. They tried several times to rush the Germans head on but each time machinegun fire from the pillboxes and other supporting positions on the crest prevented any advance. Attempts to push platoons around the flanks were also stopped cold.³⁵⁸

"D" company took whatever cover was available and poured fire into the bunkers while they recovered their dead and brought their wounded to safety. These events developed at a rather awkward time as Lt-Col. Allard was just in the process of moving his Tactical Headquarters and his reserve company up to Borgo St. Maria. Captain Dube's company was in no position to help either. Dube had pushed his men 700 metres east on the lateral road and had been pinned down by the fire of two more concrete protected, machinegun posts on the lower slopes of Hill 131. Thus it would take time to respond to "D" company's frantic calls for ammunition and reinforcements.

Capt. Howarth did a commendable job of directing the Canadian artillery fire onto the pillboxes only 100 metres away from the riflemen. The company commander had his soldiers dig slit trenches in preparation for the "friendly" artillery stonk.³⁵⁹ Howarth repeatedly exposed himself to adjust the gunners directly onto the

³⁵⁸ After Action Report, "D" Company, R22eR, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁵⁹ After Action Report "D" coy R22eR, 1 Sep 1944.

target, until he was cut down by a burst of machinegun fire. Unfortunately, the bombardment failed to have the desired effect on the thick concrete bunkers.³⁶⁰ Even the Cabrank fighter bombers were called in to help, although they could not drop their ordnance very close to the target for fear of hitting the Vandoos.³⁶¹

While trying to extract his company and move them north to support the "D" company, Capt. Dube was severely wounded. The Battalion Intelligence Officer, Captain J.H.C. Simard, was ordered up to take over but all this took time.³⁶² After two hours, both forward companies were still no further ahead. "D" company was the worst off with their numbers of dead and wounded climbing fast and their ammunition almost exhausted.

One or two tanks could have made the difference as the German Paratroopers did not appear to have any anti-armour weapons on the position. No tanks were available though as all the Canadian and British armour was being concentrated for the breakout battle developing on the left. The only armour in the vicinity were the wheeled armoured cars of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, but they were unable to climb the steep road embankment to reach "D" company.³⁶³

Lt-Col. Allard committed his reserve to try to link up his separated forward units. "C" company of the Carleton and York Regiment moved up in between the two Vandoos companies and cleaned

³⁶⁰ W.D. R22eR, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁶¹ W.D. R22eR, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁶² After Action Report, "B" Coy R22eR, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁶³ After Action Report, "D" Coy R22eR, 1 Sep 1944.

out two fortified houses east of "D" company. This took some of the pressure off "B" company but they were still taking heavy fire from the two pillboxes on the forward slope. Allard's troops still could not get any closer to the main position on top of the hill, at least not without some kind of mobile armoured machine-gun.

Shortly after noon, the enterprising French Canadians came up with a solution. While the RCD armoured cars could not get up the steep bank north of Borgo St. Maria, the tracked Bren Carriers from the Vandoos Carrier Platoon could just make it after the sappers of 4 Field Company blew a gap in it. Four carriers, each armed with a Vickers Medium Machinegun, drove up to the "D" company lines by 1400. From this point the action developed swiftly.

The Vandoos bombarded the hilltop with smoke bombs from their two-inch mortars, covering the approach of the "armour". The Carriers drove to within a few feet of the firing slits of the pillboxes and poured .303 fire inside. The riflemen followed up quickly clearing the paratroopers out with grenades, tommyguns, boots and bayonets. Unlike many of the other paratroopers encountered in the Gothic Line, the "Fallshirmjager" on Hill 131 fought to the end. After the brief but bitter attack was finished, half an hour after it started, only seven parachutists were taken prisoner.³⁶⁴

The Royal 22e Regiment now dominated the battlefield from this height, but they still had plenty of work ahead of them in order to consolidate the prize and mop up the pillboxes still holding up "B"

³⁶⁴ After Action Report, "D" Coy R22eR, 1 Sep 1944.

company further down the slope.³⁶⁵ The paratroopers were unwilling to give up the fight in this sector. In addition to forcing the French Canadians to fight for every minor position around Hill 131, the Germans also moved a Pzkw IV into the area in the late afternoon to, in a desperate attempt to hold the shoulder of the Canadian breach in the Gothic Line.³⁶⁶

To the immediate left of the Vandoos, the gap in the German line was being widened further. At first light, a squadron of 145th RAC tanks moved up to the outskirts of Pozzo Alto where "D" company of the Seaforth Highlanders had been since the evening before. With the tanks smashing houses and laying down cover fire with their machineguns, the Seaforths worked their way through the streets. The Vancouver unit's war diary reports that the fighting was "close" and that skillful use of infantry weapons like the Bren light machinegun and the PIAT for blowing holes in walls were the key to success.³⁶⁷

By 0900 the reserve companies had arrived to consolidate the town and Major "Ollie" Mace's "B" company, supported by "A" Squadron, 145 RAC moved to the next Seaforth objective; Hill 119 1500 metres to the northeast. They reported it snug within an hour. With Hill 119 in Canadian hands, the German positions near

³⁶⁵ W.D. R22eR, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁶⁶ W.D. R22eR, 1 Sep 1944. A PanzerKampfwagen IV is the a medium tank roughly equivalent in size to the Sherman. By 1944, Pzkw IV's were armed with a 75mm high velocity gun. This vehicle formed the bulk of German tank strength in Italy.

³⁶⁷ W.D. SeafHofC, 1 Sep 1944.

Hill 131 were isolated. Just like the battle of Hill 120 the day before, the combination of a deep armoured hook to cut off the enemy position coupled with pressure on the front, brought about the destruction of a well entrenched enemy force.

The collapse of effective German resistance on the right shoulder of the Canadian breach at Hill 131 frustrated one key element of 1st Parachute Division's plan for holding Green Line I. All other hopes for the German restoration of the line rested on the battlegroup that was formed to re-capture Hill 204. With 5th Canadian Armoured Division also preparing to attack, the final climactic battle for the Gothic Line was in the offing.

General Hoffmeister's men spent the morning of 1 September consolidating base areas, bringing up fresh formations and sorting out the chaos of the night before. On the left flank the Irish Regiment of Canada made its way toward the Cape Breton firm base at Mont Marrone. Their part of the 11 Brigade plan was to capture Tomba Di Pesaro.³⁶⁸

The state of the German defence in this area was one of total disarray. As previously indicated, the infantry responsible for defending the region, II/67 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, had been destroyed. All that remained were a few dozen men of 8 company, defending two strongpoints north of Hill 120, bypassed by the Cape Bretoners during their night march to Mont Marrone. These Germans were apparently aware of their plight, for they had reported to

³⁶⁸ After Action Report, W.D. 11 CIB, 1 Sep 1944.

higher headquarters that they were cut off.³⁶⁹

The isolated grenadiers, occupying two fortified houses, opened fire on the Irish as they marched unsuspectingly up to the Cape Breton lines. This resulted in a slight delay as the Irish and their supporting "horses" were forced to mop these positions. It took two hours for the Irish to finish this task and get moving again. After capturing the last 28 members of II/67 PG, there were virtually no German infantry left south of Tomba Di Pesaro.³⁷⁰

While the threat from German infantry was now minimized, there were still plenty of German anti-tank guns and a few Panther tanks lurking about on the Canadian left. In the confusion of 31 August though, all German efforts to co-ordinate an effective anti-armour defence of the Mont Marrone area had failed. For the most part the Germans armour and anti-tank artillery scattered around the spurs southwest of Tomba di Pesaro acted on their own and were thus destroyed one by one.

While Lt-Col Clark's Irish and the accompanying Sherman tanks of "C" Squadron of the New Brunswick Hussars set out for their concentration area behind Mont Marrone, the Hussars' "B" squadron, the Cape Bretoners and the attached anti-tank gunners of "B" troop, 98 (Bruce) Anti-Tank Battery worked at mopping up around Marrone.³⁷¹ Major Kierstead's Hussars employed their Shermans very aggressively.

³⁶⁹ Operations Log, W.D. I Cdn Corps, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁷⁰ Ops Log, W.D. 11 CIB, IRC, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁷¹ W.D. VIII NBH, 4 AT Regt RCA, 1 Sep 1944.

The squadron positioned a troop 1000 metres to the northwest at Casa Mirra, along with a small Highlander detachment. The little force, commanded by the squadron Battle Captain, R.S. McLeod, first had to take on a Panther tank and a small band of enemy infantry around the farm. McLeod's team mopped up the farm and took up fire positions shortly before noon, at which point they began a semi-indirect shoot on the reverse slope leading down from Tomba Di Pesaro.

This threat to the Parachute flank just prior to the launching of their counter-attack on Hill 204 drew the fire of several anti-tank and assault guns in the village. At least three of these were picked off, either by Capt. McLeod's gunners or air and artillery strikes.³⁷² The destruction of those guns would make the Irish attack go much more smoothly in the late afternoon.

Each Sherman carried only 97 rounds of 75mm ammunition, and after two hours of sustained firing, the troop at Casa Mirra had exhausted its supply. Major Kierstead and Capt McLeod solved this problem by exchanging troops. The Bruce Battery's M-10's could defend Mont Marrone if need be, so rather than waiting passively for the Irish to arrive, the Hussars continued to make use of the good fire position at the farm to harass the Germans.

Three troops from Kierstead's squadron rotated through the farm in this fashion pumping hundreds of high explosive and armour piercing shells into the German positions. At one point in the

³⁷² Operations Log, 5 CAD; After Action Report, "B" Sqn, VIII NBH, 1 Sep 1944.

afternoon, the Germans tried to put a stop to this firing by sending out a section of riflemen to attack the farm. This party was spotted and engaged by the Hussars machineguns as one troop was in the process of spelling another off.³⁷³

In addition to the three German armoured vehicles and two towed guns knocked out by the New Brunswicks on 31 August, another two Panthers and three 75mm STUG III assault guns were destroyed along with a half dozen or so towed anti-tank guns on 1 September. Some of this German equipment was destroyed by direct fire from the Shermans and the M-10's, while artillery fire, directed by the Hussars, finished off the rest.³⁷⁴ If the large number of German heavy weapons destroyed on the Canadian left had been better coordinated and protected by infantry, they would most definitely have presented a difficult obstacle to the Canadians. Had the initial Canadian attack on the Gothic Line been delivered any later than it was, it is conceivable that the Germans would have had time to organize those scattered resources into a powerful defence, even with the loss of II/67 Panzer Grenadier Regiment.

While 11 Brigade's left wing closed in on the approaches to Tomba Di Pesaro from the south west, the main act was about to played out on the forward slopes of Hill 204. Brig. Johnston originally planned for the Perth Regiment and Lord Strathcona's

³⁷³ After Action Report, "B" Sqn VIII NBH, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁷⁴ After Action Report, 5 CAB; Operations Log, 5 CAD, 1 Sep 1944. The Hussars observed and directed several Mike and Uncle targets from their forward positions on the left over the two days.

Horse to attack Monte Peloso at dawn, after 4th Princess Louise's Dragoon Guards relieved Reid's men on Hill 204. Given what the Perths had been through in the last 48 hours though, to ask them to go on would be far beyond ruthless. Johnston ordered the Guards to put in the attack instead, in spite of the fact that it would be their first action as an infantry battalion.³⁷⁵

Lt-Col. W.W.G. Darling and his command group reached the Perth/Strathcona lines by 0800. Immediately he set out on a reconnaissance with an artillery observer and Major Jack Smith commanding "C" squadron of the Strathconas, which would move with Darling's men in close support. When Darling returned, all of the Guards' subunits, still known as squadrons and troops from their armoured recce days, had arrived on the reverse slope of Hill 204. As Darling's men covered the last few hundred metres up to their forming up area, they were caught in the open by a heavy concentration of German shells. This was just an introduction to what the German gunners had in store for them.³⁷⁶

Throughout the morning of 1 September the Canadians on Hill 204 were pounded by some of the most intense shelling that any of them had yet encountered in Italy.³⁷⁷ To the soldier's hugging the bottom of their slit trenches around "Dragoon Hill" it must have seemed as though every heavy gun in the German Army was shooting at

³⁷⁵ After Action Report, 11 CIB, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁷⁶ W.D. 4PLDG, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁷⁷ The 1st Div CRA reports that this was the heaviest shelling experienced in the entire campaign. After Action Report, W.D. RCA 1 CID, 1 Sep 1944.

them. This perception would not be far from the truth as Hill 204 was the principle target for all the guns and mortars on LXXVI Panzer Corps' left wing, in preparation for the coming attack.³⁷⁸

The savage bombardment caused a number of problems for the Dragoon Guards and the Strathconas as they attempted to prepare their assault. To begin with, on returning from the squadron leaders' recce, the command group was caught by a salvo of mortar bombs and nebelwerfer rockets, killing among others, the officer commanding "B" squadron.³⁷⁹ A short time later, Captain D.J. Burke's "A" squadron, which was to be one of the two leading sub-units, was caught in the open by a German artillery strike as it moved to the startline. The shelling started several grass fires and scored three direct hits on tanks. Three officers and 30 soldiers were dead or dying with another 100 or so "off their rockers" as the ground all around them erupted in smoke and fire.³⁸⁰

The German shell and mortar fire pounding the Canadian defenses on Hill 204 not only delayed the Canadian attack, it also

³⁷⁸ German defensive doctrine dictates that "When part of a battle position is lost, the area is taken under artillery fire to annihilate enemy forces which have penetrated it." This fire is followed by the main counter-attack. U.S. War Dept. Handbook pp. 233-234.

³⁷⁹ W.D. 4th Princess Louise's Dragoon Guards, 1 Sep 1944. Nebelwerfers are a German six-barreled, towed rocket/mortar system. They were known to Allied soldiers as Moaning Minnies due to the whining sound emitted as the projectiles approached their target.

³⁸⁰ W.D. 4PLDG, 1 Sep 1944.

covered the approach of elements of four German battalions massing for an assault to re-take the peak.³⁸¹ Some of the shelling was coming from self-propelled guns, two kilometres north at Monteluro. This fire was spotted by the air OP who promptly brought the 4.5 inch guns of 2 Canadian Medium Regiment into action to silence them. The 4.5's also took on the enemy heavy guns that had been shelling Hill 204 after they too were located by the air observer.³⁸²

The Guards suffered from a shortage of fully trained infantry officers and NCO's. After the death of one experienced infantry "squadron" commander and two troop leaders on this day and another the day before, the problem was even more acute. In addition, approximately one third of the riflemen in the battalion were not old recce salts but brand new replacements, taken on over the summer and with no experience of any kind.³⁸³ The Guards had plenty of spirit and quite of bit of seasoning from their recce days in conducting small dismounted attacks on strongpoints, but pulling off a full scale battalion attack with tanks was something very different.³⁸⁴ Nevertheless, as Canadian counter-battery fire began to reduce the German shelling, the time had come for the 4th Princess Louise's Dragoon Guards to attack.

³⁸¹ Intelligence Summary, W.D. PLF, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁸² W.D. 2 Cdn Med Regt, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁸³ W.D. 4PLDG, 1 Sep 1944. Major K.E. Richardson, OC "A" Squadron had been killed the day before by mortar fire.

³⁸⁴ After Action Report by Lt-Col Darling, W.D. 4PLDG, 1 Sep 1944.

"B" squadron, now under Lt. P.M. Moore and "C" squadron crossed their startline on the west side of 204 just after 1300. The 75mm guns of the Strathconas' Shermans pumped shells onto the objective and directly in front of the infantry. The tanks' machineguns also sprayed the hedges and bushes on the front and flanks. Almost immediately, the lead sections came under sniper fire from paratroopers that had been working their way forward to support the German attack. After advancing a few hundred metres into the draw between the hills, heavy small arms fire broke all over the slopes.³⁸⁵ The lead sections had advanced into the main German forming up area.

The Guards' war diary records that, "The inexperienced troops tended to go to ground under the withering fire and required a great deal of leading on the part of the officers."³⁸⁶ 1 and 2 Troops of Major Smith's Shermans followed the first wave of infantry, and it was their aggressive fire and movement that carried the green but spirited Guardsmen forward. The bow machineguns on the Shermans sprayed wheat stooks and hedges while the main guns pounded nearby farm houses and barns into rubble. The balance of Smith's squadron remained on 204, laying down covering fire until the next wave of two Guards squadrons started forward.³⁸⁷

Dozens of German paratroopers were mowed down in exposed

³⁸⁵ W.D. 4PLDG, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁸⁶ After Action Report, 4 PLDG, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁸⁷ After Action Report, "C" Sqn, LSH 1 Sep 1944.

positions behind low stone walls and hedges where they had been waiting to launch their own attack. The Germans were giving it back as good as they got though and Canadian casualties began to mount alarmingly after the first hour of battle.³⁸⁸ The first phase of this action occurred only 300 metres away from the startline giving some indication of how close the Germans were to launching their own assault.³⁸⁹ Darling's men managed to clear the paratroopers out of their forming up area, just behind a small knoll, capturing 50 of them and killing dozens more.

After defeating the German assault element, the next problem for the Canadians came from a farm on the left flank. Machinegun and light mortar fire poured from the casa at an unusually high rate, cutting down dozens of reconnaissance soldiers from the first wave. The ranks of the leading two squadrons had been badly thinned out and were unable to continue. The second wave of "A" squadron on the left and "D" on the right, would have to deal with the casa.³⁹⁰ 3 troop and the HQ group of the Strathcona squadron followed this second wave up with 4 troop still hanging back laying down covering fire. Also traveling with the second wave, were two Sherman tanks manned by officers of the Royal Canadian Artillery who directed concentrations of field and medium gunfire around the objective and the various trouble spots along the way.³⁹¹ Between the two gunner

³⁸⁸ W.D. 4PLDG, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁸⁹ Ops Log, 11 CIB, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁹⁰ W.D. 4 PLDG, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁹¹ After Action Report, "C" sqn LSH, 1 Sep 1944.

officers, 48 25-pounder field guns of 11th and 17th Field Regiments were at their disposal to shoot the Guards onto Peloso.³⁹²

Capt. Burke, who had taken over "A" squadron only the day before, after Major Richardson's death, led his men along with several tanks around to the left to attack the casa. In a daring, but costly assault, Burke's squadron charged into the barnyard and wiped out the paratroopers defending it. In addition to the dead Germans found when the Guards overran the farm, they also discovered a large number of support weapons. Apparently this farm, with its good field of fire, facing the left front of Hill 204, was to be the firebase for the German attack. The bulk of the support weapons had thus been concentrated here, including two light mortars, five ofenrohrrs and some two dozen MG 42 medium machineguns.³⁹³ Only eight Canadians were left standing with Burke when resistance from the Casa ended. They were soon joined by Lt-Col. Darling who had come up to take personal control of the battle.

The small band decided to wait until "D" squadron could mop up several houses on the right, before advancing any further. The Strathcona's 4 troop, under Lt. W.J. Brown had been ordered to bound up on the right. Together with a party of Guardsmen led by Major Salter, two machinegun posts on the eastern slopes of Mont Peloso were silenced by the tanks. Brown's four 75mm guns made short work of the German strongpoints.

³⁹² W.D. HQ RCA 5 CAD, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁹³ W.D. 4 PLDG; After Action Report, "C" Sqn LSH, 1 Sep 1944.

Now that both the right and left wings of the Canadian attack were roughly in line, Darling's much reduced combat team prepared for the final drive to the top of the hill. Captain Eagan, one of the artillery forward observers, remained with the leading troops, directing high explosive salvos onto the German positions. The 4PLDG war diary records that Eagan carried out his work dangerously close to the enemy and with no rearguard to his personal safety.³⁹⁴

The slope leading up to the peak of Mont Peloso was rather steep and had been recently plowed. In spite of these hazards, Lt. Brown assured Lt-Col. Darling that the ground was negotiable for his nimble Shermans. Darling instructed Lt Brown to drive half way up to the crest, under covering fire from the rest of the Strathcona squadron. When the tanks reached the halfway point, Darling's 40 remaining soldiers would rush past them, and storm the crest.

The plan came off without a hitch even though the Sherman drivers had a tough time churning through the loose soil in the fields. After stopping 100 metres from the objective, Brown's tanks laid waste to any structure within their range, with both their machineguns and main armament. The Guardsmen did not exactly "rush" up to the crest either, instead crawling on their hands and knees through the freshly turned and shell riddled soil. The sight of 40 dirty, sweaty, and very angry Canadians crawling forward with bayonets and grenades ready was enough to make the few remaining defenders left alive, beat a hasty retreat to a small copse of

³⁹⁴ W.D. 4PLDG, 1 Sep 1944.

woods behind the hill. The tiny force of infantry and armour reported their success at 1600, 1 September. To celebrate, Lt. Brown produced a bottle of whiskey from the turret of his Sherman and the small group of Canadians toasted the first successful infantry attack of the 4th Princess Louise's Dragoon Guards.³⁹⁵

With the loss of so many men and so much equipment around Mont Peloso and Mont Marrone, and their firm right shoulder at Hill 131 smashed, the back of the German defence was broken. The division was in a state of complete confusion, its headquarters having little clue as to the condition or even the location of many of its units.³⁹⁶ The Canadians were not about to ease the pressure on the pressure on the Germans and allow them to regain their balance. Little did they know that the paratroopers had not the forces nor the inclination to attempt to recover their balance. Nevertheless, fresh attacks were being teed up on both flanks while the Canadian Corps artillery and Desert Air Force Fighter Bombers worked pounded both Tomba Di Pesaro and Monteluro.

On Mont Marrone, the Irish Regiment of Canada with "C" squadron from the Hussars had passed through "B" squadron and the Caper Bretoners and pushed up towards Il Cassone, 700 metres up the road closer to Tomba Di Pesaro. That farm would be their startline.³⁹⁷ At 1830 the Irish were nearly ready to put in their attack. The only thing preventing them from moving was that their

³⁹⁵ W.D. 4PLDG, LSH, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁹⁶ Jackson, Mediterranean p. 243.

³⁹⁷ Ops Log, 5 CAD, 1 Sep 1944.

supporting armoured squadron was nearly out of fuel.³⁹⁸

With Major McEwen's tanks unable to accompany the Irish any further, Lt-Col. Clark called on the heavy mortars of the Princess Louise's Fusiliers to support the lead sections right into the village.³⁹⁹ Major Keirstead's squadron had been pulled off Marrone and replaced with a squadron of the Horse Guards, but it had to conserve ammunition as it was ordered by General Burns to exploit north with the Westminster Motor Regiment as soon as Tomba Di Pesaro was secure.⁴⁰⁰ Clark could expect to get plenty of fire support from the Strathcona's on Hill 204 and from the Guards on Peloso, but he still wanted more. With all the German strength encountered in the last two days one cannot fault Clark for bringing overwhelming firepower to bear before leading his men into a potential hornets nest.

The Fusiliers from Halifax gave Clark exactly what he wanted. The Fusiliers' 4.2 inch mortar platoons rained 400 bombs on the village in a space of ten minutes and raked it over with two medium machinegun platoons set up on Peloso with the Guards.⁴⁰¹ To this was added an Uncle mission by the divisional artillery.⁴⁰² Clark unleashed his wild Irishmen next, and into the smoke and fire they charged.

³⁹⁸ W.D. IRC, 1 Sep 1944.

³⁹⁹ Ops Log, 11 CIB, 1 Sep 1944.

⁴⁰⁰ Ops log, 1 Cdn Corps, 1 Sep 1944.

⁴⁰¹ W.D. PLF, 1 Sep 1944.

⁴⁰² W.D. HQ RCA 5 CAD, 1 Sep 1944.

With much of the rest of the division watching and holding their breath, a call came over the radio from the centre of Tomba Di Pesaro at 2022. For one thing, the village was now to be called "Bobby Clarkville". Also, as soon as it could be arranged, the regimental support echelon was to bring up a rum ration. A cheer went up. The only German captured in Bobby Clarkville was a terrified gunner from the Parachute Anti-Tank Battalion. He said that two companies of his battalion had arrived on 31 August. All he knew was that they no longer existed.⁴⁰³

With the success of the Toronto Irish in "Bobby Clarkville", offensive operations for the weary soldiers of 5 Canadian Armoured Division on this triumphant first day of September ceased. Standing patrols and listening posts were established, anti-tank guns brought up and slit trenches dug to protect against harassing German shellfire. It was time for the division to catch its breath and take some time to relish in the glory of its achievement. The Horse Guards and the Westminsterers would have to wait until dawn to cut into the German rear.

The last Canadian operations of 1 September 1944 were conducted by 1st Canadian Infantry Division and 21 British Tank Brigade. Like the anti-climactic Irish attack on Tomba di Pesaro, 1st Division's attack on Monteluro revealed how badly the destruction of 4 Para's battlegroup near Mont Peloso, and the loss of Hill 131 had crippled 1st Parachute Division. The Canadians expected Monteluro, the highest point on the Tomba Di Pesaro

⁴⁰³ Ops Log, 11 CIB, 1 Sep 1944.

feature, to be heavily defended, but the paratroopers had little combat power left to defend this naturally strong position.⁴⁰⁴

With 145th RAC and the Seaforths forming a firm base at Pozzo Alto and Casa Magi, Brigadiers Dawnay and Gibson planned to attack in stages. Lt-Col. Bell-Irving's Loyal Edmonton Regiment and 12th RTR would leapfrog companies and squadrons forward from Pozzo Alto to a farm 1000 metres east of the objective. Using the farm as a firebase, the force would wheel left and hit Monteluro from the flank. This attack was actually teed up in the afternoon but was postponed until 5 Division cleaned out the strong enemy presence on Peloso and Tomba Di Pesaro.⁴⁰⁵

The next stage of the plan consisted of the Princess Patricias and 48 RTR jumping off from Casa Magi and driving north to a key road junction northeast of Monteluro. The Royal Canadian Dragoons with their attached companies of the Royal 22e Regiment would follow hot on the heels of the Patricias to be ready to rush north to the coast, to cut the main road and seal in any German units not yet withdrawn from the city of Pesaro.⁴⁰⁶

In preparation for these attacks, Monteluro had received the heaviest concentrations of artillery fire in the Canadian sector. As soon as the area had come within range, three days ago, a harassing fire program was begun on Monteluro and Tomba Di Pesaro to add to the constant strafing and bombing by Desert Air Force

⁴⁰⁴ W.D. I Cdn Corps; 1 CID, 1 Sep 1944.

⁴⁰⁵ Ops Logs, 1 Cdn Corps, 2 CIB; W.D. 49 LER, 1 Sep 1944.

⁴⁰⁶ Ops Log, 1 Cdn Corps, 1 Sep 1944.

fighter bombers.⁴⁰⁷ This fire increased in tempo on 1 September as Gibson's riflemen and Dawnay's tankers worked their way closer, culminating in a detailed fire plan of linear and timed concentrations on the peak and reverse slopes by field, medium, and heavy 7.2 inch guns just prior to the final assault that evening.⁴⁰⁸

The Loyal Edmonton attack on Monteluro was a non-event. The lead elements did have a brief tussle as they reached the farm on the right of the objective from which the final attack was to be delivered. Among the other prisoners captured was the crew of an 88mm gun taken with their weapon still intact. The crew of a Panzertrum was also rounded up from one of these deadly devices by 12th RTR. The turret was apparently poorly situated and like the others encountered thus far, unprotected by infantry.⁴⁰⁹

Bell-Irving's "B" and "C" companies attacked towards Monteluro with a squadron of Lt-Col. H.H. van Straubenzee's Churchill tanks in close support. Sometime near 2100 the lead Loyal Eddy platoons entered the little village on the peak to find an elaborate system of trenches, dugouts and pillboxes all abandoned by the Germans. In a post-action interview with the Corps Historical Officer, Captain J.A. Dougan, commanding the lead rifle company, recalled that his men "walked onto the objective, took four prisoners and

⁴⁰⁷ W.D. 1 CID, 1 Sep 1944.

⁴⁰⁸ W.D. HQ RCA I Cdn Corps, 1 Sep 1944.

⁴⁰⁹ W.D. LER, 1 Sep 1944.

reorganized."⁴¹⁰

The relentless shelling and strafing of Monteluro paid off. The garrison, thinned out for the counter attack on Hill 204 earlier that day, likely retired to safer ground on the north side of the hill with the intention of returning to their positions as soon as the heavy shelling stopped. With the Loyal Eddys following the barrage so closely, the Germans had no time to scale the hill before the Canadians were on top. Monteluro's new occupants easily repelled a halfhearted counter-attack after which the survivors joined the rest of their division fleeing north into the darkness.⁴¹¹ By midnight the Princess Patricias and the Churchill's of 48th RTR were firm at the road junction to the northeast after having encountered no enemy. With 1 Parachute Division reeling from its bloody nose and the high ground now entirely in Canadian hands the pursuit could begin.

It had become obvious to the German Tenth Army commander, General von Vietinghoff, and his operations officer, Lt-Col. Pretzell, that by the evening of 1 September the opportunity to hold back Eighth Army on the south side of the Conca had passed.⁴¹² With this in mind, Vietinghoff ordered the withdrawal of 76 Panzer Corps to a line from Pisano in the west through Monteluro to Mont Castellaro in the east on the night of 1/2 September. This would

⁴¹⁰ Nicholson, Italy p. 522.

⁴¹¹ Ops Log, I Cdn Corps, 1 Sep 1944.

⁴¹² Col Runkel, 76 Pz Cps CoS communication with AOK10, 15:35, 31 Aug 1944, as sited in Jackson, Mediterranean p. 244.

be followed by a further withdrawal on the night of 2/3 September to Green Line II running from Gemmano to St. Clemente to Riccione.⁴¹³

Obviously the Canadians had already wrecked this plan punching through the notional first line at Monteluro even before it was to come into existence. On 2 September German rearguards fought desperately to hold back the charging Canadians with little success and by that evening elements of both Canadian Divisions were poised on the south bank of the Conca River. 1 Canadian Brigade, now rested after its tough battles during the approach to the Foglia, was thrust over the river that night with the Permanent Force Royal Canadian Regiment leading the way on the right⁴¹⁴, and the former anti-aircraft gunners of 12 Brigade's Lanark and Refrew Scottish on the left.⁴¹⁵

A combination of sacrificial rearguard actions at Gradara and Fanano and premature retreat had allowed the 1st and 3rd Regiments of the Parachute Division to escape across the Conca but in doing so 4 Para Regiment ceased to exist with well over 70% of its soldiers dead or in Canadian prisoner cages. The bulk of the Division's irreplaceable anti-tank and 88mm dual purpose anti-aircraft guns were also lost.⁴¹⁶

The Canadians continued its rapid advance for several more

⁴¹³ Pretzell Rpt, p. 15.

⁴¹⁴ W.D. 1 CID, 2 Sep 1944.

⁴¹⁵ W.D. 12 CIB, 2 Sep 1944.

⁴¹⁶ Hist Sec Rpt #27, p. 40.

days. By 5 September Green Line II was pierced and when the Corps finally had to halt the day after it was not because the Germans had outfought them but that the British on the left had not been able to keep up. The Germans had developed a strong artillery concentration protected by fresh infantry formations on Coriano ridge in V Corps area.

Until the British 1st Armoured Division could throw the Germans down off Coriano, the Canadian Flank and left rear would be exposed to the enemy's commanding observation and fire, which had a four mile sweep across the alternation of grain plot and vineyard from the ridge to the sea.⁴¹⁷

The great drive of I Canadian Corps to break the Gothic Line was over, and like the operations of the Corps' predecessors at Vimy Ridge the glory of its achievement was somewhat tarnished by flanking formations not keeping pace.

⁴¹⁷ Nicholson, Italy pp. 529-530.

Conclusion

The Canadian Corps that attacked across the Foglia River in August 1944 was one of the most effective military forces ever deployed by the western Allies. The performance of the Corps in the Gothic Line reflected a level of skill and professionalism that challenges the conventional view of the Canadian Army. While other studies of Canadian Army failure may point to shortcomings, this examination of the Canadian way of war demonstrates that those components of it that worked, worked very well.

Far from being an inflexible blunt instrument, I Canadian Corps developed a plan for attacking the Gothic Line that allowed for junior leaders to take initiative to exploit battlefield opportunities. The first opportunity was discovered by the Perth Regiment late on 30 August. Of four attacking battalions, only the Perths managed to secure a tiny toehold in the heights above the Foglia River.

Instead of reinforcing failed attempts to crack the Gothic Line on 31 August, the combat power of I Canadian Corps concentrated at the tiny Perth bridgehead. With the British Columbia Dragoons leading the way, 5th Canadian Armoured Division jammed a foot in the door of the German defenses, by capturing Hill 204. This single act determined the outcome of the battle in the Canadian sector. The presence of the "Mighty Maroon Machine" on Hill 204 threatened to turn the flank of the 1st German Parachute Division and trap it against the sea.

When the sun rose on 1 September, the Germans faced two options. They could abandon Green Line I and retire across the Conca River or they could mass their reserves and recapture Hill 204. LXXVI Panzer Corps conformed to German defensive doctrine, choosing the latter option and in doing so sealing the fate of the Canadian nemesis in Italy, 1st Parachute Division.

Had the Canadians hesitated to continue their advance on 1 September then the German effort may have succeeded, however, I Canadian Corps had no intention of pausing. On 1 September, powerful, all arms battlegroups from both Canadian divisions, seized their glowing opportunity to kick the door of the Gothic Line off its hinges. With the dominating Tomba Di Pesaro high feature in Canadian hands, and the soldiers of the Parachute reserve either dead or under Canadian guard, the remaining formations of the 1st Parachute Division had no choice but to retreat in disorder. Many of the members of 1st and 3rd Parachute Regiments never fired a shot from their well developed defenses around Pesaro before the order to withdraw was issued late on 1 September.

By massing its power at the weakest point of the German line, I Canadian Corps achieved local superiority and destroyed half of the Parachute division with the other half being powerless to intervene. The Canadian action to break the Gothic Line provides a classic example to the student of modern warfare of how to overcome fixed fortifications using weapons like speed and surprise in conjunction with massive firepower. Even the Germans viewed the

Canadian action as a model for measuring Allied offensive operational effectiveness.⁴¹⁸ Detailed examination of the Canadian attack on the Gothic Line reveals a number of attributes not generally accepted as being common characteristics of the Second World War Canadian Army. Most important of these, I Canadian Corps displayed a high standard of competent and aggressive junior leadership. In the confused fighting in the high ground north of the Foglia River, Canadian junior officers and non-commissioned officers ensured that their actions conformed to the principle goal of securing the Tomba Di Pesaro feature. This mission-oriented approach contrasted sharply with the German defensive effort which lacked co-ordination and direction.

Another significant, but unrecognized, Canadian characteristic that contributed to the defeat of 1st Parachute Division, was the skillful employment of all available weapons to accomplish a mission, especially those found in the infantry and armoured formations. This finding challenges the widely held assumption that Canadian tactics relied almost entirely on artillery. Hill 120, Pozzo Alto, Mont Peloso, and other Gothic Line actions demonstrate I Canadian Corps' highly integrated combined arms doctrine.

In the aftermath of the fighting, the Germans claim that the primary reason that Green Line I collapsed so quickly was because 26 Panzer Division did not have enough time to familiarize itself

⁴¹⁸ Pretzell Rpt, p. 37.

with its position before the enemy fell upon it.⁴¹⁹ The Germans suggest that the commitment of powerful all arms forces, including a large concentration of armour, to the "break-in" phase of the battle was another principle cause of Green Line I's destruction. The well timed decision to commit 5 Canadian Armoured Brigade to the battle paid off well.⁴²⁰ The German Army lost large numbers of irreplaceable men and machines as a consequence of the sudden collapse of their main line of resistance. The Canadians too paid dearly for their victory on the slopes of Tomba Di Pesaro, but the sacrifice of life during the three days of fighting in the Foglia Valley prevented much larger losses that would have resulted had the Canadians not driven forward so relentlessly.

The armoured battles that raged across the steep hills of the Tomba Di Pesaro area have shown that the question of Second World War tank performance must be reconsidered. The excellent cross country and climbing abilities of the Sherman tank played a decisive role in the Canadian victory in the Gothic Line. The difficult advance to Hill 204 and beyond could not have been made without the powerful and agile Shermans crossing ground that no other tank in the Italian theatre, Allied or German, could negotiate. The combination of this fast moving tank and highly trained crews who made superb use of the broken Italian countryside to compensate for the relatively thin Sherman armour, dramatically limited the advantages that German armoured vehicles possessed in

⁴¹⁹ Hist Sect Rpt #27, p. 37; Pretzell Rpt, pp. 27-29.

⁴²⁰ Hist Sect Rpt #27, p. 37.

gun power and armour protection.⁴²¹ Further study into other Italian campaign tank battles will have to be conducted before any final conclusions can be drawn but detailed examination of the Gothic Line battle indicates that the Sherman tank gave I Canadian Corps an important edge that ensured victory.

The role of the Allied Air Forces in the Gothic Line was a crucial, if not decisive, factor in the rapid Canadian penetration of the defenses. The destruction of the extensive minefields in the Foglia Valley by medium bombers just before the Canadians poured into the Gothic Line has been identified by the Germans as one of the principal reasons that Green Line I was overcome so quickly.⁴²² The difficulty encountered by the West Nova Scotia Regiment attacking across intact minefields provides some idea of how the attack may have gone had the bombers not hit their target.

The role of tactical airpower in the battle is much more difficult to assess. While roaming fighter-bombers doubtlessly hampered daylight movement of men and vehicles, no physical evidence was uncovered to indicate to what extent German operations were affected. It is equally difficult to determine how much damage was done to units deployed on the Tomba Di Pesaro feature.

In all cases where Cabrank fighter-bombers attacked enemy

⁴²¹ The German high command recognizes that the Sherman tank is superior to their own in the difficult terrain of Italy especially due to the excellent fire and movement tactics employed by the crews. Interview with Kesselring and Westphal. pp. 41-42.

⁴²² Hist Sect Rpt #27, p. 37; Pretzell Rpt, p. 37.

positions, large concentrations of artillery were also laid on the same targets. The commander of LXXVI Panzer Corps, General Herr, reported to Tenth Army that the combination of artillery and airpower limited the effectiveness of his defenses.⁴²³ It appears that the combination of aircraft strafing and artillery harassment worked well together in the Gothic Line, but no conclusive evidence has yet been discovered to confirm how substantial the tactical air contribution was.

The intangible, but potentially destructive enemy of battle exhaustion did not seriously weaken I Canadian Corps during its battle in the Gothic Line. Before launching Operation "Olive" the combination of rest, training and the infusion of fresh reinforcements to make up previous losses brought the Corps to a high standard of mental strength. Morale had also been lifted by the impression among the soldiers that this operation was to be the final offensive in Italy.

On a few occasions, such as the Dragoon Guards attack on Mont Peloso, heavy shelling sharply affected morale, but this was more a factor of inexperience than mental exhaustion.⁴²⁴ When the rate of Neuropsychiatric casualties did begin to rise in the first week of September, it correlated with the growing realization that the Germans were not going to be driven out of Italy as easily as was

⁴²³ Hist Sect Rpt #27, p. 37.

⁴²⁴ The ranks of 4 PLDG were filled with green reinforcements. W.D. 4 PLDG, Sep 1944.

hoped.⁴²⁵

The battle exhaustion problem was also kept to a minimum due to the implementation of an effective system of treatment for Neuropsychiatric casualties by No. 2 Canadian Exhaustion Unit formed on 14 June, 1944.⁴²⁶ No. 2 CEU utilized a combination of rest stations and Special Employment Companies. Mild stress casualties could be treated in the rest stations with two to three days of sleep and relaxation in the safety of the rear. More serious cases could be rehabilitated in the SEC's where the patients could also contribute to the war effort, in the safety of the rear areas, with badly needed manual labour. In this fashion, 87% of all Neuropsychiatric casualties received from 25 August to 30 September remained in theatre.⁴²⁷ The available evidence thus indicates that battle exhaustion did not play a part in the breaking of the Gothic Line.

In addition to being a useful example of a successful action to add to the military effectiveness debate, I Canadian Corps's battle to break the Gothic Line deserves history's attention in its own right. The victory stands out as one of Canada's greatest military achievements. That the Eighth Army did not reach its goal

⁴²⁵ Total NP casualties for the week between the opening of "Olive" and the breaking of the Gothic Line on 1 September are 72 all ranks for the Corps. The following week's total is 136 all ranks. W.D. No.2 CEU, Aug-Sep 1944.

⁴²⁶ Report on Psychiatry in the Field, W.D. No.2 Cdn Exhaustion Unit, June 1944.

⁴²⁷ Report on Psychiatry in the Field, Sept 1944, W.D. No.2 CEU, Sep 1944.

of the Po Valley must not be allowed to diminish the contribution of Operation "Olive" to the defeat of Nazi Germany by diverting and destroying large numbers of men and weapons from the decisive battles in northwest and eastern Europe. While it is true that the Corps could have accomplished even more had they been reinforced earlier by General Leese, the Canadians still managed to use what force they did possess to inflict a stinging reverse on the enemy, proving that the Canadian Army in 1944 was well led, superbly trained, effectively equipped, and capable of taking on the best units the German Army had to offer.

Table IOrder of Battle and Principle Appointments

I Canadian Corps:

General Officer Commanding: Lt-Gen. E.L.M. Burns
 Brigadier, General Staff: Bdr. J.D.B. Smith
 Corps Commander, Royal Artillery: Bdr. E.C. Plow
 Corps Commander, Royal Engineers: Bdr. C.A. Campbell

Corps Units:

Royal Canadian Dragoons(1 Cdn Armd Car Regt.)
 The Elgin Regiment(25 Armd Delivery Regt.)
 7th Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment RCA
 1st Survey Regiment RCA
 The Lorne Scots(I Corps Defence Coy)

I Canadian Corps, Royal Canadian Engineers

9 Field Park Company
 12 Field Company
 13 Field Company
 14 Field Company

1st Canadian Infantry Division:

General Officer Commanding: Maj-Gen. C.Vokes
 General Staff Officer I: Lt-Col. M.P. Bogert
 Commander, Royal Artillery: Bdr. W.S. Zeigler
 Commander, Royal Engineers: Lt-Col. E.H. Webb

The Saskatoon Light Infantry(MG)

1st Canadian Infantry Division, Royal Canadian Artillery

1 Field Regiment RCHA (25 pounders)
 2 Field Regiment RCA (25 pounders)
 3 Field Regiment RCA (25 pounders)

1st Canadian Infantry Division, Royal Canadian Engineers

2 Field Park Company
 1 Field Company
 3 Field Company
 4 Field Company

1 Canadian Infantry Brigade: Bdr. J.A. Calder

Royal Canadian Regiment
 The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment
 48th Highlanders of Canada

2 Canadian Infantry Brigade: Bdr. T.G. Gibson

Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry
 The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada

- The Loyal Edmondton Regiment(49th)
- 3 Canadian Infantry Brigade: Bdr. J.P.E. Bernatchez
 Royal 22e Regiment
 The Carleton and York Regiment
 The West Nova Scotia Regiment
- 5th Canadian Armoured Division:
 General Officer Commanding: Maj-Gen. B.M. Hoffmeister
 General Staff Officer I: Lt-Col. H.H. Angle
 Commander, Royal Artillery: Bdr. H.A. Sparling
 Commander, Royal Engineers: Lt-Col. J.D. Christian
- Princess Louise's Fusiliers(MG)
 Governor General's Horse Guards(3 Cdn Armd Recce)
- 5th Canadian Armoured Division, Royal Canadian Artillery
 17th Field Regiment RCA (25 pounders)
 11th Field Regiment RCA (25 pounders)
 8th Field Regiment RCA (self-propelled 105mm)
- 5th Canadian Armoured Division, Royal Canadian Engineers
 4 Field Park Squadron
 1 Field Squadron
 10 Field Squadron
- 11 Canadian Infantry Brigade: Bdr. I.S. Johnston
 The Perth Regiment
 The Cape Breton Highlanders
 The Irish Regiment of Canada
- 12 Canadian Infantry Brigade: Bdr. J.S.H. Lind
 4th Princess Louise's Dragoon Guards
 The Westminster Regiment
 Lanark and Renfrew Scottish Regiment
- 5 Canadian Armoured Brigade: Bdr. I.H. Cumberland
 Lord Strathcona's Horse(2 Cdn Armd)
 VIII Princess Louise's New Brunswick Hussars(5 Cdn Armd)
 The British Columbia Dragoons
- 1 Canadian Army Group, Royal Artillery: Bdr. W.E. Huckvale
 1st Medium Regiment RCA (4.5 inch)
 2nd Medium Regiment RCA (4.5 inch)
 5th Medium Regiment RCA (5.5 inch)
- 21 British Army Tank Brigade: Bdr. D. Dawnay.
 12th Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment
 48th Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment
 145th Battalion, Royal Armoured Corps(8th Duke of Wellington's
 Regiment)

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War Diary; 5 Canadian Armoured Brigade.

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War Diary; 3rd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery.

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 War Diary; 7th Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery.
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