

In early December 1943, the 2nd New Zealand Division, advancing northwards from the Sangro river in central Italy, came up against Orsogna, a small town perched on the edge of an escarpment overlooking the wide valley of the Moro river. Staunchly defended by German infantry, tanks and paratroops, the position proved a very tough nut to crack. Five times the New Zealanders launched a determined attack on the town — on December 2, 7, 15 (twice)

and 16 — but each time they were thrown back, with heavy losses in men and tanks. A final attempt, aimed at outflanking Orsogna from the north, bogged down on Christmas Day without achieving the objective either. For the New Zealand Division it constituted its first defeat after a long series of successes and its most costly battle in the Italian campaign. This was the view of Orsogna looking across the Moro valley from the south.

THE BATTLE FOR ORSOGNA

By Jeffrey Plowman and Perry Rowe

By the third week of November 1943, Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg's division, recently arrived in Italy, was moving up from the south to join General Bernard Montgomery's Eighth Army. Ahead of them all lay the Adriatic sector of the Bernhardt Line of Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring's Winter-Stellung. Facing the Eighth Army across the Sangro river were units of General der Panzertruppe Traugott Herr's LXXVI. Panzer-Korps, specifically the 65. Infanterie-Division under Generalleutnant Gustav Heistermann von Ziehlberg, a unit composed largely of Poles, Lorrainers and non-Germans. They had been working on an elaborate defensive system up from the cliffs above the Sangro, particularly alongside Route 84. Allied aerial reconnaissance had shown it to be particularly formidable along the road from Castel Frentano to Guardiagrele. Backing them up were elements of the 16. Panzer-Division, led by Generalmajor Hans-Ulrich Back, but they were in the process of being withdrawn piece by piece from Italy, their place being taken by the 26. Panzer-Division under Generalmajor Smilo Freiherr von Lüttwitz. Elements of this latter formation had already started to appear on the battlefield. Its Panzer-Regiment 26 was taking over the remaining mobile tanks of the 16. Panzer-Division, while Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 was moving forward to relieve another of Back's units. In the meantime, Panzergrenadier-Regiment 67 and Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 26 from the 26. Panzer-Division were ordered to form a mobile reserve behind the 65. Infanterie-Division.

The Allies, for their part, were in the process of formulating a new plan for their

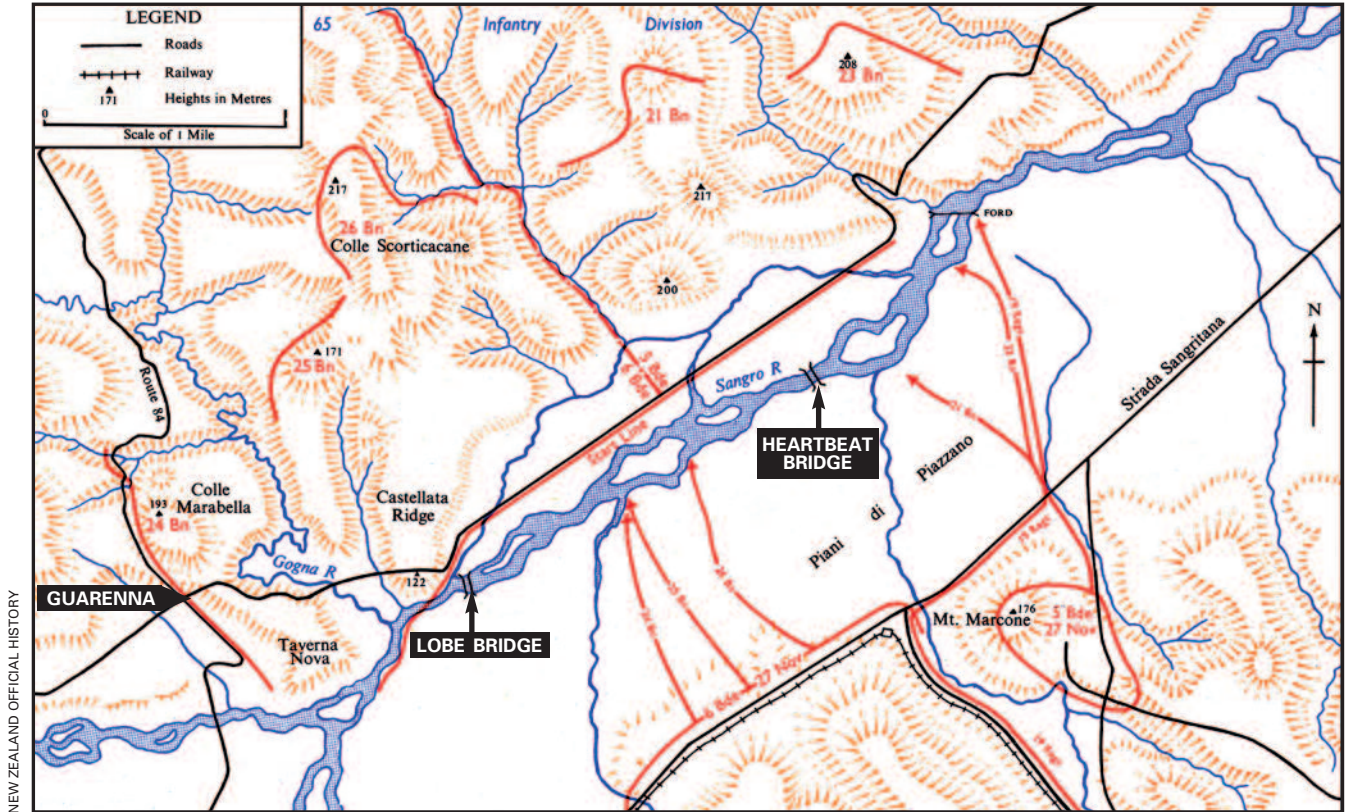
future operations in Italy. Their entry into the country had been one ad hoc decision in a series of such decisions. Now, with their advance slowing down, they were having to face the fact that they had gone into Italy with no long-term plan and that winter was now fast approaching. Their main needs were to protect the port of Naples and the Foggia airfields, as well as to prevent the Germans from transferring units to other fronts.

With this in mind Field-Marshal Harold Alexander, the Supreme Allied Commander Mediterranean Forces, had decided to focus on Rome as their next target. For this, the proposal was to launch a two-pronged assault on the Bernhardt Line. On the Tyrrhenian coast General Mark Clark's US Fifth Army was to break through the enemy's defences around Cassino and launch a drive up the Liri valley. On the Adriatic coast the Eighth Army was to cross the



Today, as in 1943, Orsogna is still an imposing sight, its arcaded foundations built into the cliffs that drop 200 metres to the Moro river below.

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NEW ZEALAND OFFICIAL HISTORY

The New Zealand Division's drive to Orsogna started with their assault crossing of the Sangro river on the night of November 27/28, part of a general offensive by the whole of the Eighth

Army. The river being easily fordable by infantry at low level, the crossing itself proved not too difficult but more trouble was met as the troops moved into the hilly terrain to the north.

Sangro river, secure Pescara and then swing inland towards Avezzano, thus threatening the German lines of communication behind Cassino. Then, when they and the Fifth Army were in striking distance of Rome, a seaborne force was to be landed at Anzio with the aim of securing Rome itself.

With the Fifth Army exhausted after reaching the Garigliano river, the first blow

was to be struck by the Eighth Army. This was to occur just as the 2nd New Zealand Division joined Lieutenant-General Charles Allfrey's British V Corps and began its move into the line on November 20, 1943. That night Brigadier Graham 'Ike' Parkinson's 6th NZ Brigade took up position on the hills overlooking the Sangro river, with the 24th Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Jack Conolly)

on the left, the 25th Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Tom Morten) in the centre and the 26th Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Denver Fontaine) on the right. To their right was Major-General Dudley Russell's 8th Indian Division and on the left Major-General Christopher Vokes's 1st Canadian Division.

Unfortunately, that night heavy rain began to fall, causing the river to rise, and contin-



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Left: The Germans left a trail of destruction as they retreated up the Italian peninsula, with several bridges on the New Zealanders' route blown. To get around this one, engineers of the 6th Field Company, INZE, built a road and a ford over the river next to the broken bridge. The picture was taken by George Kaye, the official New Zealand photographer, on November 19, 1943. Right: Although the official caption states that the bridge and ford were



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'at the Sangro', Perry Rowe after a long search discovered that in actual fact the photo had been taken 15 kilometres away from that river, at a bridge over an unnamed tributary of the Sinello river between the village of Gissi and the hamlet of Carpineto Sinello. Today the bridge on the SP150 has been nicely restored and there is no sign of the diversion constructed in 1943, other than perhaps a faint trace of the nearby (northern) ramp.



Left: A group of Italian refugees passing a vehicle column of the New Zealand Division as the latter move up to the Sangro river. Right: The refugees had nearly reached the hamlet of Camponelle



on Contrada Querceto, the road that leads from the town of Atessa in the south to Route 119 in the Sangro valley. The railway to Atessa has now been converted to a cycle track.

ued to do so until the night of November 23/24. As a result, the attack had to be called off and by the time the river had fallen sufficiently to allow the crossings to go ahead Montgomery's plans had been changed from one of a rapid drive on Pescara to a more methodical one. For the 2nd New Zealand Division this involved expanding the operation to one that included both infantry brigades, leading to Brigadier Howard Kippenberger's 5th Brigade being brought into the line on the right of the 6th Brigade, with the 23rd Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Reg Romans) on the left, the 21st Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Henry McElroy) on the right and the 28th Maori Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Monty Fairbrother) in reserve at Atessa. Facing them on the north bank of the Sangro were the 65. Infanterie-Division and, on its right, a battle group from Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 (Oberstleutnant Oskar Berger).

THE SANGRO CROSSINGS

After several postponements, the river level finally dropped enough to allow the New Zealand attack to go ahead on the night of November 27/28. Though Zero Hour had been set for 2.45 a.m. the attacking companies moved off 45 minutes earlier.

In the 6th Brigade's sector the 25th Battalion had strung hand-wires across the river for which they provided guides at both ends for both their own men and those of the 24th Battalion. In some of the other battalions the infantry formed a chain, each man holding the rifle muzzle of the next man in line to support them against the turbulence of the river. Once across, the five assault battalions lined up along the lateral road on the northern bank, though the 23rd Battalion went into action immediately, throwing the Germans off Point 208 so quickly that the artillery barrage on it had to be cancelled. When the creeping barrage of their supporting artillery did come down at Zero Hour, in front of the leading companies, it was followed minutes later by that of the Germans. Aimed at the riverbed, the German fire had no real effect.

On the left wing of 5th Brigade, the 21st Battalion ran into stiffer opposition, B and C Companies taking their objective without

Right: The river has changed significantly over the decades, with post-war dams further upstream limiting flooding during rainy periods. This has allowed years of vegetation growth which hampers orientation but careful map work and the occasional glimpse of the hills behind allowed Perry Rowe to get as near to the correct point as possible. The view is from the south bank looking north-west.



Heartbeat Bridge, a Class 9 Bailey, was the first span successfully launched over the Sangro on November 28, the day of the assault crossing of the river. Though 90 feet long (the maximum span for a Class 9) it still proved to be too short, so the 8th New Zealand Field Company had to rest the end of the bridge proper in the shallow water and fill the remaining gap with ramps. As a result, the bridge ended up at a peculiar angle over the water and it is thought that this is what saved it from serious attention from the German artillery. It was eventually destroyed by a flood on the night of December 4/5.



SIR JOHN WHITE



Lobe Bridge, an FBE folding-boat bridge built by the 6th NZ Field Company in the 6th Brigade sector, was located three kilometres south and upstream of Heartbeat. The first attempt to push it over the Sangro ended when it received a direct hit

from an enemy shell, killing 11 and wounding eight of the sappers and destroying several of the bridge's rafts. It was eventually rebuilt that night and ready for operation by 9.15 p.m. It was also washed away in the December 4/5 flood.

opposition, as did A Company, after passing through C Company. However, D Company was forced to swerve to the right after moving through B Company and, on becoming dispersed, went to ground. Nevertheless, around dawn the Germans on D Company's final objective found themselves surrounded and surrendered.

On the 6th Brigade front, A Company of the 26th Battalion reached Point 171 with relative ease and B Company the crest of the ridge to the west. More trouble was had by C Company, when smoke obscured their advance but they eventually reached the summit of Colle Scorticacane, where they were eventually forced to dig in after coming under fire from enemy machine guns beyond it. Both A and C Companies of the 25th Battalion skirted some cliffs in their approach to the Castellata ridge, while the other two companies went up by way of the road, all converging on the ridge between that and the Gogno stream. In the meantime, the 24th Battalion, having passed through the 25th Battalion, went on to secure Marabella Hill, its defenders greeting them with desultory fire before surrendering.



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Tree growth has now all but masked the river but the hill range in the background confirms the comparison. The view is from the north bank so the trucks were actually returning to the south side of the river.

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Left: On November 30, New Zealand engineers opened Tiki Bridge, a Class 24 double-double Bailey, adjacent to and downstream from Heartbeat Bridge. This was the first bridge capable of taking tanks. Raised high above the river with bulldozed



PERRY ROWE

approaches, it was the only one on the Eighth Army front to survive the December 4/5 flood, though the water did wash away the northern approaches. Right: The countryside here is more open, allowing a view of the hills which confirm the comparison.



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Left: On November 29, George Kaye pictured Sapper Clifford Cullen of the 5th Field Park Company, NZE, making his way back from the front as a carrier from the 24th Battalion heads for one of the Sangro bridges. Private Sydney Williams, seated in the carrier with binoculars, would later be killed at Cassino. Getting vehicles up to the Sangro bridges could be difficult due



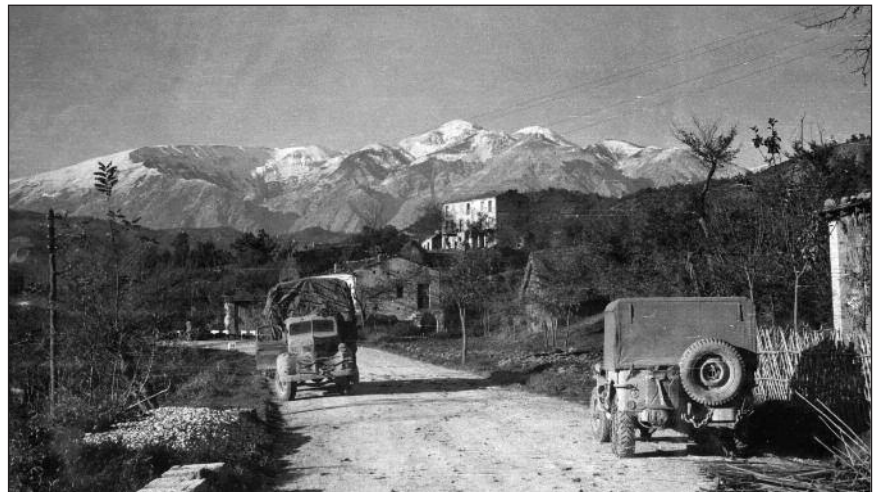
GOOGLE

to the muddy river flats, and it was often necessary to winch heavy trucks over this stretch. **Right:** The Via del Sangro on the outskirts of the village of Piazzano-Piana la Fara appears to follow the route of the wartime track to the bridges, the distinctive hills in the background providing the link with the past.

At 4.30 a.m. in 5th Brigade's sector the 8th Field Company started work on 'Heartbeat' Bridge but when they pushed it out over the river they discovered that it was three to five metres short and had to fill the gap on the north shore with ramps. Though the bridge was ready for traffic three hours later, the muddy ground on the south side caused problems for all the heavy trucks, which had to be winched or towed to the span. Further upstream the 6th Field Company had less success on 'Lobe', the folding-boat bridge for the 6th Brigade. It took time to get trucks up to the river, delaying the start of its construction till daylight. Then around 8 a.m., with one bay complete, a direct hit on the site sank several boats, killed eight men and wounded 11 others, forcing work on it to be abandoned till nightfall.

With the New Zealand infantry in place, the 19th Armoured Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel Robert McGaffin) began its move up, with mixed success. Sherman tanks from A Squadron entered the river shortly after 5 a.m. and, with the aid of 5th Field Park Company's bulldozer, crossed successfully, barring one that got stranded in the river. However, only three made it to the road, leaving 11 tanks and the bulldozer mired between the river and the road. Once on the road, they were delayed by demolitions and by nightfall had not reached the 23rd Battalion. Further upstream the going was less treacherous and by 8 a.m. six tanks from C Squadron reached the road and drove over the Castellata ridge to join the 25th Battalion. B Squadron, however, did not reach the forward positions of the 24th and 26th Battalions till early that afternoon.

Right: Perry Rowe found the comparison on Route 84, the main road that steadily climbs up into the hills from the Sangro flatlands towards Castel Frentano, the location being in an S-bend just south of the village of Guarenna. The view is looking back down the road, in the direction of the Sangro, so the New Zealand troops had advanced towards the photographer. The Maiella Mountains were shrouded in haze when Perry took his comparison.



SIR JOHN WHITE

New Zealand transport on the road near Colle Marabella, just north of the Sangro. This was the route taken by the 24th NZ Battalion on the night of November 27/28. Towering over the hills behind the trucks are the Maiella Mountains and Monte Amaro, the second-highest peak in the Apennines, so the view is westwards.



PERRY ROWE

Right: General Bernard Freyberg, the commander of the 2nd New Zealand Division, had a Tactical Headquarters based around a Sherman armoured command vehicle, a protective troop of three Shermans and a Staghound armoured car, the latter seen here in a field north of the Sangro. The sign next to the Jeep features the fern leaf emblem of the New Zealand Division, the unit serial number '50' on a black square, denoting Divisional HQ, and the words Tac HQ, with an arrow underneath pointing to the right. At rear is the same mountain range as seen in the previous picture.



SIR JOHN WHITE

THE FALL OF CASTEL FRENTANO

Having lost half its fighting strength in the night attack, the I. Bataillon of Grenadier-Regiment 146 now found its resources insufficient to mount a co-ordinated counter-attack. Instead they began a withdrawal of 3-4,000 metres back towards the crest of the Sangro ridge, abandoning much of their weaponry in the process. To add to their woes, their divisional commander, General-leutnant von Ziehlberg, was severely wounded and had to be replaced by Oberst Ernst-Günther Baade. As a result, the forward New Zealand troops were able to spend the day consolidating their positions and bringing up support weapons with relatively little interference.

When patrols on the night of November 28/29 found no evidence of enemy troops, the battalions began a series of limited

Right: Perry found the location just east of Guarenna. The road is the Contrada Guarenna Nuova. Just around the bend, Route 84 runs across the picture, right to Castel Frentano and left to the Sangro plain. Before reaching the Sangro proper, the road first crosses one of its tributary rivers, the Aventino (see the map on page 4).



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ATL DA-04764

advances the following morning that continued into the night. Over on the left, B Company of the 24th Battalion with three troops of tanks from B Squadron launched an attack on Colle Barone, taking this hill in just over an hour, the defenders having abandoned it the night before, leaving behind a few stragglers who had no hesitation in surrendering.

During November 30, as the 65. Infanterie-Division continued to pull back to its main defensive line, the arrival of the 22nd Motor Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Tom Campbell) on the left flank allowed the 24th and 25th Battalions to concentrate on the main thrust towards Castel Frentano. By the end of the day, after a hard slog uphill, the leading company of the 24th Battalion crossed the Guardiagrele—Lanciano railway line by the spur of Point 398, located just south-east of Castel Frentano. In the centre, the 25th Battalion reached the



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Centre left: Castel Frentano was the first major town to fall to the New Zealanders after their crossing of the Sangro. It was captured without a fight by the 24th NZ Battalion on the morning of December 2, the Germans having abandoned it the night before. Left: The Chiesa di Santo Stefano church still towers above the town. The view is looking north-north-west and is actually taken from the grounds of a large palazzo standing on a spur on the edge of the town, the Villa Lanza Silveri. The official caption of the photo by George Kaye states it had earlier been used as a German headquarters but it seems more likely that it was actually a main strong point set up by the II. Bataillon of Grenadier-Regiment 146 of the German 65. Infanterie-Division to block access to Castel Frentano.



ATL DA-04763

On December 2, Kaye pictured New Zealand soldiers examining a dead German soldier outside the building's northern entrance.



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The gateway remains off what is now the Via Colle della Vittoria, a side street on the south side of Route 84.

Sant'Eusanio del Sangro railway station where they became involved in a firefight before they finally secured it. In contrast, the 26th Battalion had an easier time of it, as did the 5th Brigade as it closed up with its sister brigade that evening.

Coupled with this move, the German corps commander, General Herr, had decided to pivot the line from the road junction near Melone (east of Guardiagrele) back towards a position behind the Moro river along the line of the Orsogna—Ortona road. He had already transferred the II. Bataillon (Major Wolf-Werner Graf von der Schulenburg) of

Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 1 to bolster up the 26. Panzer-Division but now, with the offer of the 90. Panzergrenadier-Division, he decided to insert this unit into the line to the left of the 65. Infanterie-Division and shift the 26. Panzer-Division to its left. Unfortunately, this all started to come unstuck on the night of November 30/December 1 when Grenadier-Regiment 146 pulled back to the line of the Sangro ridge, with its II. Bataillon around Castel Frentano. When Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 moved to conform, they were disturbed to learn that the paratroopers could find no troops to their left.

On the morning of December 1, the 24th Battalion turned its attention on Point 398. With two 3-inch mortars in support, No. 16 Platoon from D Company (Major Meryl Dew) set off along the track toward Castel Frentano, while No. 17 Platoon moved to the right along the railway but they were forced to take cover near the main road. Based on a warning from some locals, No. 16 Platoon attacked two houses in front of a hotel, taking ten prisoners. They then went on and took the hotel itself but efforts to advance beyond it were frustrated by heavy fire. Thereupon the Germans launched two counter-attacks in



ATL DA-04756

Left: Both from its location and its description, it seems probable that the villa is in fact what the 24th Battalion in their reports referred to as 'the hotel'. If so, it was taken by D Company under Major Meryl Dew, who early on December 1 sent Nos. 16 and 17 Platoons in a flanking attack, the former seizing and occupying the house after a short skirmish. Shortly after, the Germans counter-attacked twice in quick succession and No. 18 Platoon came forward to reinforce No. 16. A third attack was beaten off early in the afternoon, after which the enemy began mortaring



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the building heavily, forcing the defenders to withdraw from its upper storey, but they held on. The following day, George Kaye staged a recreation of the fight. The official caption honestly admits to the re-staging: 'NZ Infantry soldiers storm and capture the German HQ at Castel Frentano. Reconstructed scene taken immediately after the capture using the same troops as featured in the original attack.' Right: The outbuildings on the right of the villa have gone and the balcony doors have been changed to windows but otherwise the house remains the same.



ATL-DA-04759

New Zealand infantry 'closing in on the building'.



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The Lanza Silveri family still live in the villa today.



ATL-DA-04936

New Zealand soldiers passing through Castel Frentano on their way to the front, pictured by Kaye on December 25.

quick succession, the second of which was only just beaten off. To deal with this No. 18 Platoon was sent in to reinforce them. Together they beat off a third counter-attack in the afternoon, after which the Germans contented themselves with shelling the building the platoons were holed up in, forcing them to abandon the top story.

To further aid the 24th Battalion's effort, the 25th Battalion managed to close up on their left, while that night the 21st Battalion resumed its advance, reaching the Castel Frentano—Lanciano road. Their sister battalion, the 23rd, however, was forced to pull up just short of it, after encountering a number of machine-gun nests on the way up. At the same time, the 18th Armoured Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel Clive Pleasants) and 22nd Motor Battalion had begun a push up Route 84 towards the T-junction with the Guardiagrele—Castel Frentano road. On December 1 they made it as far as the turn-off to Sant'Eusanio where they were brought to a halt by shell-fire and mines, losing eight tanks to artillery. Pleasants was also evacuated with wounds.

That night saw a further withdrawal of the Germans to the Orsogna—Ortona line, coupled with a leftward shift of the inter-divisional boundary. The intention was for the 65. Infanterie-Division to pull back, pivoting on Colle Chaimato, towards which the paratroopers were to extend their boundary. Instead, during December 2, a substantial fissure opened up between the two formations, a situation that, fortunately for the Germans, the New Zealanders were blissfully unaware of.



PERRY ROWE



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Left: The same view, looking east on Via Frentana, the main road through the town. The road on top of the retaining wall is Via Domenico Romanelli, which winds its way up to the Santo Stephano Church. Above: In April 1995 the municipality of Castel Frentano placed this plaque on the Town Hall on the Corso Roma to commemorate the liberation of their town.



JACK BUSWELL

That morning, after the 24th Battalion entered Castel Frentano, to a joyful reception from its inhabitants, General Freyberg ordered the 6th Brigade to exploit to the right towards Lanciano. Thus at 11 a.m. the remaining tanks of C Squadron, 19th Armoured Regiment, along with some Staghound armoured cars from the Divisional Cavalry set off from Castel Frentano. At first things went well, the former farmers among the Staghound crews taking great delight in picking out any haystack built in an inconvenient location for access or with insufficient pitch to turn heavy rain. A quick burst of machine-gun fire set these on fire, often revealing an anti-tank gun or machine gun. At the Orsogna—Lanciano road the column swung left towards the village of Spaccarelli and down into the Moro valley, where they discovered that the bridge over the steep gully of the river had been blown, with no chance of repairing it immediately. Half an hour later, following receipt of a report that six German panzers were approaching from Lanciano, one troop of Shermans was sent off in that direction. Though this threat did not eventuate they were ordered to stay there that night, with some infantry from the 28th Maori Battalion for support.

Sited along Route 84 some distance west of Castel Frentano was a brickworks and the Germans in Orsogna used its prominent chimney as an aiming point for their artillery, particularly for traffic moving along the section of road that was clearly visible to them. This became known to New Zealand drivers as the 'Mad Mile'. This shot in fact shows its entire length, from the brickworks on the right all the way to the railway crossing at the foot of the ridge lower down on the far left. The vehicles seen on the road at right are tucked under the last bit of cover before they start running the gauntlet.



PERRY ROWE

The brickworks complex still survives along Route 84 albeit without the chimney. The view is westwards and Castel Frentano is behind the photographer. Orsogna is out of the picture to the right.



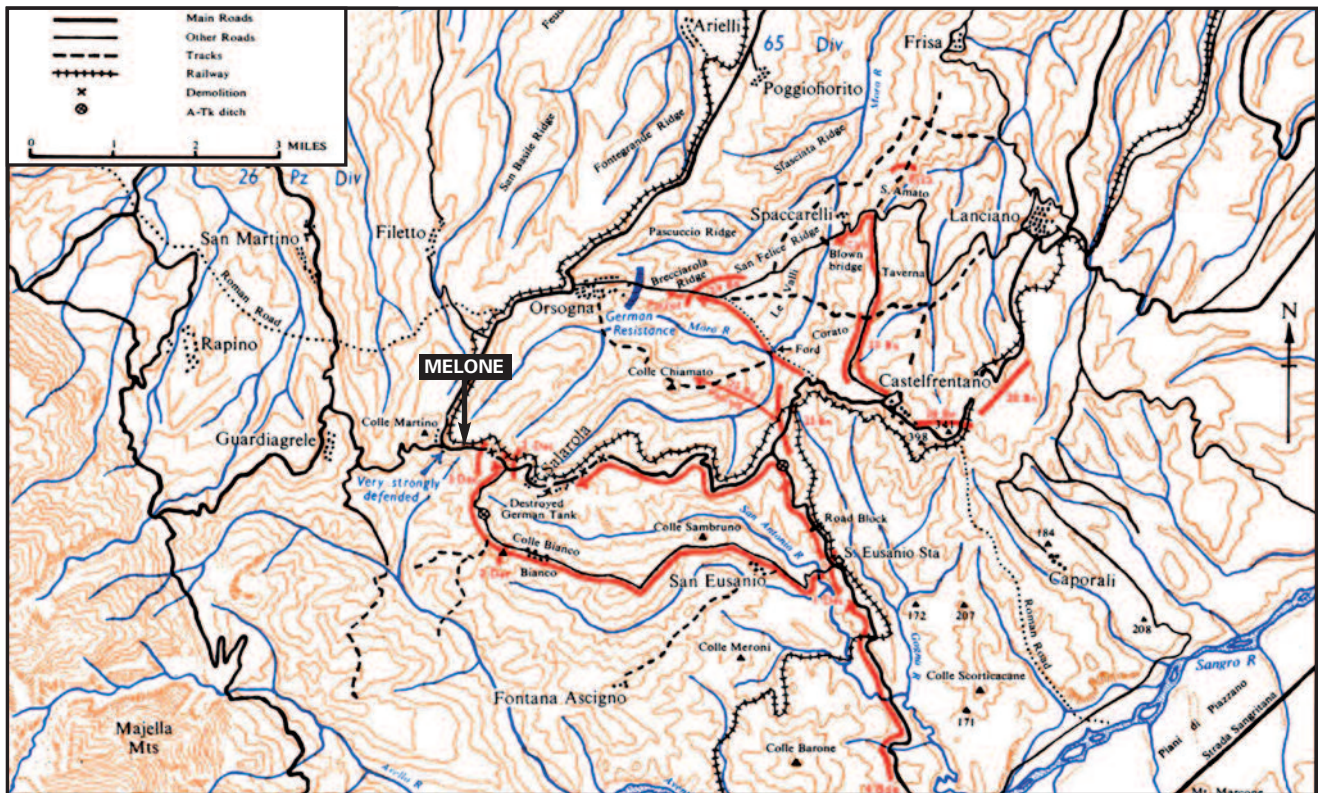
RAY McFARLANE

Left: In the early afternoon of December 2, a troop each of Sherman tanks from C Squadron of the 19th Armoured Regiment and Staghound armoured cars from the Divisional Cavalry set off from Castel Frentano. On reaching the Orsogna—Lanciano road, the force swung left towards Spaccarelli and headed down into the Moro valley (see the map on page 12). However, this attempt to reach Orsogna came to an end when they discovered that the bridge over the Moro on



PERRY ROWE

this road had been blown by the retreating Germans. The gap was eventually spanned by this Bailey bridge built on the night of December 10/11 by Lieutenant Arnold Hunter's 2nd Platoon of the 6th Field Company. It became known as 'Hunter's Bridge'. Right: Nicely repaired after the war, the stone bridge still carries the SP64 over the Moro. The view is looking east, towards Spaccarelli on the slope in the background. Orsogna lies behind the photographer.



On December 2-3, while the right flank of the division deployed north of Castel Frentano towards Orsogna, the 4th NZ Armoured Brigade explored westwards toward Guardiaagrele, hoping in addition to open an alternative approach route to Orsogna from that direction. Deploying the 18th NZ Armoured Regiment, the 22nd Motor Battalion (motorised infantry) and the Divisional

Cavalry (armoured cars), the force moved in two columns, one via Sant' Eusanio and another along the main road further north. However, its advance was repeatedly held up by German rear-guards with panzers and road demolitions and finally ground to a halt near the village of Melone, three kilometres from Guardiaagrele and still short of the turn-off to Orsogna.

THE FEINT TO GUARDIAGRELE

While elements of the 6th Brigade were operating north-eastwards towards Lanciano on the morning of December 2, Brigadier Keith Stewart's 4th NZ Armoured Brigade launched a westward feint towards Guardiaagrele.

One column, consisting of No. 1 Motor Company of the 22nd Motor Battalion and C Squadron of the 18th Armoured Regiment, with some Staghounds from the Divisional Cavalry, turned off from Route 84 towards Sant' Eusanio, entering the small town to a riotous welcome from the locals. While the Staghounds carried on immediately, the bulk of the column remained in Sant' Eusanio until 3.30 p.m. When they did renew their westward advance, they discovered that the road soon deteriorated into a steep and slippery, rutted cart track, and they only got as far as the small hamlet of Bianco, where they came under fire and were forced to laager for the night.

At the same time, B Squadron (Major Ron Ferguson) of the 18th Armoured Regiment and two companies from the 22nd Motor Battalion, plus some Staghound armoured cars, headed off from the Sant' Eusanio turn-off, continuing north on Route 84 towards the Castel Frentano—Melone—Guardiaagrele road. In front of them was a platoon of infantry from the I. Bataillon of Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 under Obergefreiter Bluschke with two PzKpfw IVs from the 8. Kompanie of Panzer-Regiment 26. Their orders were to cover the withdrawal of the II. Bataillon of Grenadier-Regiment 146, for which they had laid some Teller mines and cut a deep trench in the road 250 metres beyond the turn-off. This caused a temporary delay and once clear of this the New Zealand column reached the T-junction at the summit at 10 a.m. but was unwilling to press on because of fire coming across the ridge.

Eventually the column set off at 4.30 p.m. and immediately the tanks became engulfed in shell bursts, the fire coming from the Orsogna ridge on the far side of the Moro valley. Undeterred they carried on, swinging their turrets around and firing broadsides like ships at sea. This thrust along the ridge forced the Germans to fall back towards the hamlet of Salarola, dragging one tank with them after it broke down. Some 1,600 metres from the T-junction they detonated a charge in the road, blasting a column of mud high into the air. Undeterred by this, Major Ferguson eventually located a steep narrow track, barely passable for his Shermans, but enough to bypass the demolition.

The Germans sent forward a patrol from Salarola but had to pull it back when it came under fire. Then their damaged PzKpfw IV came under fire so they towed it back another two kilometres. It was here that a paratrooper officer ordered them to leave it as they had no other anti-tank weapons available. Just then, however, the leading tanks of the 18th Armoured Regiment hove into sight on a ridge 200 metres away and opened up on them. When No. 2 Motor Company (Captain Robert Knox) closed up to 50 metres of them, Bluschke ordered his men to retire, blowing another crater in the road and setting off demolition charges in the panzer.

Undeterred by this, the New Zealand column pushed on beyond the crater, exploding ammunition erupting from the PzKpfw IV as they passed it. However, the whole thrust came to an end half a kilometre beyond the junction of the road coming up from Sant' Eusanio (the one up which the other column had been pushing). Here the Germans set off an even more spectacular demolition. Unable to circumvent this, Ferguson's tanks pulled back to Salarola. Captain Knox, however, led a patrol forward through Melone to within sight of the turn-off to Orsogna but withdrew on encountering German activity.

ORSOGNA — THE ROMAN ROAD ATTACK

Late on the afternoon of December 2, the 6th Brigade made its first move on Orsogna itself. Leaving A Company of the 24th Battalion to search Castel Frentano, B and C Companies continued on down into the Moro valley by way of an old Roman road and then up the Brecciarola ridge, cutting the Orsogna—Lanciano road in the process. Later, they were joined by the 25th Battalion, who sent a patrol forward until it came under fire from some anti-aircraft guns on the outskirts of Orsogna, forcing it to withdraw, leaving behind two observers. At 4.30 p.m. they reported seeing 70 Germans forming up for what looked like a counter-attack, though nothing came of it. Half an hour later, fire came from Orsogna against some troops of the 25th Battalion as they were digging in to the west of the road.

As it so happened, on reaching Orsogna both battalions had inadvertently stumbled on a serious gap in the German line of defence. This had occurred during the withdrawal of the 26. Panzer-Division in the face of the New Zealand attack towards Guardiaagrele; the paratroopers with them had reported that again they had lost touch with the right wing of the 65. Infanterie-Division. Worse still, when von Lüttwitz, the commander of the 26. Panzer-Division, went to Colle Chiamato (the height between Castel Frentano and Melone) he could find no sign of the 65. Infanterie-Division, the last of their troops having left there around 9.30 a.m.

At 12.45 p.m. von Lüttwitz finally received permission from his corps commander, General Herr, to commit his Aufklärungs-Abteilung 26 (still in corps reserve) to the defence of Orsogna. However, it was only at 5 p.m. — one hour after the two battalions from the 6th Brigade had started pushing around the left shoulder of the paratroopers — that von Lüttwitz ordered that unit into

Right: The first attack on Orsogna was made by the 25th Battalion on December 3 by way of the Roman road, an old route from classical times that led across the deep gully of the Moro. Seen here from the vicinity of the brickworks, it was little more than a rough and steep track. With the forward platoons of the 25th Battalion meeting heavy opposition inside Orsogna and being chased out of houses by German panzers, an urgent call went out for armoured support, and A Squadron of the 18th Armoured Regiment went forward using this track as well, but in the end the New Zealand infantry had to withdraw from the town before they arrived. The spire of the San Nicola di Bari Church in Orsogna can just be made out in the distance.



EMMA EWART

Orsogna, these troops finally entering the town two and a half hours later. Much to the relief of the Germans, the 6th Brigade failed to exploit their opportunity, concentrating instead on bringing up anti-tank guns and mortars to the 24th Battalion that night.

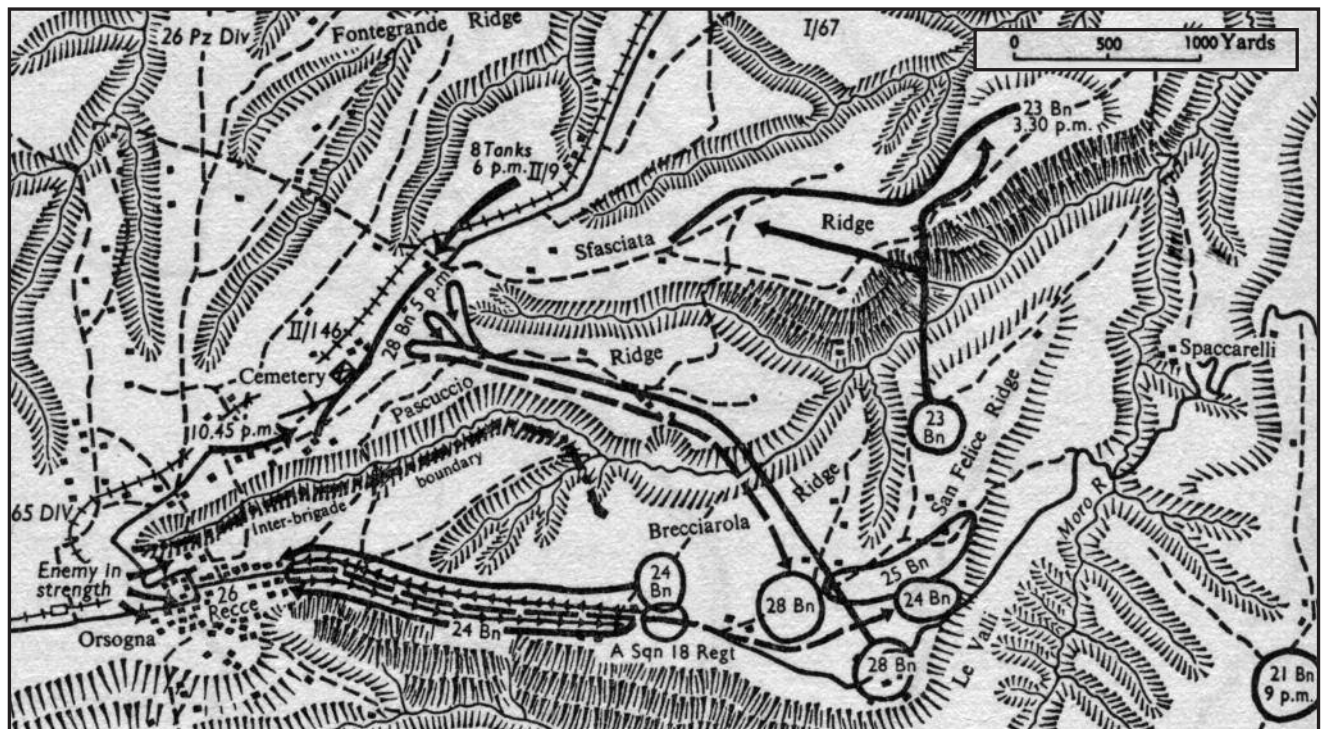
At 10 p.m. the 25th Battalion received orders to launch an attack on Orsogna at dawn the following morning. At this stage no tank support was requested, Lieutenant-Colonel Morten, the battalion commander, instead refusing an offer from Major Hugh Green, the acting commander of the 18th Armoured Regiment. At 1.30 a.m. on December 3 the battalion began to make its way up the Roman road, reaching the forward positions of the 24th Battalion an hour and three quarters later. There A Company (Captain Paul Robertshaw) halted and began digging in, while D Company (Major Stamford Hewitt) deployed on both sides of the road and, along with C Company (Captain Ian Webster), continued their advance. Around 6 a.m., in a cloudy misty dawn, Hewitt's company entered Orsogna, No. 17 Platoon advancing on the right and No. 18 Platoon on the left, leaving No. 16 Platoon the task of clearing the buildings. All went well until they had passed through the centre of the town and a German armoured car, which had come down the main street to the

town square, appeared behind the leading two platoons and opened fire on them. Both platoons attempted to work their way around to the south to deal with the vehicle but were forced to take shelter in some buildings when they came under fire from other German troops. Shortly afterwards, a section of three carriers, under Sergeant Ronald O'Neill, entered the town behind the two platoons but, when it tried to close up to D Company, was forced to pull in behind some houses by fire from an anti-tank gun. There they were joined later by C Company.

At 7 a.m. the 6. Kompanie of Panzer-Regiment 26 (Leutnant Schaft) was ordered into Orsogna with its tanks. Around that time Brigadier Parkinson, realising that the 25th Battalion was in trouble, sent out an urgent request for support from the 4th Armoured Brigade. This came initially from a troop of tanks from C Squadron, 19th Armoured Regiment, who fired on the Germans assembling to the north-west of C Company and on the advancing panzers. At the same time, some 20 kilometres back near the Aventino river, A Squadron of the 18th Armoured Regiment responded by sending two troops of tanks under the command of Lieutenants Ray Maskew and Tim Cullinane.

In the meantime, some of Schaft's panzers entered Orsogna and at 8.30 a.m. launched a

counter-attack. At the same time, his remaining tanks started shelling the town from a ridge to the north of the 25th Battalion, some falling on the houses the carrier section was sheltering behind. C Company called for artillery support but ended up being shelled themselves, until they were able to lift the fire but not onto the German tanks, which were too far away. This left C Company no choice but to withdraw by way of a gully north of the road. On hearing that a tank was approaching down the main road, the carrier section abandoned their vehicles and escaped. This left Nos. 17 and 18 Platoons in an untenable position and they were forced to surrender. Further back, the seven survivors of No. 16 Platoon tried to hold on, in the hope that their own tanks would appear soon. However, when some German tanks appeared, they abandoned the building they were in, dashed down a street under fire and dived into a gully, re-joining C Company behind 24th Battalion's positions. Unfortunately, by the time Maskew's and Cullinane's tanks reached the forward troops of the 24th Battalion an hour and a half later, it was too late to save the infantry in Orsogna. Instead they drove to within 500 metres of the town and opened fire on two German panzers, hitting and disabling one. The other one then withdrew.



NEW ZEALAND OFFICIAL HISTORY

On December 7, the New Zealand Division made its second attempt to capture Orsogna (Operation 'Torso'), launching the 24th and 28th Battalions against the town from the east.

Although the 24th Battalion managed to penetrate into Orsogna, both battalions met heavy German resistance, including from tanks and assault guns, and eventually had to withdraw.

Right: The battle that day was a narrow escape for the Germans and they only prevailed because of the timely arrival of the III. Bataillon of Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 4, which reached Orsogna around midnight on the 7th/8th and helped restore the situation. Unteroffizier Wilhelm Weier, from the battalion's 12. Kompanie, carried a camera and he took this photo of their command post building.

THE BATTLES FOR MELONE

On the morning of December 3, following an artillery barrage, No. 3 Motor Company of the 22nd Motor Battalion left Salarola, crossed the narrow saddle above Melone and made its way down to the small hamlet. They were followed shortly afterwards by No. 2 Motor Company and B Squadron of the 18th Armoured Regiment but, at 7.30 a.m., when the tanks poked their noses over the hill and started to move down it, the whole force came under intense shell, mortar and small-arms fire from the prominent bluff overlooking Melone. The leading platoon of No. 3 Motor Company managed to find shelter inside the houses but No. 2 Company took the full weight of the fire as they attempted to find cover on the hillside. With no other option, the attack was called off, four tanks being hit and disabled as they pulled back to the crest. Here the remaining tanks blazed away at Melone and the bluff beyond, allowing the infantry to retreat to safety.

On the night of December 3/4, after a patrol from the 22nd Motor Battalion found the road junction at Melone unoccupied, another attempt was made to seize it. This time No. 1 Motor Company went forward with B Squadron in support but when the infantry appeared in the open they were forced to ground by heavy machine-gun and mortar fire. At that juncture B Squadron went forward, drew fire off the infantry, then backed out once the latter were clear. Not content with this, another attempt was made the next day with two platoons from the 22nd Motor Battalion and B Squadron, with the same outcome. Once the infantry crossed over the saddle they came under fire and had to withdraw. B Squadron ran into trouble on the muddy track, seven tanks throwing tracks, getting stuck in the soft ground or slipping over banks before withdrawing, leaving them only five runners. That night, a tank-hunting patrol from Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 4 (Oberst Erich Walther), on discovering that the tanks seen above Melone had withdrawn, established an outpost on the hill.



WILHELM WEIER

ORSOGNA — OPERATION 'TORSO'

The next attack on Orsogna took place on December 7. The delay was partly due to the need to build up supplies after a flash flood in the Sangro valley washed away all but 'Tiki' Bridge, but also Freyberg wanted the 5th Brigade to move up further to the east of Orsogna. For the new attack, code-named Operation 'Torso', the 24th Battalion was to launch a direct attack on Orsogna along the Brecciarola ridge, while the 28th Maori Battalion was to attack from the Pascuccio ridge towards the Orsogna—Ortona main road. At the same time the 23rd Battalion was to provide flank protection on the right by securing the Sfasciata ridge. While Orsogna did not start out as the main target, it assumed greater importance when the 28th Maori Battalion discovered that neither the Pascuccio nor Sfasciata ridges were negotiable by wheeled or tracked vehicles. This meant that all of their support weapons and armour would have to be routed through Orsogna.

Opposing them were still the 26. Panzer-Division, with the 65. Infanterie-Division to its right, the boundary between the two running through Orsogna. Directly facing the New Zealand attack were Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 and the II. Bataillon of Grenadier-Regiment 146, while in the town itself Aufklärungs-Abteilung 26 was about to be relieved by the III. Bataillon (Major Franz Grassmel) of Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 4.

At 2.15 p.m. on December 7, under heavy fire, B and C Companies of the 24th Battalion started to move forward. Less than an hour later B Company, on the left of the road, lost its commander, Major Ian Thomson, who was killed by a shell burst, 2nd Lieutenant Robert Genge taking over command. On approaching some of the outlying houses, No. 11 Platoon came under heavy machine-gun fire but when they tried to outflank it by working up a ravine they came under fire from their own 25-pounders. More luck was had by No. 10 Platoon who managed to penetrate the outskirts of Orsogna but by then it was dark. By this stage, the 6. Kompanie of Panzer-Regiment 26 had moved into Orsogna and, when flares went up revealing three panzers, No. 10 Platoon took shelter in a nearby house. This they held onto until one of the tanks tried to force its way in. At this point the platoon pulled out and took shelter in a cave, until discovered by a party of Germans, whereupon they blasted their way out with grenades and escaped.

C Company (Major Eric Clarke), on the right of the road, made slow progress, under enfilading fire from a ridge west of Pascuccio. Just short of Orsogna they discovered a minefield, covered by machine guns, which Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons were unable to work around. This coincided with a move forward by tanks and assault guns from Panzer-Regiment 26 but one of the tanks, a flame-throwing Flammpanzer III, slipped off a bridge into a gully and a Semovente assault gun got stuck in some soft ground. They then sited a short-barrelled PzKpfw IV on the road in Orsogna, backed up by some engineers. Thus, when No. 13 Platoon eventually got into the town, they came under fire from it down the main street. After a failed attempt to take out the panzer with a sticky bomb the platoon withdrew because of intense machine-gun fire.

Around 4 p.m. A Company (Major Edgar Aked) went forward, dealt with a few German strong points on the way and ended up 150 metres short of the town before the Germans moved to seal off their penetration.

Two troops of tanks from A Squadron of the 18th Armoured Regiment were sent up but were held up by craters on the road. A bulldozer was knocked out while trying to fill one of the holes but the next one succeeded in the job. The leading tank troop eventually reached the outskirts of Orsogna but was halted by another crater in the road, this one



Left: The 12. Kompanie were based in the Orsogna school on Corso Umberto I, and Perry found that the command post was located in the house at No. 58, next door to the school building, which is just off to the right.

PERRY ROWE

Right: The capture of the Sfasciata ridge during battle of December 7 had opened another avenue of approach to Orsogna, namely that of the Orsogna—Ortona main road, which came in from the north-east. In the early hours of December 15, the New Zealanders started their third attack on Orsogna, the 21st and 23rd Battalions attacking up the ridge towards the road, with the 18th Armoured Regiment ready to pass through to exploit towards Orsogna, and the 20th Armoured Regiment waiting to follow up. However, the first tank unit to be committed, 18th Armoured Regiment's C Squadron, did not get very far, most of its tanks getting bogged down before reaching the road. Reverend Pat Gourdie, the regimental padre, photographed these two Sherman tanks of Lieutenant Charlie Passmore's troop on the ridge track, abandoned where the taped path ran through a vineyard.



PAT GOURDIE

mined. On its way up, a tank from the other troop detonated a mine, then plunged into the resulting crater. The other two tanks eventually joined the leading troop but had to wait till darkness for engineers to come forward, remove the mines and fill in the crater. Just inside the town proper, they came up against the PzKpfw IV parked on the main street, which their infantry had been unable to deal with. It had also set a haystack on fire, illuminating their only line of approach.

While the 24th Battalion was making its direct assault on Orsogna, the 28th Maori Battalion was carrying out the other part of Operation 'Torso': the attack from the Pascuccio ridge towards the Orsogna—Ortona road. They set off at 1.30 p.m. but on their climb up to the ridge encountered an almost sheer escarpment where they came under fire from German troops dug in on the crest. They remained pinned down until A Company (Captain James Henare) swung round to take the Germans from the rear, wiping out two sections of the 7. Kompanie of Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9. C Company (Captain Tutu Wirepa) had easier going and, after brushing aside some light opposition and destroying an anti-tank gun, crossed the Orsogna—Ortona road and dug in. Shortly afterwards, D Company (Captain Peter Ornberg) pushed on beyond the road to the Orsogna cemetery and the railway line, overrunning the II. Bataillon of Grenadier-Regiment 146 and cutting its 7. Kompanie to pieces. In response the 6. Kompanie counter-attacked but lost its way. When they finally reached and attacked the Maori lines they were repulsed twice before restoring the situation.



PERRY ROWE

Passmore's troop appeared in an aerial photograph (see page 20) enabling Perry Rowe to pinpoint their position with accuracy. The ridgeline is just visible over the grapevines.

Over on the right, C Company came under fire from some tanks from the 8. Kompanie of Panzer-Regiment 26 supported by the last reserves that the II. Bataillon of Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 could muster. C Company responded with a PIAT gun, stopping the lead panzer. At this point Captain Wirepa decided to pull the company back but before doing so crept forward to one of

the stationary tanks and placed several Hawkins grenades under its tracks, blowing one off when it started to move. After the Maori withdrew, the Germans re-occupied their old positions but were hit by a 'murder stonk' (all the divisional artillery on a single map point) from the New Zealand artillery that set one tank on fire and drove off the rest.

The II. Bataillon of Grenadier-Regiment 146 then turned its attention to the forward platoon of D Company but the latter pulled back to the rest of the company at the edge of the cliff, and called down artillery on the attacking Germans, forcing them to retire. There they were joined by A Company, who called down another 'stonk' on the Germans massing for an attack. It was then that they heard an order in near-English to 'Feex bayawnets!' Rising to the challenge the company fixed their own bayonets and charged at the enemy, driving them off. By 3 a.m., however, the situation was becoming untenable and, lacking contact with the 23rd Battalion, their flank protection on the right, the battalion pulled back over the Moro river.

The one success of the day fell to the 23rd Battalion. Beginning their advance at 2 p.m. the three attacking companies encountered



PAT GOURDIE

Left: Captain Hamish Dean's tank, also from C Squadron, slipped over a bank near the top of the ridge after its driver became temporarily blinded by a burst of fire from the co-axial machine gun in the turret. This is another photo taken by Captain Gourdie.



ATL DA-03263

Left: Though the 23rd Battalion suffered heavily in their attack up Sfasciata ridge on the 15th, they did manage to cut the Orsogna—Ortona road in the vicinity of the cemetery, about a kilometre north-east of the town. This was then used as the



PERRY ROWE

jumping-off point for the attacks towards Orsogna later that day and again the following day. *Right:* The gate has been restored and the cemetery itself has been enlarged after the war. Even the shattered trees have re-grown.



ATL DA-06246

However, before the New Zealand attack got underway, a German counter-attack came in against the 21st Battalion further back on the Orsogna—Ortona road, three PzKpfw IVs from the 8. Kompanie of Panzer-Regiment 26 of the 26. Panzer-Division advancing down the road from the north-east. One of the panzers was eventually hit and set on fire by Lieutenant Ron Horton's Sherman from C Squadron of the 18th Armoured Regiment. It eventually exploded in a

spectacular fashion, the blast lifting its turret off the hull. George Kaye took this photograph of the wreck on June 14, 1944, from the engine deck of another panzer in front of it that was knocked out during another German counter-attack the following night (see page 20). The dark objects seen in the distance further down the road are most probably some of the other German tanks that were disabled during that later action.

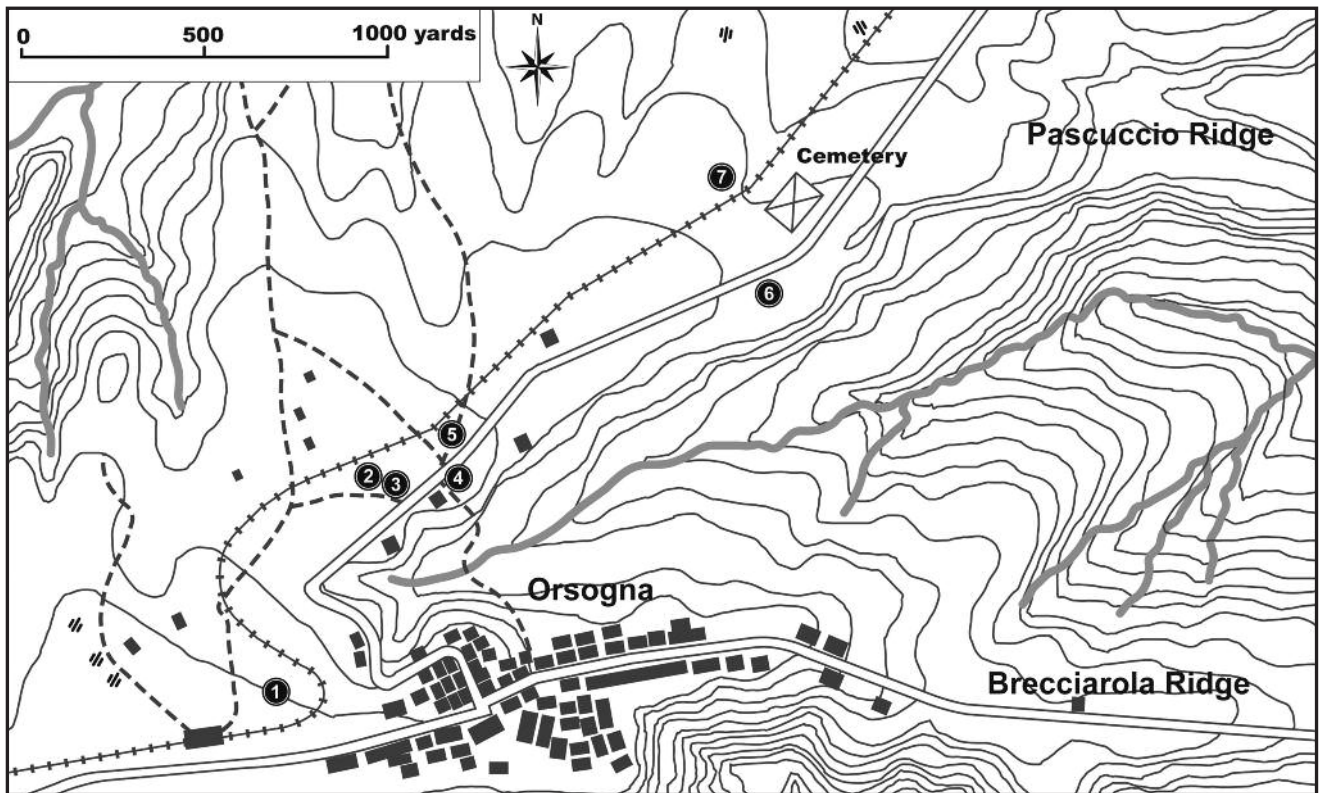
virtually no opposition as they made their way up Sfasciata ridge and just over an hour later were digging in, having taken the greater part of the ridge. Their reserve company joined them shortly afterwards. Later, Italian muleteers brought up their reserve ammunition, 3-inch mortars and other heavy equipment.

Realising the situation was hopeless, General Freyberg eventually called off the attack, though little did he know how perilous the situation had been for the Germans in Orsogna. Around 7.50 p.m., when Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 26 (Hauptmann Hans Klemme) put in their final counter-attack on a New Zealand penetration on the south-east side of the town, they had used up the last of their reserves. Such was their desperation that the 26. Panzer-Division had requested assistance from Major Grassmel of the III. Bataillon of Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 4. These troops arrived in the town around midnight on December 7/8 and helped restore the situation there.



PERRY ROWE

Looking north-east down the SS538, the Orsogna to Ortona road, today.



The fourth attack against Orsogna was a tank-only effort, made by the 20th Armoured Regiment in the afternoon of the 15th. The lack of supporting infantry support cost the unit heavily, both in this attack and in the renewed attempt the following day. In all, the 20th lost 20 tanks on December 15 and 16. This map marks the positions of those illustrated and of some others mentioned in the text.

[1] Sergeant Theo Dore, C Squadron, December 15. [2] Lieutenant Cliff Shirley, C Squadron, December 15. [3] Lieutenant Ivan Walton, A Squadron, December 16. [4] Major Pat Barton, C Squadron, December 15. [5] Sergeant Gib Dalton, A Squadron, December 16. [6] Captain Alan Shand, C Squadron, December 15. [7] Lieutenant Ian Carson's troop, C Squadron, December 15.

ORSOGNA — OPERATION 'FLORENCE'

Though the attack on December 7 had been a dismal failure, the foothold the 23rd Battalion had secured on the Sfasciata ridge had opened up another line of approach to Orsogna, particularly as there was also a reasonable cart track running from the Moro river ford up the ridge. On the night of December 8/9, with artillery drowning the noise, two bulldozers from the Mechanical Equipment Platoon moved all of 23rd Battalion's six-pounders up to them and improved the track for tanks. The following night a tractor hauled 28 tanks from A and C Squadrons of the 18th Armoured Regiment from the ford up to an area of relatively flat ground. From here seven of C Squadron's tanks moved up to the 23rd Battalion's positions, losing three on the way.

Orders for an attack were eventually issued on December 14. This involved the 23rd Battalion seizing the stretch of the Orsogna—Ortona road north of the cemetery, while the 21st Battalion was to attack north-west across the ravine north of Sfasciata to the ridge beyond. Once they were in place, the 18th Armoured Regiment was to move up and provide support in the event that the Germans launch a counter-attack, as well as exploit towards the west should the opportunity arise. After this, the 20th Armoured Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel John McKergow), with the 22nd Motor Battalion, was to exploit south-west towards Orsogna, initially with the object of capturing some high ground behind the town and thus isolate the latter — that is until Brigadier Kippenberger decided against the use of the motorised infantry. In support of all this, the 26th Battalion on the Brecciarola ridge and the 25th Battalion on the Pascuccio ridge were to link up with the 23rd Battalion at the cemetery. By now, with Grassmel's III. Bataillon of Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 4 in

Orsogna, Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 26 had taken over the right-hand sector of the division, along with the 6. Kompanie of Panzer-Regiment 26. Nevertheless the Germans were experiencing a severe shortage of infantry, the commander of Panzer-grenadier-Regiment 9 having been reprimanded for employing their anti-tank platoon as infantry.

At 1 a.m. on December 15, in bitter cold and icy showers of rain, the New Zealand barrage opened up, some of it, unfortunately, falling on the 23rd Battalion as they were forming up on their start line. There were many casualties as a result of this, among them the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Romans, who died several days later. Nevertheless, the leading companies reached both the road and railway, overrunning and almost wiping out the 6. and 7. Kompanie of the II. Bataillon of Panzer-grenadier-Regiment 9. At the same time, the 23rd Battalion cut off the 5. Kompanie forcing them to fight their way out of the pocket. By now, though, the 23rd Battalion were in a precarious position, having lost over 40 per cent of their assault force, and were unable to extend their positions to reach the cemetery, though they did manage to link up with the forward companies of the 25th Battalion on the Pascuccio ridge.

The Germans, it turned out, were in a worse position, the II. Bataillon of Panzer-grenadier-Regiment 9 suffering heavily in the attack, as well as losing most of their anti-tank guns and other heavy weapons. This resulted in a gap being opened up between them and the II. Bataillon of Panzer-grenadier-Regiment 67 on their left that was only plugged by pulling in elements of the II. Bataillon of Grenadier-Regiment 146 and other troops.

Over on the right the 21st Battalion had an easier time of it. Major George Hawkesby of

B Company led two platoons up the right side of a re-entrant, while the other platoon followed the left side, eventually reaching their objective unopposed. C Company had to scramble up a gully until halted by a machine-gun nest, their commander, Captain Robert Horrocks, being killed when he went to investigate. The nest was located and dealt with by A Company when they arrived. Later, 2nd Lieutenant Allen Dale's No. 13 Platoon came under fire from a casa (farmhouse), which they surrounded, taking 11 prisoners, including four officers, one of whom was initially reluctant to leave. The remaining Germans then withdrew.

Around 5 a.m. three PzKpfw IVs and a troop carrier were sighted advancing along the road from Arielli. They drove into the middle of Nos. 10 and 11 Platoons' positions and opened fire, killing one man, while a round fired from a PIAT gun failed to explode against one tank. One of the panzers turned down towards the casa captured by No. 13 Platoon, forcing them to retire, whereupon a crewman climbed out and ran inside, before returning to his vehicle. The tank then fired a couple of rounds at the house, then pulled back to the other tanks. Another of the panzers drove forward towards B Company of the 23rd Battalion where it was engaged at 20 metres' range by Private Bob Clay with a PIAT, at first to no effect. It then closed to within ten metres of Clay, who, after a misfire, lobbed another round at it. This one jammed the turret ring and killed its commander, whereupon the tank quickly reversed. The whole force then retired.

With the infantry up on their objectives, C Squadron (Captain Hamish Deans) from the 18th Armoured Regiment began its move up but just half a kilometre from their starting point Lieutenant Owen Burn's tank slipped off the track and came to rest

JEFF PLOWMAN



TOM SHERLOCK

Private Tom Sherlock from the 27th Machine Gun Battalion took this photo of an abandoned Sherman III. As well as a penetration in the side and scorings of bullet marks, it appears to have run off its right track after hits to its suspension.



PERRY ROWE

Perry found that it was 150 metres forward of the cemetery suggesting that it was the Sherman commanded by Captain Alan Shand of C Squadron, 20th Armoured Regiment, which was knocked out on the 15th (marked [6] on the map).



TOM SIDNEY

The same Sherman appears on the right in this image. The other tank, which seems to have slipped off the road, has a triangle on its turret, indicating A Squadron, but it is unknown who commanded it. This area was under the sights of an

88mm gun located to the west, which may well have knocked out both vehicles. This image is actually a still from cine footage shot by Lieutenant Tom Sidney of Divisional Signals when he returned to the battlefield in 1944.

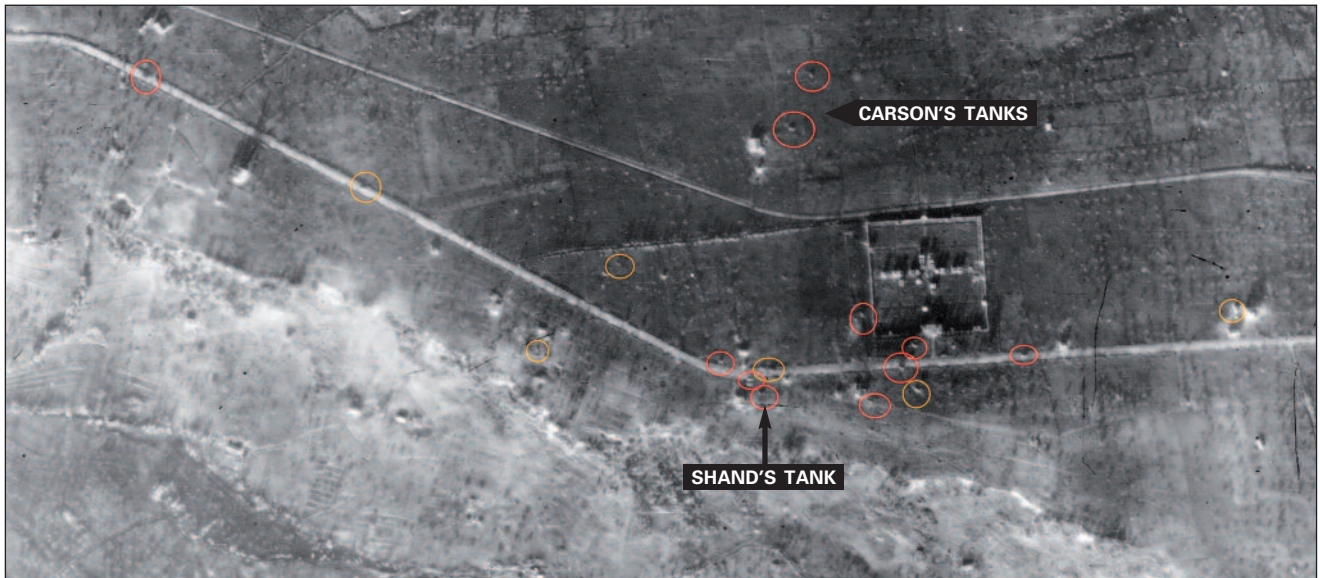
against a tree. Further up, Lieutenant Charlie Passmore's troop became bogged in the soft going in the taped path where it ran through a small vineyard. Near the top Captain Deans's tank slipped over the side of a bank after its driver was blinded by a burst of fire from the co-axial machine gun. Lieutenant Ron Horton's tank made it to the road, the other two tanks from his troop getting bogged, where he dealt with an anti-tank gun before pushing on towards the 21st Battalion. Here he was joined by another tank.

A Squadron (Major Allen Dickinson) managed to dodge the worst parts of the track. Captain Peter Burns reached the road with his troop and set off towards the 23rd Battalion but missed them in the dark and ended up 100 metres past the cemetery, realised his mistake and pulled back. Lieutenant Cullinane's troop reached the road, where it and another tank were directed by Major Dickinson towards the 21st Battalion.

Right: Looking north-east down the SS538. The cemetery is off to the left, a little further up on the other side of the road.



PERRY ROWE



TARA

At 10 a.m. on December 16, 1943 — as the New Zealand attack was still underway — a photo-reconnaissance aircraft from No. 682 Squadron took this vertical exposure showing the area around the cemetery. A number of tanks can be

discerned, among them two from Lieutenant Ian Carson's troop ([7] on the map on page 17) near the cemetery's north-west corner. Also visible is what is believed to be Captain Shand's tank just off the road to the west of the cemetery.

At 8.50 a.m. Horton's troop observed two PzKpfw IVs, with infantry riding on their engine decks, advancing along the road from Arielli. As the leading vehicle nosed around the bend of the road both Shermans opened up. One round entered the panzer around the driver's station and exited out the back, setting it on fire and killing one of its deck passengers. Horton put a second shot into it, setting it on fire and prompting the others to jump off and clamber onto the tank behind, which beat a hasty retreat. The PzKpfw IV burned for four hours after that and then blew up, scattering bits everywhere.

Right: Gefreiter Gerhard Pohle, a soldier from the 334. Infanterie-Division (which held Orsogna during the first months of 1944 — after the New Zealanders had gone) took this photo of a Sherman III when he was occupying the Parco delle Rimembranze, a First World War memorial park dedicated in 1926 on the western edge of Orsogna. It is almost certainly the mount of Sergeant Theo Dore [1], also from C Squadron of the 20th Armoured Regiment, which was knocked out by fire from some PzKpfw IVs in the afternoon of the 15th. After being hit it continued to advance towards the German lines because its driver was dead inside, his foot firmly on the accelerator pedal. At least one penetration can be seen in the turret and another in the hull and the tank appears to have caught fire. *Bottom right:* The clue to this photo's location lay in the buildings seen in the background, especially the tower of Orsogna's San Nicola di Bari Church. The view is south-eastwards and the tank has rolled to within 100 metres of the SS538, the main Orsogna—Guardiagrele road, here called Via R. Paolucci, which runs where the large trees are on the far right. The field in the foreground was originally inside a loop of railway line. After the war this was straightened out and the tracks lifted with only the bushes marking its path now. The road on the right is the Via Torre Pellegrina and this was only extended to the Via Paolucci after the tracks were lifted. The Parco delle Rimembranze, where Pohle was dug in, is some distance away to the right.



GERHARD POHLE



PERRY ROWE

Right: On the night of December 15/16, the Germans launched another counter-attack to restore their positions along the Orsogna—Ortona road, this time using four PzKpfw IVs, five Flammpanzer III flame-throwing tanks and two Semovente assault guns. Like with the counter-attack of the day before, it came in from the north-east. This PzKpfw IV, which was in the lead, came to grief on the road after passing the wreck of the panzer that had been destroyed in the earlier action (see page 16). According to the combat reports for the 7. Kompanie of Panzer-Regiment 26, the Germans thought it was immobilised by a direct hit but in actual fact it had run on some Hawkins grenades placed there by the 21st Battalion. The vehicle appears to have caught fire and, judging by the missing hatches on the glacis plate, also suffered an internal explosion. This photo was taken by Pat Gourdie, who visited the scene some time after the first snowfall on New Year's Day in 1944.



PAT GOURDIE

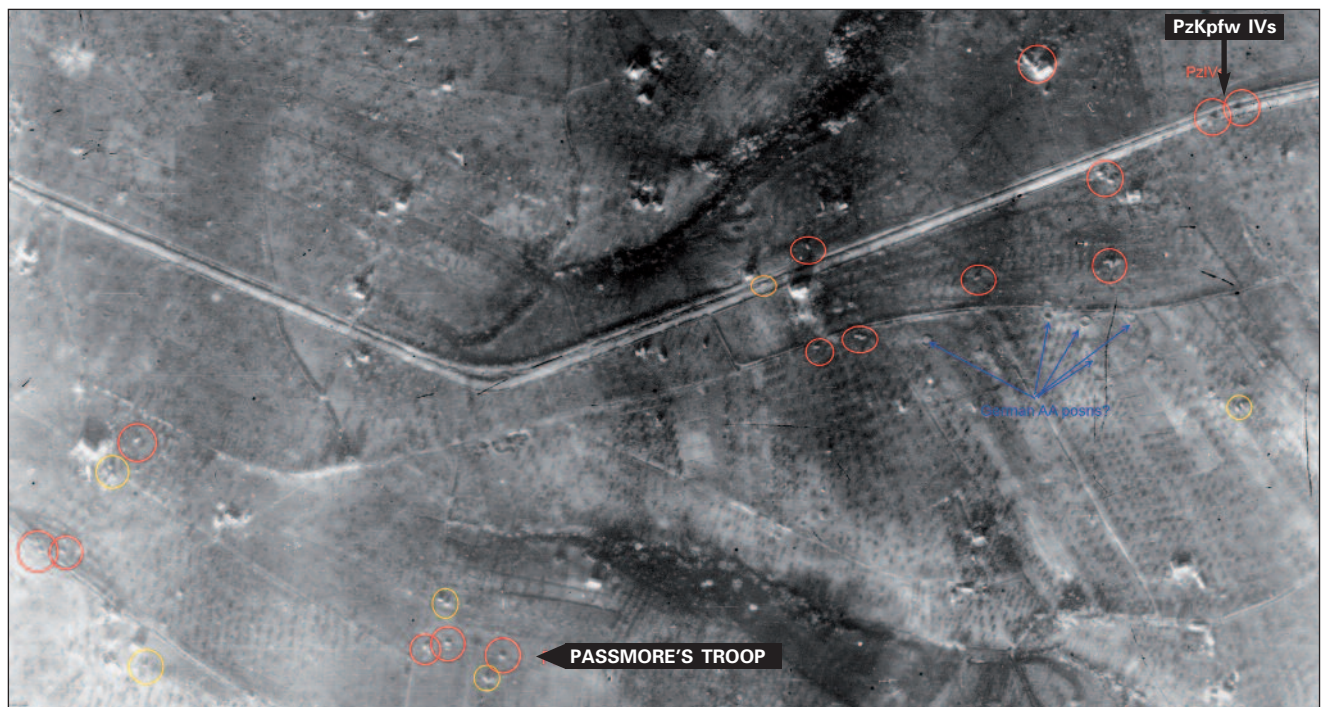
B Squadron was now ordered to join the rest of the 18th Armoured Regiment on the road, though by now they were considered too weak to exploit towards Orsogna. Nor was the 23rd Battalion in any position to assist either. Instead Brigadier Kippenberger ordered the 20th Armoured Regiment to send up C Squadron (Major Pat Barton), the squadron crossing the Moro ford with the assistance of a bulldozer around 10.30 a.m. Once there, with the support of two companies from the 28th Maori Battalion, they were to pass through the 23rd Battalion and strike out for Orsogna. At this stage no orders had yet been issued to the 28th Battalion to that effect, instead they were still expecting to merely relieve the 23rd Battalion that night.

In the meantime, the slackening of German fire prompted Kippenberger to order a reconnaissance in force towards Orsogna. At 1 p.m. two troops of tanks from the 18th Armoured Regiment set off but had only managed to advance 100 metres past the cemetery before Lieutenant Cliff Hawkins's



PERRY ROWE

The small bend is around two kilometres north up the SS538 from the cemetery. The single-track railway line to Ortona is now disused but its electric wire supports remain.



TARA

This aerial, another one taken by No. 682 Squadron on December 16, shows the same stretch of the Orsogna—Ortona road and the area around it. A number of tanks are

visible, in particular the two PzKpfw IVs knocked out at the slight bend in the road and Lieutenant Passmore's troop bogged down on the 15th (see page 15).

Right: After the 18th Armoured Regiment had dealt with one other PzKpfw IV, they turned their attention to the Flammpanzer III, knocking them out by noting where the flame was coming from, sweeping the area with their co-axial machine guns to see ricochets sparking up in the darkness and then following that up with armour-piercing rounds. The flame-throwers, though fearsome in the dark, were not particularly effective, and caused no casualties to the 21st Battalion. This one was abandoned after suffering damage to its track and front sprocket. The picture was again taken by Gourdie.

tank was hit by an armour-piercing shell and set on fire, killing all but him. At the same time Kippenberger ordered the 28th Maori Battalion, then at Lanciano, to move up immediately to Sfasciata ridge to assist the armour in their attack on Orsogna. He also ordered RHQ and A Squadron of the 20th Armoured Regiment up there as well, both setting off at 1.30 p.m. An hour later, transport finally arrived to take the Maori troops over to the Moro river ford.

Barton's squadron eventually reached the cemetery area at 2 p.m. with 14 tanks, the track having deteriorated considerably over the day. Here he received orders to exploit towards Orsogna with two companies from the 28th Maori Battalion with the view of blocking the western exit of the town and then entering it, as well as launching a thrust towards Guardiagrele. Meanwhile, the 6th Brigade was to be ready to occupy Orsogna from the east. If all else failed, the tanks were not to stay out long but to return to the infantry that night. Despite the fact that the Maoris were still some hours away (they did not reach the Moro river until 4.30 p.m.), Kippenberger decided to go ahead with the tank-only attack, because there were signs of confusion in the German ranks.

Barton's squadron finally began its advance at 4 p.m., their delay in starting being caused by their own rear-link tank throwing a track before setting off, Captain Robin Coote taking over that role. While the bulk of the squadron set off down the road, Lieutenant Ian Carson's troop turned to the right and swung round the back of the cemetery. Within minutes, however, all three Shermans had been knocked out by the same anti-tank gun that had destroyed Hawkins's tank earlier in the day.

Miraculously, the rest of C Squadron managed to slip past the cemetery unscathed, except for Captain Alan Shand, a round from the anti-tank gun blowing the track off his Sherman. Undeterred, Shand's gunner swung their turret round and plastered the general area with high explosive, some of the rounds striking trees, and no more fire was received from that direction for the rest of the afternoon. Next to be hit was Lieutenant Martin Donnelly's tank, a round entering the engine compartment on one side and exiting



PAT GOURDIE



GOOGLE

The vehicles seen in the background of the pictures of the two PzKpfw IVs knocked out next to each other (see page 16 and *opposite*) helped to narrow down the location of the Flammpanzer to a spot 200 metres further up the road. While most buildings have been remodelled and expanded, this is the only one in the area not set back from the road.

via the other. After its crew got out, another round passed right through the turret.

The rest of the squadron deployed off the road and started engaging casas, haystacks and any likely target. Slamming high-explosive rounds through the doors or windows of the houses or armour-piercing shells right

though the building they forced the German infantry out into the open, where they machine-gunned them with their co-axial guns, or the haystacks and barns where they tried to hide. Some Germans put their hands up to surrender but the squadron could take no prisoners and just pushed on. Further on,



PAT GOURDIE



PAT GOURDIE



PAT GOURDIE

Left: Pat Gourdie also shot a cine film on the day he visited the battlefield. This still of the Flammpanzer showing the stanchion along the railway line reveals that it was on the opposite side of the road to the railway line. As Gourdie panned to the right (toward Arielli) across the front of the Flammpanzer this

PzKpfw IV (*centre*) came into view. The number on the rear of the turret was 735 (*right*), revealing that it is from the 7. Kompanie of Panzer-Regiment 26, the second that they lost on that night. It was knocked out by Lieutenant Owen Burn's Sherman from C Squadron, 18th Armoured Regiment.

Right: A second Flammpanzer III ended up a short distance further east up the road. According to a sketch map by Alexander Craig, who was a platoon sergeant in the 21st Battalion at the time, both flame-throwing tanks were disabled on the section of the road adjacent to the railway line and, as the track is not visible in this shot, this tank probably had turned around to face back towards Arielli when it was knocked out. This squares with an account by Captain Richard Abbott, commander of 21st Battalion's C Company, which states that one of the Flammpanzers turned around, ran over a Hawkins mine, which disabled it, and then started flaming the area. Having thus revealed its position, it was quickly knocked out by a Sherman from the 18th Armoured Regiment. The II23 on the turret suggests that it was from the 2. Flamm-Kompanie under the command of Leutnant Fay.



PHIL HORNE

Lieutenant Cliff Shirley's tank bellied in the soft ground, forcing him and his crew to remain inside till nightfall.

With darkness falling, the lead troop under Lieutenant Percy Brookes ran into three hay-covered PzKpfw IVs. Sergeant Theo Dore's tank took several armour-piercing rounds in the turret, killing the gunner and loader, and then more in the hull. Dore himself, though wounded, managed to get out but the tank kept on moving until Brookes climbed on board to rescue the driver, only to discover that he was dead at the controls.

Further back, aiming at the muzzle flashes of the German tanks, the rest of the squadron opened up, using the light of their shells' tracer to illuminate their targets. Within seconds one PzKpfw IV was hit and burst into flames, lighting up the others. A second panzer, already moving away, managed to take shelter behind a building but the other was hit several times and went up in flames. Brookes's Sherman was in turn fired upon by two anti-tank guns, which were engaged by WOII Jock Laidlaw's tank. Both guns were hit and destroyed, one spinning over like a Catherine Wheel.



GOOGLE

Right: The house beside which the panzer stood has gone but this is the approximate comparison.



Around 5 p.m. Barton — having now lost seven of his 14 tanks — put out an urgent call for infantry support and was told that a company of the 23rd Battalion would be with them in an hour. However, with the light fading fast, their situation was becoming precarious. Barton asked his battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel McKergow, for permission to withdraw, which was granted. Twenty minutes later Kippenberger instructed them to stay on until the infantry came up but it was already too late. The surviving tanks were already on their way back along the road to the cemetery, running the gauntlet through houses that the Germans had re-occupied after the tanks had gone forward. Barton's tank, in the lead, was hit low on the front, wrecking the final drive, and he and his crew transferred to Captain Coote's tank before reaching the cemetery. Around 7 p.m. they were joined by the first elements of the 28th Maori Battalion.

Left: Unfortunately, the run of aerial photos taken by the Spitfire PR.XI photo-reconnaissance aircraft of No. 682 Squadron on December 16 did not cover this particular section of the Orsogna—Ortona road so we have used a present-day aerial to indicate the positions of the five panzers knocked out along this stretch during the two German counter-attacks on December 15 and the night of December 15/16.

GOOGLE



WILHELM WEIER

Right: At 8 a.m. on December 16 — the German counter-attack on the 21st Battalion to their rear having been staved off — the 20th Armoured Regiment and the 28th Maori Battalion renewed the attack on Orsogna, the fifth New Zealand attempt to take it. During this attack Lieutenant Ivan Walton's tank [3], leading No. 1 Troop of A Squadron, was hit on the tracks and disabled by a mine. From his position in the Orsogna school, Unteroffizier Weier from Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 4 saw the tank being immobilised next to a house on the ridge road and took this picture of it.

ORSOGNA — DECEMBER 16

With the coming of night, the Germans made another attempt to restore their positions along the Orsogna—Ortona road. Having exhausted its reserves, the 26. Panzer-Division was in need of support so Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 4 sent over a company that evening. In addition Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6 (of the 2. Fallschirmjäger-Division but partly detached to the 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division) sent the 13.



PERRY ROWE

The building seen on the left in Weier's photo has been extended and many new houses have sprung up along the ridge road (SS538, here known as Via Ortonese). Thus the house beside which Walton's tank was disabled is now hidden by the villa seen on the extreme left.



WILHELM WEIER

Left: Just minutes later, a black column of smoke further to the right alerted Weier to the destruction of another tank — that of Sergeant Gib Dalton of Walton's troop [5] — and he took another snapshot from the school window. From where the tank is burning a sunken road can be seen leading



PERRY ROWE

down from the main road into a gully. *Right:* All of the buildings seen in the wartime picture survive among the new development. The sunken road is the Via Fontana which runs across the gully to Orsogna, entering it just east of the school building.



Left: With two knocked-out tanks so close at hand, Weier took a party of his men over to the other side of the gully, stopping first at Walton's tank and taking this picture of it. Its crew had continued to fight on until their ammunition was exhausted after which they bailed out. However, a high-explosive shell detonating near the tank wounded both Walton and his gunner, Trooper Tom Herbison, and their radio operator, Trooper Jack Perrin, was knocked out cold. Before he evacuated his vehicle, Walton had ordered the other two tanks of his troop to

Right: Unable to find the crew of the Sherman, Weier and his men next went over to Gib Dalton's tank, which they found fully ablaze with a dark plume of black smoke pouring out of the turret. Dalton and Troopers Katie Thomas (wireless operator) and Eric Kneebone (gunner) had managed to get out of the turret, though both Dalton and Kneebone suffered serious burns and leg injuries. The hull crew, Troopers George Drysdale and Selwyn Naylor, also got out through the flames but got separated from the others (though wounded, they got back to friendly lines). The other three took shelter in the small barn seen on the right where, shortly after, they were joined by Walton's crew who had managed to make their way here from their tank. Searching around, Weier and his men soon found the eight New Zealanders, five of whom were badly wounded. Seeing their condition, he made his way back to the school building and brought back his unit's medical officer, Oberstabsarzt Major Dr Hockenleiter, as well as some water, wine and juice. He then arranged for the evacuation of the wounded to the school, though Herbison died in the barn before this could take place.



return to squadron headquarters at the cemetery. As we have seen, Sergeant Dalton's tank had fallen victim to the German anti-tank fire before he could get away but Corporal Bill de Lautour's Sherman, which had been midway between the other two, managed to escape after taking shelter behind a farmhouse. *Right:* The house where Walton's tank came to grief still stands on the Orsogna—Ortona road at its junction with Via Chiusa and is locally known as Stella Rosa after the red star on its facade.



and 14. Kompanie into Orsogna, while their III. Bataillon (Major Hans Pelz) was sent over from Arielli. There they joined a force of four PzKpfw IVs from the 7. Kompanie of Panzer-Regiment 26 (Oberleutnant Ruckdeschel), along with five Flammpanzer IIIs and two Semovente assault guns from the 1. Flamm-Kompanie (Leutnant Niess) and 2. Flamm-Kompanie (Leutnant Fay). This force finally set off for the cemetery around 3.15 p.m., the tanks operating along the road and Pelz's battalion on either side of it.

The attack fell first on the 21st Battalion when some of the flame-thrower tanks

Left: An important clue for finding the comparison was the railway stanchion seen just left of the tall house. This is the only one along the line that is curved, not straight (probably because of the railway crossing at that point), and it puts Dalton's tank on the north side of the Via Ortonese, just opposite its junction with the Via Fontana. The view is eastwards, away from Orsogna.



Left: Before heading back to the school, Weier photographed yet a third Sherman, which he found burned-out and abandoned immediately across the road from Dalton's tank. It is almost certainly the mount of Major Pat Barton, commander of C Squadron, 20th Armoured Regiment [4], knocked out the evening before.

started to burn up the houses in D Company's area. Then, when one of the leading PzKpfw IVs nosed past the knocked-out panzer at the bend in the road (disabled in the previous day's action), it ran onto some Hawkins grenades that the battalion had laid around it, the explosion blowing a coupling off the right track. Some of its crew got out and attempted to fix it but were soon picked off by tanks from the 18th Armoured Regiment.

The second PzKpfw IV down the road was tackled by Lieutenant Burn, who allowed it to come to within 150 metres of his Sherman, his gun having been trained on it for some time. When it loomed out of the mist, his gunner fired four rounds in quick succession, putting it out of action. The Sherman crews then concentrated on the other panzers, watching for the spurt of flame from their gun, then sweeping the area with co-axial fire before following up with an armour-piercing round. One of the flame-thrower tanks further back turned around and ran over a Hawkins grenade and was immobilised. Its commander then started flaming the area, silhouetting the tank's position until it was hit and knocked out. When another of the Flammpanzer was knocked out, they gave up their attack.

Having held back, possibly awaiting the outcome of the tank battle, the paratroopers now made their move, the attack falling on the 21st Battalion and B and D Companies of the 23rd Battalion. The main body of them formed up on the reverse slope of the ridge, attacking first along the open right flank of D Company of the 21st. This was beaten off by mortar and artillery fire. They then concentrated in the centre on A Company's positions. Later 2nd Lieutenant Albert Burton from No. 11 Platoon, 21st Battalion, brought over a Sherman, which sprayed the area with machine-gun fire, lighting up a haystack on a ridge behind the enemy. Silhouetted against this the paratroopers were easy targets. They eventually withdrew, leaving behind 50 dead, among them Major Pelz. By 6 a.m. the position was secure.

Just two hours later, the New Zealanders made a second attempt towards Orsogna from the cemetery. This time by both A Squadron (Major John Phillips) and Barton's depleted C Squadron of the 20th Armoured Regiment, with A and D Companies from the 28th Maori Battalion following 300 to 400 metres behind. C Squadron set off first but just past the cemetery Barton, now in Lance-Sergeant Jack Groufsky's tank, took a direct hit, killing Groufsky and mortally wounding the gunner, Trooper Bill Sinclair. Barton was about to transfer to Lieutenant Stan Morris's



Posing in the smoke in front is one of Weier's men, Obergefreiter Konrad Schäfer. Right: The Sherman stood facing eastwards on the Via Ortonese, just a few metres past where the Via Fontana descends from that road into the gully below Orsogna. Unfortunately, trees now obscure the view of the town.



When George Kaye returned to Orsogna in 1944, he took this photo looking north-east along the Orsogna—Ortona road. Standing at the bend in the road is the same Sherman as pictured by Weier. According to him, the paratroopers had used a Teller mine to knock it out. Orsogna is off the picture to the right.



The same view, looking north-east down the main road. Just off to the left is the spot where Walton's Sherman was knocked out. The white building on the right is a survivor from 1943. It can be seen in the first shot that Weier took from the school and is indicated in the comparison on page 23.

Right: Just after setting off from the barn, Weier's men and Walton's crew stopped by the latter's tank where Weier took this snapshot. L-R: Lance-Corporal Coleman, Obergefreiter Schäfer, Trooper Alec Percasky (Walton's hull machine-gunner) and Obergefreiter Hans Lewald.

tank when a bogey from this tank was shot off. He then went back to his RHQ and secured another tank. Captain Shand was in the process of burying one of Barton's crew when he noticed that his own tank was on fire. As he climbed onto it to put out the fire, another shell smashed into it, completing its destruction and severely wounding him.

A Squadron then took over the lead and forged ahead, shooting up haystacks and casas, and outrunning the Maori infantry in the process. Radio contact between them also broke down after netting-in their radios because of problems with the aerials of their No. 38 sets. The Maori infantry, in turn, were forced to ground some 50 to 100 metres beyond the cemetery by German fire. In the meantime, the tank attack ran into trouble. A number of Shermans came under fire from anti-tank guns and had to take shelter behind buildings.



WILHELM WEIER



WILHELM WEIER

Walton's crew were then marched back to Orsogna, with Trooper Jack Perrin in the lead . . .



WILHELM WEIER

. . . followed by Percasky (in front) and Coleman. The surviving wounded — Walton, Dalton, Thomas and Kneebone — were carried into Orsogna on stretchers.



PERRY ROWE

From wintry battlefield to quiet summer day. New houses now stand in the double S-bend where Via Ortonese passes around the head of the valley.



Weier and his men took their captives back to their main strong point, the school on Corso Umberto I. However, Dalton died the next day and Kneebone two days later.

Lieutenant Ivan Walton's No. 1 Troop continued on towards the railway station at Orsogna until his tank was hit on the tracks and disabled, taking two more hits after that. The crew carried on fighting until all their ammunition was expended, silencing two anti-tank guns, Walton then ordering the rest of his troop to return to headquarters before he and his crew abandoned the tank. Unfortunately, before they could get away from it, a high-explosive shell detonated nearby, wounding Walton and his gunner, Trooper Tom Herbison.

Further back, Corporal Bill de Lautour managed to get his tank in behind a casa where his driver turned it around before racing back towards the cemetery, chased by several armour-piercing rounds.

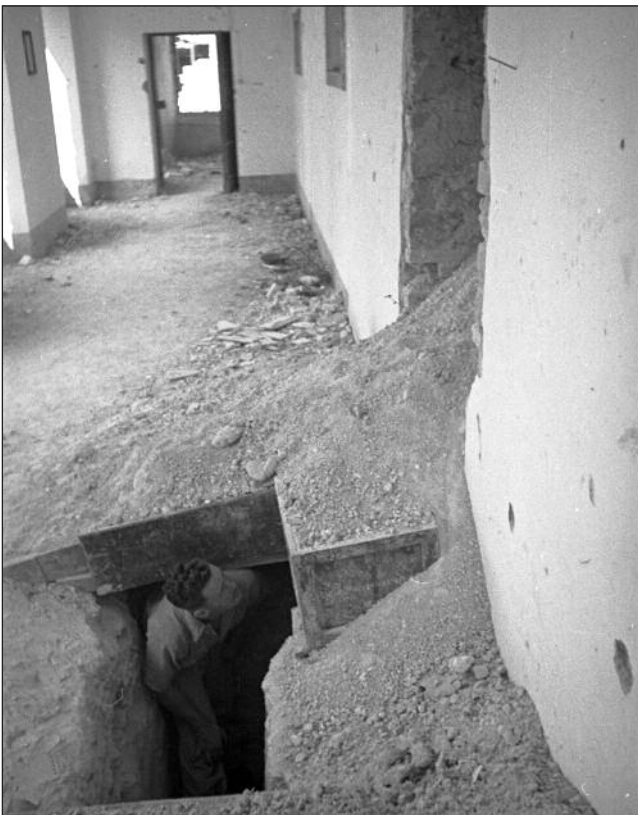
Sergeant Gib Dalton was not as lucky. His tank had halted between two houses and was engaging targets when his tank was hit and brewed up. The two drivers escaped but the turret crew was not so lucky. With Dalton and Trooper Eric Kneebone severely wounded, Trooper Katie Thomas carried them over to a small shed, where they were joined by Walton's crew. All were eventually captured by the Fallschirmjäger.

De Lautour's tank made it back safely to Major Phillips's tank only to see it get hit and brew up as they pulled alongside it. Shortly afterwards, Lieutenant Walter Dougall's tank was hit by a 'needle gun' (most probably a Panzerschreck recently issued to the paratroopers) and started to burn slowly. He and his crew managed to extinguish the fire and then made it back to the cemetery

By now, with the attack clearly failing, an attempt was made by A Company of the 28th Maori Battalion to work round to the right and locate the anti-tank guns but they were too well camouflaged. Instead at 10 a.m. Kippenberger ordered the remaining tanks to withdraw behind the Maori battalion. C Squadron initially remained where they were, while A Squadron pulled back to a small chapel. All were still at the mercy of the German fire and when another tank from A Squadron HQ was hit and brewed up, the tanks pulled back behind the cemetery, A Squadron first, followed by C. Even there the German fire proved very intense and they were forced to withdraw further, two more tanks being hit and disabled, leaving them only five runners in C Squadron, seven in A Squadron and two in RHQ.



The building, with all its war damage repaired, is still in use as a state elementary school today. The view is back towards the town centre.



When George Kaye returned to Orsogna on June 18, 1944 he took the opportunity to examine the interior of the school. The paratroopers had managed to enhance the already significant protection provided by the thick school walls by digging covered trenches in the ground floor.



Saverio Malatesta, who took the comparison for us, found it to have been in the corridor on the side nearest to the valley. Offices and classrooms run off it on the right. Since the war an elevator has been built further down the corridor with another wall and door added in front of it.

Right: On December 24 the 2nd New Zealand Division launched an attack towards the Fontegrande ridge, north of the Orsogna—Ortona road. It was their final attempt to gain Orsogna, this time by outflanking it from the north. What followed was a day of heavy combat before the feature was secured. One of the early casualties was this Sherman tank from Lieutenant Rae Familton's No. 5 Troop in B Squadron of the 20th Armoured Regiment that struck a mine as it turned off the main road. Visible further down is Major Barton's Sherman that was knocked out at the junction with the Via Fontana (see page 15). Orsogna is on the left, with the multi-windowed school building standing out prominently.



ATL DA-08251

STALEMATE

Despite all these setbacks, the 2nd New Zealand Division's offensive was not entirely spent. On December 17, the 18th Armoured Regiment sent its 13 mobile tanks towards Arielli, accompanied by a platoon of infantry from the 21st Battalion. All went well until the leading tank crossed the railway line and was hit on the cupola ring by an anti-tank weapon, the round killing the commander. The tanks then proceeded to shoot up the houses in the village but several of them became stuck in the mud as they tried to manoeuvre off the road. When the force came under mortar fire the attack was called off and they returned to the 21st Battalion lines, abandoning two tanks that could not be recovered in time.

There was to be one more, final attempt to gain Orsogna. Lieutenant-General Miles Dempsey of the British XIII Corps (to which the New Zealand Division became subordinated on December 15) was still keen to split the defences of the 26. Panzer-Division and 65. Infanterie-Division by sending in the British 5th Division to take Arielli. To support this, the 2nd New Zealand Division was to launch an attack on the Fontegrande ridge located north of the Orsogna—Ortona road. If all went well, there would then be the opportunity of exploiting towards the Feuduccio and San Basile ridges and ultimately turn the defences of Orsogna from the north. This task was entrusted to the 21st and 28th Maori Battalions of the 5th Brigade and the 26th Battalion, with A Squadron, 20th Armoured Regiment, in support. The exploitation phase, through or around Orsogna, was to be carried out by the 19th Armoured Regiment and the 22nd Motor Battalion. However, the problem by now was that all three battalions, despite having received reinforcements, were still under-strength, with 630-670 men out of a total establishment of 800. Many of them had also lost their enthusiasm for continuing the attack, to the extent that on the eve of the operation, 15 men from one platoon in the 21st Battalion refused to take part.

The British launched their attack on December 23 and secured all their objectives, Arielli being found deserted that night. The New Zealand assault was launched the following morning in miserably cold weather, punctuated by frequent rainstorms. Despite some battalions meeting firm resistance as they progressed forward, all were firmly established along the line of the Fontegrande ridge by nightfall and had some tanks up in support. However, with resistance hardening in front of them, and signs of the weather deteriorating further, the proposed exploitation phase was called off and the division went over to the defensive. Thus ended the battle for Orsogna and, with the Canadian capture of Ortona on December 27 (see *After the Battle* No. 183), the end of the Eighth Army's attempt to break through to Pescara. For the New Zealand Division, it represented its first defeat after a long string of successes.



SAVERIO MALATESTA

Looking down the Via Ortonese towards Orsogna today.

Moreover, it had been costly, with 413 dead, 1,150 wounded and 71 prisoners of war, a total of 1,634 casualties — 153 more than it would suffer at Cassino the following year.

Orsogna was never captured in battle. Between January 13 and 25, the New Zealand Division was relieved by the 4th Indian Division, the New Zealanders being withdrawn for rest and recuperation before transferring to the Cassino sector on the Tyrrhenian front. The Adriatic front remained static throughout the winter, various formations — the Canadian 5th Armoured Division, the 8th Indian Division and, again, the 4th Indian Division — holding the Orsogna sector in turn. Then in May 1944, in another regrouping of forces, the Italian Utili Division arrived to relieve the Indians.

In the end, Orsogna's fate was decided by the rapid northward thrust of the Allies on the Tyrrhenian coast after the fall of Cassino that same month. On June 7, the 4th Indian Division, then holding the line on the Adriatic coast, learned of the imminent departure of the Germans when a deserter from the 278. Infanterie-Division revealed that they were planning to pull back 40 kilometres. This was confirmed early the following morning when patrols found the Germans marching out with all their equipment, prompting the Indians to set off in pursuit. Further west, the German 334. Infanterie-Division likewise abandoned Orsogna, the deserted and bomb- and shell-wrecked town being finally entered by the Utili Division on June 8.



ATB

Orsogna was not finally taken until June 8, 1944 — and then by the Italian Utili Division. Today a Monument to the Civil Martyrs of Orsogna recalls the battles for the town. It was dedicated on June 8, 1994, the 50th anniversary of its liberation.