

# 6TH SOUTH AFRICAN ARMoured DIVISION



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## Beginning

The idea of a South African Armoured Division was born out of the chaos of the Western Desert Campaign, the Officers in the 1st and 2nd South African Infantry Divisions felt the need for their own armour instead of depending on other Commonwealth Armoured Units.

The formation of two strong Armoured Divisions was first discussed between Lt. Gen. G. E. Brink and Prime Minister (Field Marshal) J.C. Smuts in April 1941. At that point time, South Africa was struggling to maintain the manpower needed to sustain the 1st and 2nd Infantry Divisions in the field due to the political divisions in the Country. The 3rd South African Infantry Division was based in South Africa and provided the pool from which reinforcements were drawn to supplement the 1st and 2nd Infantry Divisions. A re-organisation committee met for the first time in May 1942 to discuss the armour option, it was decided to send three Infantry Battalions for armour training in August 1942, but the plan was rudely interrupted when Rommel launched his attack on the Gazala line in late May 1942.

Nine days after the final El Alamein offensive the South African Divisions were pulling back to regroup. The plan was for the 1st Infantry Division that was withdrawn to Quassasin and that its 1st Brigade would return to South Africa to regroup with the 7th Infantry Brigade in Madagascar to form the 1st South African Armoured Division and the 1st Infantry Divisions 2nd and 3rd Brigades would remain in Egypt to form the 6th South African Armoured Division, which would replace the 2nd Infantry Division that had been captured at Tobruk in June 1942. By late December 1942 the South African Chief of Staff was having doubts about the ability of South Africa fielding two Armoured Divisions.

By January 1943, the Allied leadership had decided at the Casablanca Conference to pursue the war by invading Sicily. A motion was also put forward in the South African parliament to enable South Africans to fight anywhere in the world. Surprisingly very few soldiers were keen to carry on fighting outside of Africa, in one of the keenest Battalions only 52% opted for world-wide service. The invasion of Sicily reduced the need for the number of Armoured Divisions as compared to those needed in the Western Desert.

This, together with further manpower shortages led to plans for the 1st South African Armoured Division being abandoned, with only the 6th South African Armoured Division being considered viable. All of the 1st South African Infantry Division Brigades were returned to South Africa for re-training and amalgamation with other Units to form the 6th South African Armoured Division. The 6th South African Armoured Division was officially formed in South Africa on 1 February 1943 with Maj. Gen. William Henry Evered Poole as its Commander. It sailed for Port Tewfik in the Suez on 30 April 1943 as a two brigade division (The 11th Armoured Brigade and 12th Motor Brigade with supporting elements).



## Training

The 6th South African Armoured Division started their training in the desert at Khataba, North West of Cairo and was focused on tank operations and integrating the Rhodesian elements into the Division. In addition, the lack of manpower had forced the amalgamation of numerous units. The period of training was finally concluded by a series of training exercises, "Exercise Cape Town" being the first from 1 – 3 December 1943 for the 11th South African Armoured Brigade and "Exercise Durban" from 5 – 7 December 1943 for the 12th South African Motorised Brigade. Training was concluded with "Exercise Tussle" as a British III Corps operation finishing on 21 January 1944 and on 23 January 1944 the division moved to Helwan. By now, the 6th South African Armoured Division had been in Egypt for months due to indecision related to its role.



But on 3 March 1944, the 6th South African Armoured Division was instructed to move to Palestine and the advance parties left on 7 March 1944. However, on 12 March 1944 this movement order was countermanded and the 6th South African Armoured Division was instructed to move to Italy. One year after arriving in the Middle East, the 6th South African Armoured Division embarked from Alexandria between 14 and 16 April 1944 to arrive in Taranto, Italy on 20 and 21 April 1944 and concentrated in the Altamura-Matera-Gravina area.

### Arrival

The 6th South African Armoured Divisions regrouping was still in progress after they disembarked at Taranto, when the 12th South African Motorised Brigade with Artillery and Support elements under Brig. R.J. Palmer were detached from the 6th South African Armoured Division, and ordered to move to the S. Elia area, a mountainous sector of the line North of Cassino in preparation to relieve the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade. The 12th South African Motorised Brigade came under the command of the 2nd New Zealand Division in the British X Corps. The 12th South African Motorised Brigade took over the sector on 6 May 1944, and relinquished it on 23 May 1944. The 12th South African Motorised Brigade held these positions until after the fall of Monte Cassino and the breakout from the Anzio beachhead, when they were withdrawn and reunited with the division. The 12th South African Motorised Brigade were the first South African troops to enter combat in Italy.

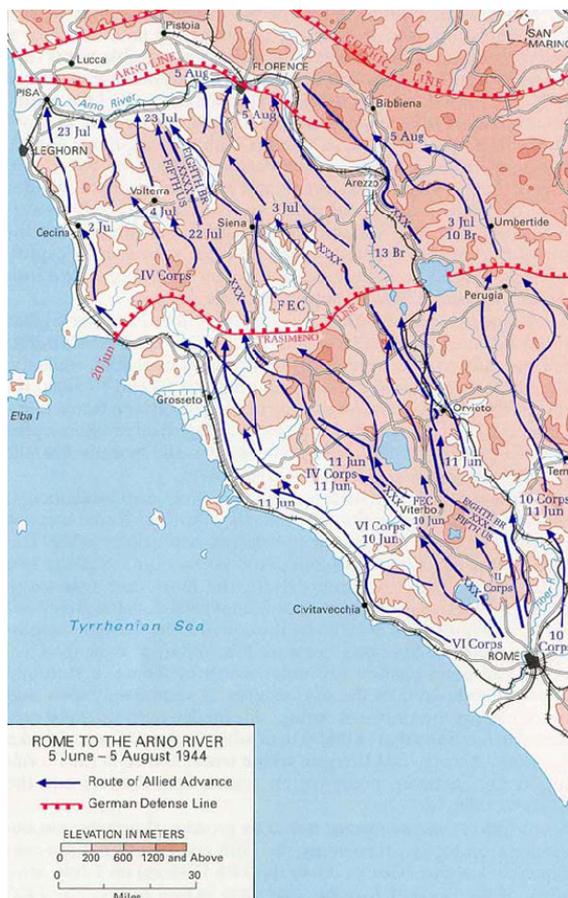
### Advance after Rome

On 20 May 1944, the 6th South African Armoured Division was brought up to a full complement of three Brigades, when the 24th Guards Brigade was put under their command. The Brigade commander was to be Brig. A. F. D. Clive who had been a Senior General Staff Officer to the British Military Mission in South Africa earlier in the war. At the end of May 1944, the 6th South African Armoured Division having formed part of the British Eighth Army's Reserve concentrated at S. Agata.



The 6th South African Armoured Division was moved forward and attached to the Canadian I Corps. The break-out from Anzio was complete, and the US Fifth Army was driving on to Rome. The 6th South African Armoured Division was ordered to advance along Highway 6, and fought its first action as a

Division on 3 June 1944, when the 24th Guards Brigade took Piglio and the 12th South African Motorised Brigade entered Paliano.



The 6th South African Armoured Division advanced with the Tiber River to the East and Lake Bolsena to the West at a rate of 10 miles (16 km) per day, outstripping their flanking Units. So, after Rome had been taken by the Allies on 4 June 1944, the 6th South African Armoured Division was ordered to move up the Via Casalina to take over the spearhead of the of British Eighth Army's British XIII Corps. On 6 June 1944, the 6th South African Armoured Division, now in the British XIII Corps, and on the extreme left of the British Eighth Army front, passed through Rome. The 11th South African Armoured Brigade under Brig. J.P.A. Furstenburg took the lead, screened by tanks of the NMR/SAAF (Natal Mounted Rifles/South African Airforce Regiment), the 6th South African Armoured Division's reconnaissance regiment. By night, forward elements had reached Civita Castellana, and the advance continued towards Viterbo. It was a bold thrust, aimed at taking advantage of the Germans confusion.

The 6th South African Armoured Divisions advance North towards Bagnoregio and onwards to Florence, was delayed by demolitions North of Viterbo, where a blown bridge was covered by German infantry and three Tiger I E tanks. With both field and medium guns heavily shelling enemy targets, 2/8 Troop of 8th Field Squadron under Lt. M.P. Pearse began construction of a culvert while under fire, but had to withdraw to defensive positions for a while when a Tiger I E approached.

Then when it became obvious after dark that the newly constructed crossing would not stand up to continual use by tanks, 2/8 Troop had to put a Bailey bridge inside it. Sappers of 12th Field Squadron relieved the exhausted men of 8th Field Squadron on 9 June 1944. It was after midnight on 9 June 1944 that a bridgehead was established over the Acqua Rossa.

At first light on 10 June 1944 "C" Squadron, NMR moved up to establish contact with the enemy defence line running North of the Acqua Rossa bridgehead, where the enemy brought down heavy mortar fire on the ILH/KimR (Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment) and SSB (Special Service Battalion). Passing through on reconnaissance at 08:00, the leading NMR tank (under Lt. H. Butcher) came under fire and was knocked out with the entire crew all being killed. Another tank soon went the same way, also a victim to an enemy anti-tank gun, before an SSB Squadron was ordered up to their assistance and knocked out the enemy gun. Heavy resistance was coming from the German 356. Infanteriedivision, which had recently arrived from Genoa under Generalmajor Hans von Rohr. The freshly committed German Division was still raw but it was supported by elements of 4. Fallschirmjägerdivision, 3. Panzergrenadierdivision, 362. Infanteriedivision and 26. Panzerdivision.



Instead of passing the 24th Guards Brigade through the bridgehead as intended, Maj. Gen. W.H.E. Poole now ordered the 11th South African Armoured Brigade in with the SSB leading, though the 4/22 Field Regiment, SAA, who was not yet in position to give covering fire. Brig. J.P.A. Furstenberg appreciated the main German axis of withdrawal on the immediate front was along Route 2, which meant that the South African Armoured Brigade on the enemy's left flank. He decided to turn the flank by ordering the SSB to advance right flank forward. The Rhodesians of "C" Squadron, SSB were at breakfast when the call came for support.

Mess tins, plates and mugs were abandoned with contents unfinished as the men raced to their tanks. The squadron was in the lead along the road and had covered barely a kilometre when its tanks were sprayed with machine-gun fire. They had struck the enemy anti-tank screen South of the railway running across their line of advance.

With "A" Squadron, SSB in right rear and "B" Squadron, SSB in left rear North of the bridgehead, the SSB had hardly formed up for the attack before they came under heavy shell-fire. Without waiting for reconnaissance or artillery support Lt. Col. C.E.G. Britz boldly decided to move on in the same formation, with "A" Squadron, SSB forming a firm base on high ground on the right flank as the NMR tanks withdrew from the action. "C" Squadron, SSB moved forward against heavy anti-tank fire from guns of all calibres from 20 to 88 mm, backed by

some 50 to 60 Spandau machine-guns sited in houses and trees, and from a number of Nebelwerfers.

- South African Units
- RDLI - Royal Durban Light Infantry
  - NMR - Natal Mounted Rifles
  - DROR - Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles
  - RLI - Rand Light Infantry
  - RB/RPS - Regiment Botha/Regiment President Steyn
  - PR - Pretoria Regiment
  - PAG - Prince Alfred's Guard
  - SSB - Special Service Battalion
  - ILH/KimR - Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment
  - RNC - Royal Natal Carbineers
  - FC/CTH - First City/Cape Town Highlanders Regiment
  - WR/DLR - Witwatersrand/De La Rey Regiment

Part of "A" Company, ILH/KimR rode into the attack on the back of the tanks. While two troops of "A" Squadron, SSB held firm base, the rest of the Squadron were ordered right and forward, to take up hull-down positions from which they put down heavy fire on the enemy's left flank to such good effect that the German infantry broke and were mown down as they tried to get away. "C" Squadron had been brought to a halt, but Lt. Col. C.E.G. Britz ordered "B" Squadron round in a wide left hook which ran into anti-tank fire. This was silenced by superb marksmanship on the part of the South African and Rhodesian tank gunners, before the SSB turned machine-guns on the enemy infantry, who broke and fled.

Lt. Col. C.E.G. Britz reckoned that the enemy was holding with a strength equivalent to a brigade with two battalions up and one in reserve, supported by divisional as well as regimental anti-tank guns. All SSB tanks except his own command tank had been committed, and they were rapidly replenished, with truck drivers displaying great courage in coming right forward in their open vehicles under fire. "C" Company, ILH/KimR was winking out enemy remnants hiding among



the cornfields, hedges and farmhouses, and artillery forward observation officers at last came forward to report to Lt. Col. C.E.G. Britz.

From 11:45 the guns of the 4/22 Field Regiment, SAA (South African Artillery) were engaging numerous targets, including enemy infantry who were effectively pinned by air-burst. Anti-tank guns to the right, in the area of Grotte S. Stefano, were knocked out by fire from 7/64 Field Battery's 25-pdr guns, and the 7/23 Medium Regiment's 5.5" howitzers brought down fire with devastating effect shortly before midday. In less than two hours artillery fire had knocked out five 88mm, sixteen 50mm anti-tank guns, three machine-guns, a Panzer IV, four Panzer III's and many infantry.

"B" Company, ILH/KimR joined "C" Company with the SSB at 14:30, while "A" Company swept the slopes towards



Celleno village, beyond the enemy's prepared positions, which followed the steep bank of the railway line running east to west through Grotte and some 4500m South of Celleno. Working in close co-operation with the tanks, ILH/KimR cleared the approaches to Celleno through a thickly wooded area studded with enemy machine-guns and Panzerfaust anti-tank posts.

Wiping out enemy pockets was a dangerous and slow process, and in order not to lose the momentum of the attack Lt. Col. C.E.G. Britz decided to keep the tanks moving. Dismounting from the Sherman tanks, "B" and "C" Companies, ILH/KimR kept working with the armour, whose "C" Squadron now advanced under the railway line and immediately met anti-tank fire from guns sited in depth along the road,

and with Infantry opposition from Panzerfausts, Spandaus and snipers.

With the railway atop a high embankment, it was impossible to cross it anywhere except where the road ran beneath the line, but "C" Squadron got through and made firm on high ground running across the road about 180 meters North of the railway. Having driven through the wooded area cleared by ILH/KimR, the tanks acted as artillery and very effectively shelled Celleno before the infantry moved in.

With "C" Squadron firm beyond the railway line, "B" Squadron passed through, carrying men of ILH/KimR on the backs of the tanks again as they made for high ground North of Celleno. Fighting with every weapon at its disposal, the Squadron got one troop on to high ground North-West of the village and overlooking it, and "C" Squadron then moved up on the right into an area which had to be cleared of determined German tank hunting parties and snipers by ILH/KimR, who were brought up by "A" Squadron and SSB reconnaissance tanks.

While Lt. Col. R. Reeves-Moore's men of ILH/KimR fought their way towards the outskirts of Celleno, their mopping-up developed into an attack on the village itself, and the SSB moved more tanks on to higher ground northeast of it, thus holding the area while the Infantry prised the Germans out. In farmhouses scattered around about 10 large buildings which looked like schools, German remnants had good cover and resisted bitterly, but they were unable to hold back the men of ILH/KimR, who took a large number of prisoners and inflicted heavy casualties.

By 20:00 that night the SSB tanks had run out of petrol and ammunition, but the enemy's fire had died down.

Brig. J.P.A. Furstenberg ordered Lt. Col. C.E.G. Britz not to continue the advance until the divisional artillery could come into action further forward to search the wooded country ahead. It was decided not to hold the ground occupied at the end of the day, and as the SSB tanks withdrew to replenish and to rest their crews, many of whom had not eaten since the previous night, they took the ILH/KimR men out with them to a position about 3 km south, to wait for the 24th Guards Brigade to pass through and continue the advance the next morning.

During the action at Celleno, Brig. J.P.A. Furstenberg ordered PAG (Prince Alfred's Guard) to cover the SSB's right flank, with support from 4/22 Field Regiment, SAA, whose guns effectively engaged the enemy.

The PAG moved up the Viterbo-Bagnoregio road, and by 12:30 on June 10th, 1944 it had reached a point about 11 km North of Viterbo, with "A" Squadron and the Reconnaissance Troop searching for a crossing over the River Malone. "B" Squadron, coming up from reserve, crossed the river but was pinned by anti-tank fire. "A" Squadron was already moving along sunken lanes only some 1370 meters from Grotte when enemy anti-tank guns scored hits on five tanks, three of which burned out. "C" Squadron covered "A" Squadron's left and "B" Squadron moved up to take over from "A" Squadron but was halted by anti-tank fire, some of which was from a range of only 180 meters.





No further progress in this sector was possible without Infantry support, but casualties were inflicted on the enemy and 28 prisoners were taken. Though it had just come under command of the 24th Guard Brigade, the PR (Pretoria Regiment), at 18:00 that day was ordered to move immediately for a shoot in support of 11th South African Armoured Brigade, and from turret-down positions plastered the Celleno-Grotte area with high explosive rounds.

The Battle of Celleno culminated as South Africa's first victory in the Italian Campaign. The 11th Armoured Brigade had suffered a total of 53 casualties, but it had severely mauled the 356. Infantry-division. A year prior to the battle, however, the 6th South African Armoured Division was still training in the desert expanses of Khataba. Under-equipped, under-strength, and unsure of their future, the 6th

South African Armoured Division was able to turn themselves into a capable, armoured, fighting force within less than a year. It was a confident and vigorous action which went far to justify Field Marshal H.R.L.G. Alexander, 1st Earl Alexander of Tunis words the previous day: "South Africans are the spearhead of the advance".

The 11th Armoured Brigade's success spread through the whole 6th South African Armoured Division and on 11 June 1944, the advance was continued in heavy rain. The 24th Guards Brigade with PR tanks under their command took the lead and ran against a strong enemy position at Bagno Regio. A divisional attack on 12 June 1944, failed to achieve its purpose, but the position was taken on 13 June 1944, after a skilful flank march by the RNC (Royal Natal Carbineers).

The 12th South African Motorised Brigade took over the lead and on 14 June 1944, and with heavy and confused fighting around Bagnoregio, the FC/CTH (First City/Cape Town Highlanders Regiment) entering the vitally important road junction of Orvieto.

Demolitions had greatly hampered the advance, despite the indefatigable work of the three engineer squadrons (8th Field Squadron, 12th Field Squadron and 17th Division Field Park Squadron). Now poor roads and bad weather further slowed down the advance to the Trasimeno Line. The 6th South African Armoured Division took Orvieto, having advanced 75 miles (121 km) in 10 days. However, their daily rate of advance had been slowed considerably by consistently being in contact with the enemy.



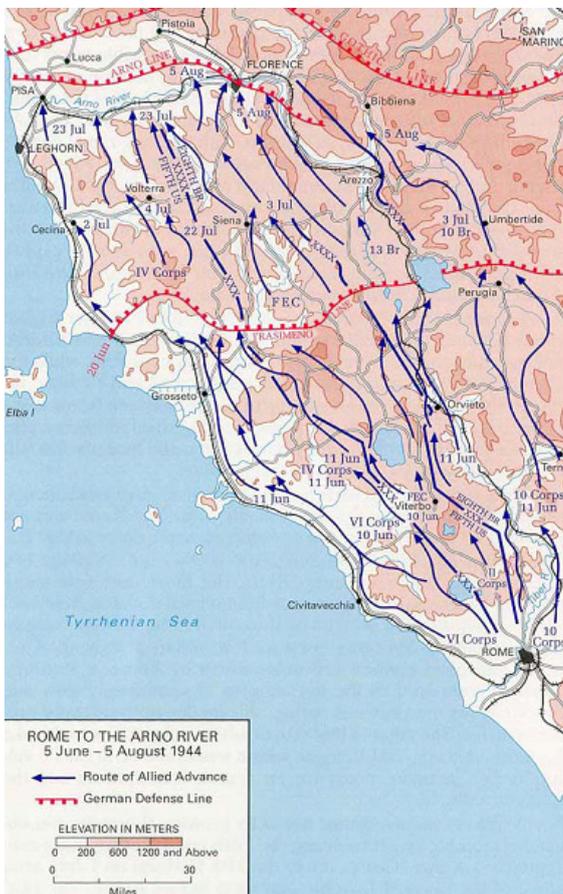
On 19 June 1944, the 6th South African Armoured Division came up against the Trasimeno Line, of which Chiusi was the main strong point in the divisional sector. The ILH/KimR of the 11th Armoured Brigade had been stopped by the German 4. Fallschirmjägerdivision on their first attempt to enter Chiusi, but by 26 June 1944, the town had been taken as a result of an attack by two British divisions on the 6th South African Armoured Division's right. During this attack on Chiusi, "A" Company, FC/CTH was leading the attack up the terraces around the town. The night of 21 June 1944 saw "A" Company surrounded by strong German infantry elements closely supported by tanks. After sustaining heavy losses, "A" Company's surviving members were forced to surrender by noon on 22 June 1944. The 24th Guards Brigade after heavy fighting supported by tanks of the PR, took Sarteano on 25 June 1944.

#### Crossing the Trasimeno Line

By 28 June 1944, after heavy fighting on the Trasimene Line had broken German resistance, the Allies streamed North with the 24th Guards Brigade reaching Chianciano and the 11th Armoured Brigade pushing North of Lake Montepulciano.

The British Eighth Army's XIII Corps advance on Florence led by the British 6th Armoured Division on the right, British 4th Infantry Division in the centre and the 6th South African Armoured Division on the left. The Division advanced in two columns through Rapolano and Palazzuolo until they encountered the LXXVI Panzer Corps on the Georg Line, a delaying position on the north side of Route 73.

The strength of the panzerkorps was not known initially and the leading elements of British XIII Corps continued to probe forward expecting the German line to crumble under pressure without the need to launch a full-scale attack. The corps fed in more battalions in an attempt to secure the Monte Lignano high ground and fighting for the hill continued on



6 and 7 July 1944, but the German 15. Panzergrenadierdivision continued to hold the heights. The 6th South African Armoured Division had been stopped on the left flank with the two Infantry Brigades spread over a 10-mile (16 km) front, and the armour had been withdrawn into reserve because of the difficult terrain.

On 7 July 1944, the 2nd New Zealand Division was brought forward from the reserves and their attack together with the British 6th Armoured Division eventually took the high ground and caused the German Corps to withdraw towards the Heinrich Line behind the River Arno on 15 July 1944. The 6th South African Armoured Division then continued their advance, directed on an axis towards Radda-Greve on the western side of the Chianti Mountains covering the southern approaches to Florence.

The 6th South African Armoured Division made good progress, advancing with two Brigades leading the advance, the 12th Motorised Brigade astride the road defining the division's axis of advance and the 24th Guards Brigade on the right flank, on the slopes of the Chianti highlands. Radda was secured on the night of 17 July 1944 and orders were then received for the 6th South African Armoured Division to secure the heights of the Chianti Highlands. The 24th Guards Brigade took Mount Maione by a night attack on the night of 18/19 July 1944 supported by the tanks of the PR while 12th Motorised Brigade attacked to take Mt. St. Michele on 20 July 1944. The 6th South African Armoured Division now held the heights of the Chianti range, dominating the Arno

Valley and the advances to Florence.

### Florence

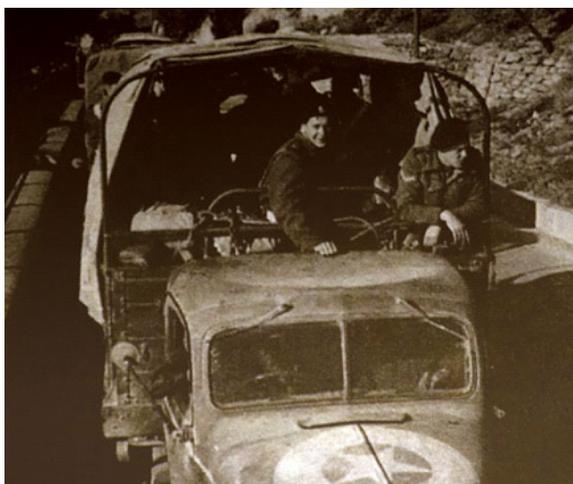
On 20 July, Gen. Sir S.C. Kirkman, the British XIII Corps Commander, issued orders for a "Powerful thrust to seize all crossings across the River Arno to the west of Florence". This effort was to be concentrated on the 6th South African Armoured Division front. The advance was to be led by the 6th South African Armoured Division with the US 4th Infantry Division to its right, supported on the flanks by the British 6th Armoured Division and 8th Indian Division.

The 6th South African Armoured Division advance was slowed at the approaches to Greve due to heavy mining, where a number of tanks were lost, but eventually the 11th Armoured Brigade succeeded in capturing Mercatale, which was defended by the German 356. Infanteriedivision supported by Tiger I E tanks. The 6th South African Armoured Division advanced through Greve and were again stopped by the German 4. Fallschirmjägerdivision on the River Greve on 24 July 1944. However, the 6th South African Armoured Division had out-flanked the German 4. Fallschirmjägerdivision who then withdrew during the night of 24/25 July 1944 allowing the South African, New Zealand and Indian divisions to advance to the Paula Line, which was reached on 28 July 1944.



Gen. Sir S.C. Kirkman again placed the South African and New Zealand divisions as the spearhead of his Corps advance, this time to break the Paula Line and to take Florence. The New Zealand Division would carry out the main assault and the South African Division would neutralize the enemy on the high ground west of Impruneta and then clear Route 2 into Florence. The attack was scheduled for 30 July 1944. Field Marshal H.R.L.G. Alexander, 1st Earl Alexander of Tunis, Commander of Allied Armies in Italy, had indicated that he had no intention of fighting in Florence and so Gen. Sir S.C. Kirkman gave orders to by-passing of the city.

On 31 July 1944, the heavy artillery support for the attack had resulted in an ammunition shortage and Gen. Sir S.C. Kirkman ordered a 24-hour pause for fresh supplies to arrive. The Desert Air Force flew over 100 sorties per day on 31 July and 1 August 1944 in support of the attack and by 3 August 1944 columns of South African, New Zealand and British 4th Infantry divisions were advancing towards Florence. By 4 August 1944, advance parties were exploring the outskirts of Florence to find that all Bridges across the Arno River viable for military transport had been destroyed.



An ILH/KimR patrol however found the smaller Ponte Vecchio bridge intact and crossed it under heavy shelling, entering into the centre of the city at 04:00, to be the first Allied troops to enter Florence.

After reaching Florence, Maj. Gen. W.H.E. Poole recorded in a Special Order of the Day, that the 6th South African Armoured Division had "Covered 601 miles (967 km) since leaving its concentration area at Taranto, its artillery had fired 201,500 rounds, the divisional engineers had built 65 bridges and had made 196 major deviations necessitated by 'blows' and demolitions. The signallers had laid 3,752 miles (6,038 km) of telephone cable".

The 6th South African Armoured Division was then withdrawn into British Eighth Army reserve for rest and maintenance in the Siena /Castelnuovo area on 6 August 1944 until 17 August 1944, when orders were issued for the 6th South African Armoured Division to be transferred from British XIII Corps to US IV Corps to partially replace divisions withdrawn to the US Seventh Army for the assault of southern France. The 6th South African Armoured Division was assigned to their new Corps in the US Fifth Army on 22 August 1944. The role of the US Fifth Army was to distract the enemy by intensive patrolling during the days preceding the British Eighth Army attack, and then to launch an offensive in the Florence area. The main effort was to be made by US II Corps astride Highway 65, in the direction of Bologna. US IV Corps was to hold the sector along the Arno to within 5 miles of Florence, and was to protect the left flank of US II Corps during its advance into the Appenines.

#### Advance on the Appenines

To continue the main Allied thrust north from Florence, the Arno River first had to be crossed. On 21 August 1944 an order announced that the 6th South African Armoured Division would pass under command of US IV Corps with effect from the following day, and would relieve the 85th US Division west of Florence. The relief of the Americans commenced on the night of 24 August 1944 and was completed on 26 August 1944.

The relief went smoothly although the 59th South African "Q" Company was bombed by eight enemy aircraft on the afternoon of 24 August 1944, and 21 PR tanks broke down on the road, because the rest period was too short to allow overhaul to be completed.

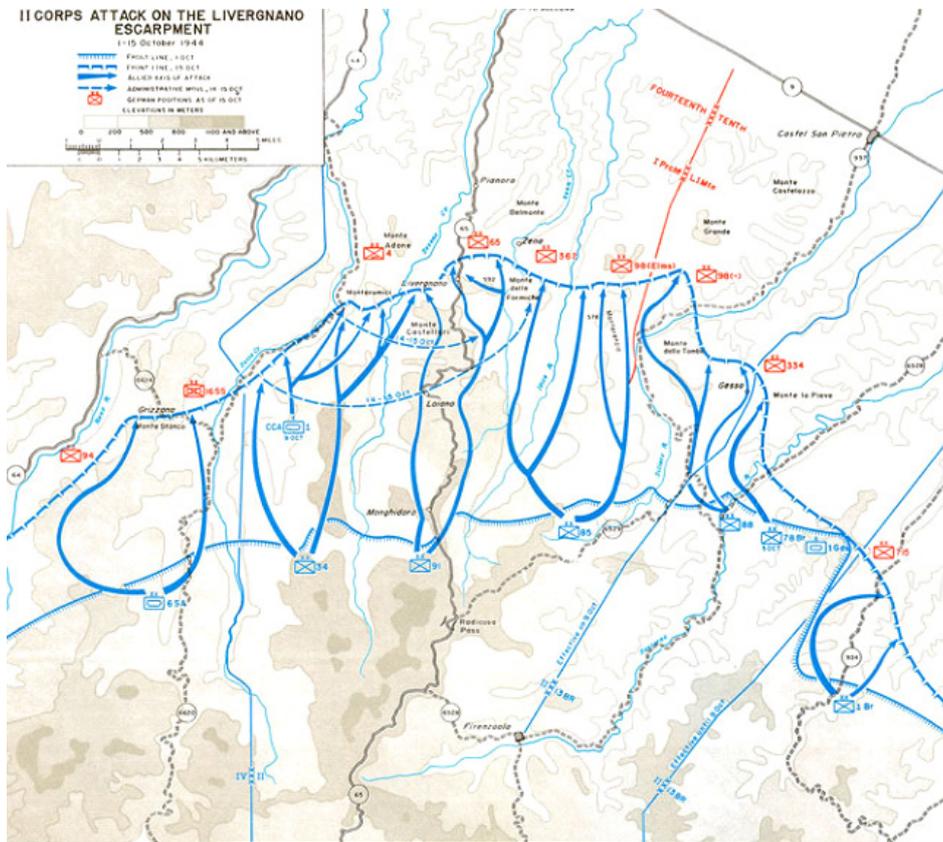
The 6th South African Armoured Division took over a front of over 20 miles along the south bank of the Arno, west of Florence. The 12th South African Motorised Brigade, with Prince Alfred's Guard (PAG) under command, held the eastern sector and the 24th Guards Brigade with Pretoria Regiment (PR) under command, the western sector. The 11th Armoured Brigade was in reserve. The 74th British Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment (now converted into an Infantry Battalion) was under command of the 12th South African Motorised Brigade, while the 166th NFLD (Newfoundland) Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, which had just joined the 6th South African Armoured Division, supported the 24th Guards Brigade.



The 6th South African Armoured Division was rather thin on the ground, but the artillery and the Royal Durban Light Infantry (RDLI) did their best to cover the wide front. The 6th South African

Armoured Division's signal squadrons had to lay some 1500 miles of cable. It was noted that the German 3. Panzergrenadierdivision was on the eastern sector as far as Empoli, and thereafter 26. Panzerdivision continued the front. Partisans frequently crossed the river and gave valuable information. It was impossible on such an extended front to watch the entire watercourse, and German patrols often infiltrated into the lines. The ration jeep and Company Quartermaster-sergeant of the RNC (Royal Natal Carbineers) were shot up, and the same night a strange voice rang through on the telephone and with unrewarded optimism asked the Witwatersrand/De La Rey Regiment (WR/DLR) for the password for the night. The vigorous patrolling of the 6th South African Armoured Division soon curtailed the German's activities South of the river.

The Arno was first crossed on the night of 26/27 August 1944 by a patrol from First City/Cape Town Highlanders Regiment (FC/CTH). Reconnaissance patrols from the FC/CTH found suitable crossing points close to Le Piagge allowing the 12th South African Motorised Brigade to cross during the night of 28/29 August 1944 under light enemy artillery and mortar fire. The German observers took full advantage of the commanding ground on the southern spurs of Mt. Albano.



The Germans also used new rocket launchers whose projectiles had considerable blast effect, which also announced their coming with an unpleasant screaming noise. Reports from prisoners indicated that the German forces in front of the 6th South African Armoured Division were withdrawing and this was confirmed by the sound of demolitions ahead of them. The 12th South African Motorised Brigade, as well as the 24th Guards Brigade was tasked to send fighting patrols forward to determine the extent of the withdrawal.

On the night of 31 August/1 September 1944 both the RNC and FC/CTH secured footholds on the northern bank, and just west of Empoli the 3rd Battalion, The Coldstream Guards did the same. Apart from some machine-gun and mortar fire, and a patrol clash on the Guards front the crossing was unresisted. Reports indicated that the Germans had withdrawn across a wide front to what was to later known as the Gothic Line. The 6th South African Armoured Division crossed the Arno river, thanks to Bailey bridges erected between the damaged abutments by the South African Engineers on 1 September 1944 and pushed into the Albano hills overlooking the river.

By the afternoon of 1 September 1944, "C" Company, RNC reached Arlimino, while the 24th Guards Brigade had secured a substantial bridgehead. The Germans had sown the river bank with mines, and the 24th Guards Brigade reported the thickest minefield which they had yet encountered. Three bulldozers were lost in 24 hours. By 2 September 1944, the PAG was able to get their tanks across the river, and rapid progress was made in the divisional task, which was to occupy Mt. Albano.

The operation was completed by 3 September 1944. The only impediments to the advance were a tremendous flood which washed away the bridge at Empoli on 6 September 1944 and delayed the crossing of 11th South African Armoured Brigade, and the orders of US IV Corps, which laid down where the front line should run each day, regardless of the opposition or lack of opposition offered by the enemy. The Germans made no attempt to hold Mt. Albano, and a foot patrol of the RNC reached the outskirts of Pistoia on 6 September 1944. The RNC entered the town without opposition on 8 September 1944 and the 11th South African Armoured Brigade was brought into the line on 10 September 1944.



On 11 September 1944, the 6th South African Armoured Division regrouped with the 11th South African Armoured Brigade on the right, the 12th South African Motorised Brigade in the centre, and the 24th Guards Brigade on the left. The 6th South African Armoured Division was ordered to advance and occupy the general line of Northing 91, running some 2 miles north of Pistoia.



Maj. Gen. W.H.E. Poole observing the lack of resistance ahead of the 6th South African Armoured Division, encouraged a rapid advance, but this was countermanded in order not to compromise the surprise of the main US Fifth Army attack north of Florence. The order to wait and hold the Albano Massif until further notice was deeply resented by the 6th South African Armoured Division's command and was considered representative of the persistent inflexibility displayed by the US Fifth Army leadership.

### Apennines

The British Eighth Army offensive on the German held Gothic Line was codenamed "Olive" and commenced on 25 August 1944.

Ultra intercepts had shown that the Allies had a significant numerical superiority in manpower, armour, air and artillery, although there were

concerns regarding the relative inferiority of Allied tank armour and gun power as compared to German equipment. The US Fifth Army attack was launched on 10 September 1944 against the mountain bastions south of Bologna and the main assault of the Gothic Line was to be delivered by the US II Corps up the Futa Pass, on the main highway between Florence and Bologna. In conformity with this move, 6th South African Armoured Division as the right flanking formation of the US IV Corps, had been ordered to push into the hills north of Pistoia. The right boundary of the 6th South African Armoured Division was the Prato - Bologna road and the Western boundary ran North and South through a point a mile west of Montecatini.

As part of the plan, the 6th South African Armoured Division was ordered to advance along Route 64 leading to Vertago and Bologna and to capture the twin peaks of Sole and Capara. The 6th South African Armoured Division's 24th Guards Brigade were first to encounter the Gothic Line defences when the 24th Guards Brigade met strong resistance from two battalions of the Lehr Brigade as well as two battalions of 362. Infantriedivision, fighting from strongly fortified positions which had been prepared throughout the previous winter.

On the morning of 11 September 1944, a patrol of the Scots Guards patrolling towards Femina Morta found the place held by the Germans and protected a thick belt of wire. The 6th South African Armoured Division had reached an outpost of the Gothic Line. On 12 September 1944, forward movement into the Apennine foothills met increasing shellfire and patrols began to clash with German ground troops. On 13 September 1944, the US II Corps opened its great attack on the Futa Pass and good progress was made. The policy for US IV Corps was to continue aggressive patrolling, and maintain contact with the Germans. The 6th South African Armoured Division was ordered to occupy the high ground between the roads Pistoia-Porretta and Prato-Castiglione.



Enemy resistance stiffened and there were fierce actions at Mt. Alto which was captured by the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles Brigade, who were specially trained in mountain warfare, and at Mt. Porro Del Bagno, which was stormed by the ILH/KimR on 18 September 1944. German shellfire was heavy and the 4/13th Frontier Rifles Brigade had to advance along a narrow ridge commanded by Spandau posts. These were cleared one by one, and after some close fighting on the bush covered crest of Mt. Alto, the 4/13th Frontier Rifles Brigade gained their objective. They were heavily counter-attacked on 18 September 1944, and ammunition ran out. Mules bringing up more ammunition were dispersed by shellfire, but the 4/13th Frontier Rifles Brigade used their bayonets and clung to the mountain.



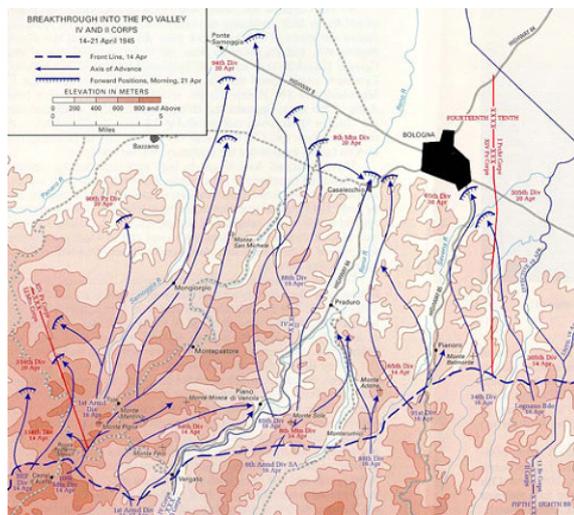
Meanwhile the ILH/KimR was involved in sharp fighting on Mt. Porro Del Bagno. After a clash with the enemy, commanding group was captured by "A" Company, ILH/KimR on the afternoon of 16 September 1944. On 17 September 1944, "C" Company, ILH/KimR made a flank attack but the enemy held a dominating position on the thickly wooded mountain, and were driven back. Tanks of "A" Squadron, SSB attempted to give support but could not force a way through the brushwood. On the morning of 18 September 1944, two tanks succeeded in getting into the "A" Company, ILH/KimR area, and fired with effect on an enemy observation post.

At 18:00 "A" Company, ILH/KimR attacked in the gathering dusk, supported by direct fire from the tanks, and a barrage was put down by the 1/6 Field Regiment, SAA and 4/22 Field Regiment, SAA. The attack was completely successful and the enemy's use of tracer on a fixed line was much to the advantage of the attacking troops. Meanwhile "A" Company, ILH/KimR captured a spur on the south west of the mountain. The whole ILH/KimR area was heavily shelled during the three days battle for Porro Del Bagno. The capture of Mt. Alto and Mt. Porro Del Bagno did much to deprive the enemy of observation over the divisional area.

Then after being ordered to hold the Albano Massif, the 11th South African Armoured Brigade was forced due to the terrain to operate dismounted from their tanks in order to contain the German 362. Infanteriedivision. By 22 September 1944, demolitions were again heard and it became evident that the Germans had started withdrawing to Green Line II, the next layer of the Gothic Line defences. Operation "Olive" officially ended on 21 September 1944.

### Gothic Line Battles

The South African advance re-commenced with the 6th South African Armoured Division heading north on Route 64 with the US II Corps to their right and 34th US Infantry Division on the left. Reports had been received that the 16. SS-Panzer Grenadierdivision had taken over from the German 362. Infanteriedivision and that they were now defending the front ahead of the 6th South African Armoured Division. The division advanced along the axis running between Prato and Castiglione dei Pepoli. The 11th South African Armoured Brigade was ordered to advance up Highway 6620 (the Prato-Bologna road) while the 12th South African Motorised Brigade moved up Highway 64. By 27 September 1944, the FC/CTH had crossed the main Appenine watershed at Collin, and the ILH/KimR had reached the southern outskirts of Castiglione Del Pepoli. By 28 September 1944, the 6th South African Armoured Division was advancing on three widely separated axes, retreating German forces were demolishing bridges, culverts and roads and this, with traffic congestion on limited roads, made passage extremely slow. It was then decided to hand over Route 66 to Task Force 92, as the South African engineers were not able to maintain the three parallel routes simultaneously. This permitted the 24th Guards Brigade to re-unite with the 11th South African Armoured Brigade in protecting the US II Corps' western flank.



The 24th Guards Brigade was ordered to capture the Cattareto Ridge and exploit 6000 yards beyond. The 11th South African Armoured Brigade was to protect their left flank by capturing Mt. Vigese. The 12th South African Motorised Brigade was to be held in divisional reserve in the Montale area. The artillery was considerably strengthened when the 178th (Lowland) Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery came under the 6th South African Armoured Division command, and two American 240mm howitzers from the 697th US Field Artillery Battalion and one 8" Gun M1 from the 575th US Field Artillery Battalion moved into the divisional area. In addition, the 6th South African Armoured Division was heavily reinforced with Combat Command "B", an Armoured Brigade from the 1st US Armored Division.

Traffic movement on 28 September 1944, was extremely difficult owing to rain and mud, and only two Companies of 1st Battalion, Scots Guards and a Troop of "A" Squadron, PR reached Castiglione during the day. The 11th South African Armoured Brigade were unable to give any information about the enemy, but that afternoon the 1st Battalion, Scots Guards advancing along the Cattareto Ridge made contact with the enemy in a thick mist. At dawn on 29 September 1944, the 1st Battalion, Scots Guards resumed their advance, and in spite of a certain amount of machine-gun and mortar fire cleared the greater part of the ridge. It was found that the Germans were holding Mt. Cattareto in strength.

The attack developed on 30 September 1944, and met with fierce opposition. The PR managed to get two Stuart tanks on to the ridge and they were able to give some machine-gun support. The 1st Battalion, Scots Guards got within 200 yards of the crest of Cattareto, but the enemy's resistance was fanatical. It was impossible to advance further, and during the night and at dawn, the Germans sent in two strong counterattacks. Very hard fighting followed, and the Guards were assisted by the mortars and machine guns of "B" Group.

The 166th NFLD (Newfoundland) Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery was in close support and the 7/23 Medium Regiment,



SAHA brought down fire at their request. Although the 1st Battalion, Scots Guards were forced to draw back their left flanking Company, the enemy did not press his advantage in the face of very heavy artillery and machine-gun fire. Attempts were made to bring up the PR tanks to assist the Guards, but the rain-soaked road began to collapse under their weight.

While this furious struggle was raging on the Catarelto Ridge, "C" Squadron, PR led the advance of 3rd Battalion, Coldstream Guards up the western banks of the Brasimone, and reached the area of Bucciagno directly opposite to Mt. Catarelto. Enemy machine-gun fire was heavy, but attempts by the SS troops to infiltrate during the night of 1/2 October 1944 were beaten off. With the 1st Battalion, Scots Guards having been badly knocked about, 5th Battalion, Grenadier Guards were ordered to storm Mt. Catarelto on 2 October 1944. The attack was delivered in thick mist and blinding rain, and although the attacking troops got within 50 yards of the crest, the Germans refused to be dislodged. Twice the leading Company attempted to storm the crest, and twice they were beaten off. The thick mist greatly restricted supporting fire, and it was decided to call off the attack pending an improvement in the weather.

Plans were made to resume the assault on 3 October 1944, but during the night of 2/3 October 1944 a Grenadier Guards patrol reached the crest of Catarelto and found that the Germans had withdrawn. The Germans had fallen back



along the whole brigade front and 3rd Battalion, Coldstream Guards completed the occupation of the Bucciagno Ridge. The German retreat had probably been hastened by the American occupation of Mt. Del Galletto four miles north-east of Catarelto. Meanwhile, the 11th South African Armoured Brigade was advancing against Mt. Vigese, a dominating feature that towered up on the left flank. On 30 September 1944, the ILH/KimR occupied the village of Camugnano while the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles on their right flank secured Mt. Fontanavidola.

The advance continued on 1 October 1944, and it was confirmed that the enemy was holding Mt. Vigese. The RNC was put under 11th South African Armoured Brigade command.

On 3 October 1944, "C" and "D", ILH/KimR passed through the RNC and advanced against the southern spurs of Mt. Vigese. "D" Company, ILH/KimR took Cardeda after a brisk engagement and then occupied Torlai. The night was wet and dark, and at 23:30 the platoon

in Torlai was heavily attacked. The infantrymen fought until their ammunition ran out and then executed an extremely skilful and orderly withdrawal. Further enemy attacks were broken up by artillery fire. Attempts by "D" Company, ILH/KimR to retake Torlai on 4 October 1944, were unsuccessful and the enemy's mortar and rocket fire inflicted many casualties. The blast effect of the rocket projectiles was devastating. SSB tanks, trying to assist "D" Company, ILH/KimR lost tracks or bellied in mud. On the night of 4 October 1944, No. 1 Platoon of "D" Company, ILH/KimR again attacked Torlai and after fierce house-to-house fighting cleared the village.

At 02:00 the Germans launched a counterattack in force and desperate fighting followed. The enemy approached Cardeda but our fire was so heavy that he did not press the attack. The 4/22 Field Regiment, SAA bombarded Torlai with good effect and the battle died down at 05:00. A patrol sent out that morning established that the enemy was still holding Torlai. The events of the previous two days had shown the futility of attempting to hold Torlai with small pockets. At last light on 5 October 1944, "A" and "B" Companies, ILH/KimR concentrated at Greglio with "C" Company, ILH/KimR some 1200 yards in rear. "A" Company, ILH/KimR was ordered to take the summit of Mt. Vigese and establish a platoon on a position overlooking the neck. "B" Company, ILH/KimR was to take Vigo and "C" Company, ILH/KimR to exploit. "A" Company, ILH/KimR moved off at dawn on 6 October 1944, and a platoon made straight for the summit of Mt. Vigese. It was a silent attack without artillery preparation. Advancing up the steep slopes in thick mist the platoon fell upon a German position near the summit and took it completely by surprise. Nine prisoners were taken, including the captain responsible for the Vigese-Vigo area.

A second "A" Company platoon after a sharp fight, captured a machine-gun post halfway down the slope and the Company took up positions overlooking the neck Montovolo and Vigese. Meanwhile, "B" Company, ILH/KimR captured Vigo after calling for artillery support. The Germans in Torlai, finding their retreat threatened, evacuated the village under cover of heavy rain and mist. Patrols on 7 October 1944, found evidence of a considerable withdrawal. The Montovolo massif was clear and Collin and Campolo had been abandoned.



The successful RNC attack no doubt influenced this withdrawal, but the enemy probably wished to shorten his front in view of the heavy American pressure up Highway 65.

The 6th South African Armoured Division intentions for 7 October 1944, stated that the 11th South African Armoured Brigade would advance along the high ground through Prada to Mt Stanco. East of the River Setta the US II Corps had secured an outstanding success by the capture of Monzuno on 5 October 1944. It was intended to pass the 24th Guards Brigade through the Monzuno area to launch an assault on Mt. Sole. Such an attack, if successful might have compelled the Germans to abandon the whole Stanco-Salvaro feature would have contributed to a decisive break-through to Bologna.



Unhappily this movement of the 24th Guards Brigade was cancelled, because of the setback to the 11th South African Armoured Brigade at Mt. Stanco.

Brig. J.P.A. Furstenberg decided that the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles should concentrate at first light on 7 October 1944, in the Camugnano area. The battalion was then to pass through the ILH/KimR, occupy Prada, and capture Mt. Stanco. Thereafter it was to exploit to Mt. Salvaro. The 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles were faced with a difficult task, which involved concentrating in the dark and marching along unscouted tracks and through thick mud for 6000 yards to the ILH/KimR positions. Nevertheless the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles, after an arduous march and some sharp skirmishes, occupied Mt. Stanco by dusk on 7 October 1944.

The weather deteriorated during the day and no jeeps were able to get as far as Mt. Stanco. "A" Company did not come up until 20:00, after marching continuously for 14 hours. At dawn on 8 October 1944, heavy firing broke out around the mountain, and intense mortar fire out off the forward Companies from reinforcements in Prada. The forward observation officer's jeep and wireless set had been bogged down en route to the mountain, and it was deemed imprudent to give the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles artillery support by blind firing. After two hours fierce fighting the Indians' ammunition ran out. Mules bringing up more ammunition were dispersed by shellfire and the mountain was abandoned.

On 8 October, divisional orders announced that the line would be held on a four-Brigade front, and for this purpose the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade was moved up to hold the Mt. Vigese-Montovolo area. The 11th South African Armoured Brigade was told to take Mt. Stanco and exploit to Mt. Salvaro. Brig. J.P.A. Furstenberg, now ordered the RNC to secure Mt. Stanco and it was decided to attack on a two-company front – "D" on the right and "B" on the left.

Advancing at dawn on 10 October 1944, "B" and "D" Companies, RNC made rapid progress, and captured their objectives by 06:40. At 08:40 the enemy was reported to be forming up for a counterattack, and the whole of the divisional artillery, augmented by the 4.2" mortars of the RDLI (Royal Durban Light Infantry), brought down their curtain of fire.

Communications with the guns were not good, and the enemy succeeded in crossing open ground and reaching the bushes on the northern slopes of Mt. Stanco. At 10:05 the SS troops put in a sharp attack and after overrunning the right-hand platoon of "D" Company, RNC captured Forlino. "C" Company, RNC was sent up to recover Forlino, and came under very heavy fire in doing so. After mid-day the enemy's main attack, estimated at two companies strong, came in from the south-west, taking advantage of a gully. Confused fighting developed and Forward Observation Officers declared that they could not engage without endangering their own troops. "B" Companies left flank was threatened and the "A" Company Commander ordered both "B" and "D" Companies to withdraw. They did so in good order covered by "C" Company.



Maj. Gen W.H.E. Poole then decided to pause and prepare a divisional attack for the third battle of Stanco, to be led by the 12th South African Motorised Brigade with 11th South African Armoured Brigade and 24th Guards Brigade in support.

"B" and "D" Companies, RDLI and a platoon of "C" Company, RDLI were put under 12th South African Motorised Brigade Command. On 9 October 1944, the 5th Battalion, Grenadier Guards took over the Montorio Ridge from the Americans and on 10 October the 3rd Battalion, Coldstream Guards advanced their line forward of Cisalpina to protect the right flank of the RNC.

The task of the 12th South African Motorised Brigade was to take Mt. Stanco and then exploit north-east along the ridge towards Mt. Salvaro. 11th South African Armoured Brigade was to protect the left flank, while 24th Guards Brigade was to stage a demonstration. The attack was to be supported by all available artillery. Brig. R.J. Palmer decided to assault Stanco on a two-battalion front, with WR/DLR on the left, and FC/CTH on the right. The WR/DLR was to capture the summit of the mountain, while the objective of the FC/CTH was Point 650 on the eastern spur of Mt. Stanco.

At 04:30 on 13 October 1944, the 24th Guards Brigade staged a diversion by attacking Grizzana station. They were supported by a dummy barrage. At 05:00 a terrific artillery bombardment came down on Stanco, thus heralding the largest set-piece attack in which South African troops had taken part in Italy. The 4.2" mortars and medium machine-



guns of the RDLI added their weight to the divisional artillery, which fired over 10000 shells at the Germans. Two American Medium Regiments and three American Heavy Guns took part in the bombardment. The attack was supported by 139 guns and the German artillery didn't remain silent as "A" Company, WR/DLR were heavily shelled on their starting line. Nevertheless the WR/DLR pushed forward with determination. At 05:59 a platoon of "A" Company, WR/DLR reported they had reached the summit of the mountain. The enemy's machine-gun and mortar fire was very severe, and the Germans clung stubbornly to positions near Stanco village, and in Casa Forlino. The artillery and 4.2" mortars continued to assist the infantry by firing concentrations as called for by the assaulting troops, and "A" and "C" Companies, WR/DLR captured their objectives by 10:20.

FC/CTH found the opposition more stubborn, and the battalion suffered heavily from very accurate machine-gun fire. Three successive attacks on Point 650 were repulsed. At 11:45 "D" Company, FC/CTH was instructed to take Point 650 "At All Costs". Twice the enemy attempted to form up for counterattacks, but these efforts were crushed by artillery and mortar fire. By mid-afternoon the mortaring and shelling died down, and the 12th South African Motorised Brigade was secure on Mt. Stanco.

On 15 October 1944, "C" Company, RNC reached the crest of Point 689 without opposition, apart from mortar and artillery fire. Patrols were sent out, and it soon became clear that a serious action would be required to clear the enemy from Mt. Pezza and the massive spur jutting out on the west of the mountain. The 24th Guards Brigade moved forward to conform with Brig. R.J. Palmer's advance, and the 1st Battalion, Scots Guards occupied Veggio on 15 October 1944. This advance was of the first importance as it opened the road from Castiglione to Grizzana and so did much to ease 12th South African Motorised Infantry Brigades communications. Engineers of 12th Field Squadron, SAEC and 42nd Field Company, RE laboured on the road and by the afternoon opened it for the jeeps. The supply line, however, was completely overlooked from the German positions on Salvaro.

Brig. R.J. Palmer decided to attack Mt. Pezza with two battalions supported by troops of "B" Squadron, PAG, who had been able to get their tanks up to the Grizzana area. On the afternoon of 17 October 1944, the RNC attacked Mt. Pezza and the FC/CTH assaulted the western spur. The attack was supported by the 7/23 Medium Regiment, SAHA, 1/6 Field Regiment, SAA and and RDLI. PAG Tanks made a feint down the Carviano road, and drew off much of the enemy's fire. Nevertheless, the German mortaring and shelling were very heavy, but both battalions took their objectives. During the night of 17/18 October 1944 divisional artillery and mortars brought down defensive fire and frustrated German counterattack plans.

On the map Mt. Salvaro looked much like a figure 8, with broad northern and southern sections and a narrow waist. Point 806 is the southern section, and Point 826 in the northern section. The WR/DLR were ordered to capture Point 806 and then exploit to Point 826. The battalion concentrated on Mt. Pezza in thick mist on 18 October 1944. It was arranged for the 24th Guards Brigade to attack Mt. Alcino on 19 October 1944 in conjunction with the WR/DLR attack. "B" and "D" Companies, WR/DLR crossed their Start Line at 05:45 on 19 October 1944, and found the going steep and difficult. For 15 minutes the advance was made in silence, and accordance with the plan the artillery and mortars did not open fire until 06:00. "D" Company, WR/DLR reached Point 806 by 07:40, opposition being slight. Considerable fighting developed on the western side of Salvaro, and it took three hours to clear the thickly wooded area.



Towards midday the enemy started very heavy shelling and mortaring. During the afternoon the Germans tried to infiltrate between "B" and "D" Companies, WR/DLR, but their attempts to counterattack failed before accurate small arms

and mortar fire. It was found that Point 826 was held in strength. Meanwhile the 1st Battalion, Scots Guards had attacked Mt. Alcino supported by the fire of "C" Squadron, PR. It was important to secure this feature in order to protect the right flank of the 12th South African Motorised Infantry Brigade. Mt. Alcino was a most formidable position, and owing to previous casualties the 1st Battalion, Scots Guards were suffering from an acute shortage of Officers and Platoon Sergeants.



After severe fighting extending over three days the enemy withdrew from the mountain on the evening of 21 October 1944.

On 20 October 1944, the Germans launched several counterattacks against the WR/DLR, but the battalion hung on to 806. Accordingly it was decided to relieve the WR/DLR with the ILH/KimR, who would then undertake the capture of Point 826. The ILH/KimR moved up from 11th South African Armoured Brigades sector on 21 October 1944, and took over on Point 806. The ILH/KimR came under the 12th South African Motorised Infantry Brigade's command, and the WR/DLR was put under the 11th South African Armoured Brigade's command.

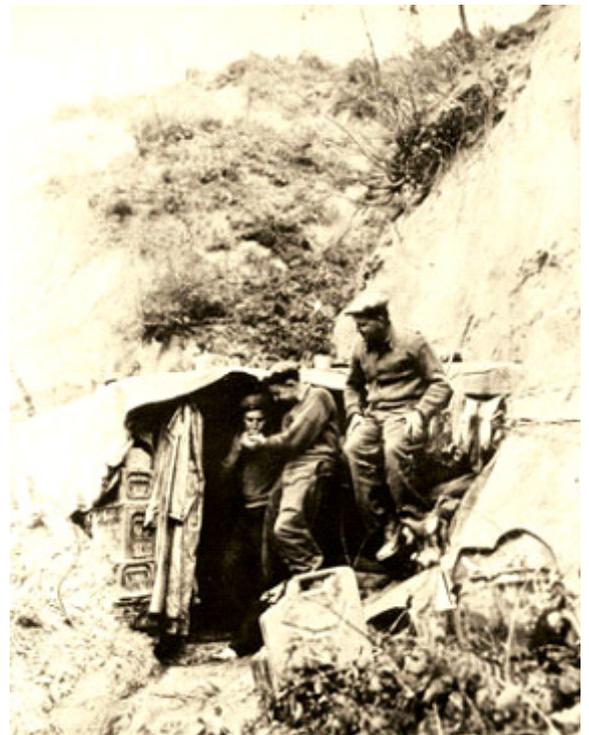
The flanks of the ILH/KimR were protected by the precipitous slopes of Mt. Salvaro, but this meant that the only line of approach for the attack on Point 826 lay along the narrow knife-edge ridge connecting that point with 806. North of Point 806, the ridge narrows and descends to Point 778, some 500 yards ahead. Then the ridge climbs again and four hundred yards further on is Point 826. The northern slope of Mt. Salvaro is also acute, but a low neck trends away to the north-east and finally connects the Salvaro feature with Mt. Sole. On 22 October 1944, visibility was extremely poor, and mist alternated with rain. Patrols were sent out to Point 778, and found the enemy occupying buildings in that area. That afternoon two platoons of the ILH/KimR made a brilliant raid on Point 778, and after a sharp fight took 45 prisoners. Counterattacks from Point 826 were beaten off. Prisoners taken on Point 778 came from no less than three battalions, and it appeared that Point 826 was held by a mixed group drawn from 94. Infantry division.

Plans were made for the decisive attack on 23 October 1944. The FC/CTH were holding firm west of Mt. Pezza and patrolling vigorously in that area. The RNC were in rear of the ILH/KimR and when the latter battalion attacked, were instructed to take over Point 806. "B" Squadron, PAG was allotted harassing fire tasks. The attack was to receive unprecedented artillery support. As soon as the ILH/KimR had captured Point 826, the 1st Battalion, Scots Guards were to assault Mt. Termina. Lt. Col. R. Reeves-Moore decided to attack with "A" and "B" Companies, 1st Battalion, Scots Guards forward, and "C" following in close support. Considerable difficulty was experienced in getting food up to the attacking troops and "A" Company did not receive their evening meal until 01:30 on 23 October 1944, when it was cold and uneatable.

At 05:45 "A" and "B" Companies moved in to the attack, and the artillery let loose their tremendous bombardment. The assaulting troops advanced rapidly, so rapidly indeed that most of the enemy's defensive fire fell behind them. The enemy had returned to Point 778 during the night, and brisk fighting developed among the houses there. The German artillery and mortars now got the range, and heavy casualties were suffered by the attacking troops. Point 778 was finally secured at 07:15.

"A" and "B" Companies pressed on, but were met by intense machine-gun fire from houses some 200 yards beyond the neck. "C" Company moved up in close support, and "D" Company took over on Point 806. A period of stalemate followed, during which the mortaring on both sides was terrific. Finally "B" Company's right hand platoon succeeded in enfilading this position, while the centre platoon of "B" Company made a front attack. The enemy withdrew at 11:30.

Under the cover of mist the leading troops worked their way forward up the southern slopes of 826. Suddenly the mist lifted, and they had to withdraw to cover under violent Spandau fire. Firepower was needed, and it was decided that after 40 minutes mortaring, the artillery would put down a five minute barrage, and then "A", "B" and "C" Companies would charge the objective. Advantage was taken of the pause to bring up more ammunition and grenades a difficult task in the face of the enemy's persistent and accurate shelling. As soon as the artillery ceased fire the attack went in. The enemy was outfought and outmanoeuvred and surrendered right and left. Positions were



rapidly dug-in and consolidated in all-round defences and prepared for counterattacks. Other attempts to counterattack were smothered by artillery fire. Fortunately, the battalion had consolidated well-down the slopes of 826, and the enemy's artillery concentrated on the summit itself.

Spasmodic shelling and mortaring continued throughout the night. The evacuation of casualties was a heart-breaking task, and many had to be left on the mountain in the cold and rain. The 1st Battalion, Scots Guards attacked Mt. Termine on the afternoon of 23 October 1944, but the attack was called off when an extensive minefield was discovered. The enemy abandoned the ridge that night, and it was subsequently found that none of the mines were armed. The capture of Point 826 marked the end of the most desperate close quarter fighting of the campaign - at least as far as South African troops were concerned. Mt. Salvaro was the highest and most dominating ground between Mt. Vigese and Bologna, and its occupation was essential to a further advance along the Reno or Setta valleys. Its conquest was a great tactical achievement, and although casualties had not been light, those of the enemy were far heavier. Indeed the 12th South African Motorised Infantry Brigade operations from Stanco to Salvaro were remarkable for the fact that ground which greatly favoured the defence was torn from a stubborn and skilful enemy, without his being able to exact a proportionate penalty in casualties. The artillery fired 7369 rounds in support of the attack on Point 826 and RDLI mortars expended 1753 bombs. The 6th South African Armoured Division received no air support during these operations and success was due to the skilful handling of very powerful artillery, coupled with the self-sacrifice and sound tactics of the assaulting infantry.

After this battle, the 6th South African Armoured Division was withdrawn for rest and maintenance. It was re-assigned from US IV Corps to direct command by the US Fifth Army to enable US Fifth Army Commander Lt. Gen. M.W. Clark to coordinate the 6th South African Armoured Division's advance more closely with that of the US II Corps. The 6th South African Armoured Division's major task became that of thrusting north towards Bologna covering the flank of the US 34th Infantry Division.

Combat Command "B" was to advance on Route 64, the 24th Guards Brigade along the Setta Valley road, with 11th South African Armoured Brigade and 12th South African Motorised Infantry Brigade covering the high ground between the two. Opposing the advance was the 16. SS-Panzerdivision.



By 25 October 1944, the 6th South African Armoured Division had waded the Setta Creek and taken Hill 501 below Mt. Sole, but the 24th Guards Brigade attack on Mount Sole was halted by torrential rains. The following day the continuing rains had turned to floods, isolating the 6th South African Armoured Division elements on Hill 501 and suspending all air support from the US XXII Tactical Air Command. Mt. Sole was not attacked again and the 6th South African Armoured

Division was returned to the US IV Corps command on November 4th, 1944, and was given instructions for holding the front. The 24th Guards Brigade held the right flank, the 12th South African Motorised Infantry Brigade the centre, and 11th South African Armoured Brigade the left. Aggressive patrolling was ordered with a view to an eventual attack on Mt. Sole.

On 5 November 1944, the first frost occurred. Most of the men had now received battle dress but not a few individuals were still without it. Winter equipment, including rubber boots and leather jerkins, began to arrive. Each Battalion worked out a scheme for resting the troops. The plan generally favoured was to hold the line with three companies forward, and give one company a fire day rest. Leave started, and as Florence and Pistoia were virtually American cities, Prato became the 6th South African Armoured Divisional leave centre.

The Union Defence Force Institute established an Out span club in Castiglione and arranged cinema shows and concert parties. Supply problems were acute on the ice-coated roads and in the perpetual rain. Hitherto the division had been assisted by the 10th Pack Transport Company, whose muleteers were Italians. The Commander "Q" Service Corps formed 6th South African Armoured Division Mule Pack Detachment, whose muleteers were mostly Cape Corps men released by the "Q" Service Corps Companies.

Reinforcements arrived and personnel from the 43rd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, SAAF were absorbed into Infantry Battalions. Throughout November the 6th South African Armoured Division patrols continued to operate well-forward. A number of clashes occurred, but 60% of the patrols had nothing to report. Ammunition supply was restricted, but the artillery took advantage of suitable targets. The guns also shot off a good many propaganda shells. The German artillery caused few casualties, but considerable annoyance and used a number of rocket projectiles, which had terrific blast effect.



Even the Luftwaffe put in an occasional appearance during the full moon, and one raid on Castiglione caused 12 casualties. Detailed plans were worked out for the attack on Mt. Sole. The task was entrusted to the 24th Guards Brigade and on 1 December 1944, 5th Battalion, Grenadier Guards began a series of attacks designed to secure the outworks of the Sole - Caprara massif. The operations met with little success. The enemy's positions were very strong, his mortar and machine-gun fire was heavy, and the ground was held by 16. SS-Panzer Grenadier Division.

The 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles were put under the 24th Guards Brigade and relieved the 5th Battalion, Grenadier



Guards. The 5th Battalion, Grenadier Guards opened its attack on 8 December 1944, and stubborn fighting continued throughout the week. The 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles gained some ground, and the divisional artillery gave support. But the German counterattacks were very determined, and his artillery fire extremely heavy. On 15 December 1944, the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles withdrew to their original positions, and the fighting died down on the slopes of Mt. Sole. Snow fell on 21 December 1944, and on 28 December 1944, the capture of Mt. Sole was indefinitely postponed.

From now on administration became the chief problem of the 6th South African Armoured Division. By 10 January 1945, the snow on Point 826 was thigh deep, and the temperature had dropped to 20 degrees below freezing. Snowploughs and bulldozers were called on to clear the roads, and pioneer companies and troops laboured to chip the ice off road surfaces. The recovery sections were particularly busy, and on 31 January 1945, Light Recovery Section recovered 547 vehicles, and back-loaded 144. Tanks were incapable of moving unaided on the iced roads, and 30th Heavy Recovery Section was called on to assist them.

Winter clothing came forward in good quantities, including snow-shoes and white snowsuits with hoods for use on patrol. Hot baths were provided by the mobile bath units. As in the 12th South African Motorised Infantry Brigade position at St. Ella, mules and porters had to be used to get rations up to the forward positions. The food, although mostly tinned, was good and was carried up to forward companies in hotboxes. Skiing and tobogganing were popular recreations, but on 28 January 1945, rain fell and the temperature rose sharply. Then came the thaw, adding greatly to the general inconvenience. Dugouts filled up with water and mud and slush made many men wish that winter would return.

The health of the troops remained good in these conditions, although there were many cases of trench foot. Some blamed the boots, other considered that foot-discipline was a fault. The front remained static, but patrolling in the bitter cold of January was a grim ordeal. Leaky boots and lack of waterproof trousers added to the difficulties of moving across naked snow on clear nights. One WR/DLR patrol took seven hours to cover a mile across snow and ice. The 6th South African

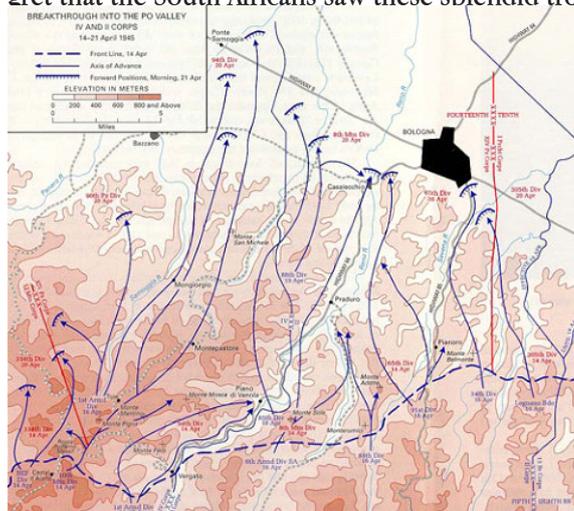


Armoured Division passed under command of the US II Corps on 15 January 1945. This Corps instructed the 6th South African Armoured Division to take a prisoner every three days. Battalions were required to make raids 30 to 50 strong to secure identifications. On the night of 3 February 1945, the WR/DLR had a sharp clash with a German party near Salvaro church, and secured a badly-wounded prisoner. By 10 February 1945, adequate identifications had been obtained of the enemy on the 6th South African Armoured Division front. Deserters began to come in daily, and there was no longer any necessity for raids.

### The Advance from the Appenines

The first months of 1945 saw important changes in the organisation of the 6th South African Armoured Division. It was known that the 24th Guards Brigade would pass out of command after relief, and it was essential to have another South African Infantry Brigade in the division. On 13 January 1945, the 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade came into being and Lt. Col. J. Bester, battalion commander of the WR/DLR, was appointed Brigadier. The infantry battalions of the Brigade were provided initially by the RDLI and NMR/SAAF, whom reverted to infantry and began training in infantry tactics. Artillery support was provided by the 15th Field Regiment, SAA, which was formed from elements of the divisional artillery and reinforcements from the Union. 5th Field Squadron, SAEC came under command, and the Brigade commenced training in the Prato-Pistoia area.

The 6th South African Armoured Division concentrated in the Lucca area at the end of February. The men were delighted with their new quarters, situated in a lovely countryside, and took advantage of the opportunity of having some leave and recreation. Enthusiasm waned, however, when an intensive training programme began. On leaving the line the 6th South African Armoured Division bade farewell to its comrades in the 24th Guards Brigade, and it was with genuine regret that the South Africans saw these splendid troops depart to the British Eighth Army. Brig. M.D. Erskine, said the Guards would always be proud to have served in the 6th South African Armoured Division.



The leave and training programme had been planned on a six weeks cycle, but this had to be curtailed. On 28 March 1945, the 6th South African Armoured Division issued detailed orders for the relief of the 1st US Armored Division in the old sector between the Reno and the Setta. The great offensive that was to destroy the German armies in Italy was about to begin. Generalfeldmarschall A. Kesselring's successor, Generaloberst H.G.O.R. von Vietinghoff, was under no illusions about the coming storm, and the possibility of resisting it. He would have preferred to withdraw to the line of the Po River. The German High Command, so far from agreeing to this, would not even allow Von Vietinghoff to carry out a limited withdrawal on the Eighth Army Front, which would have effectually frustrated the Allied air and artillery programme.

By insisting on the retention of the Appenine Line, Hitler had tied the German Army in Italy to an anvil.

During January and February four German Divisions were withdrawn from Italy to attempt to dam the Russian tide, and these included the old opponents of the South Africans the 16. SS-Panzer Grenadierdivision "Reichsführer-SS" and 356. Infanteriedivision. More would probably have been demanded, if the Allied Airforce had not played such havoc with communications in northern Italy that it took weeks to move a division through the alpine passes.

By comparison with their forces on other fronts, the German Army in Italy was still a formidable fighting machine, and on 10 April 1945 Generaloberst H.G.O.R. von Vietinghoff had under his command 21 German divisions of all types, supported by a powerful force of artillery. Although the Allied armies were now pouring into Germany, morale was still high.

The greatest weakness was an almost total lack of air support. Generaloberst H.G.O.R. von Vietinghoff had only 260 tanks, and the petrol shortage compelled him to rely excessively on animal transport. The Allies planned to attack along practically the whole Italian front. Preliminary blows along the shores of the Adriatic and the Tuscan sea were to be followed a week later by an all-out assault by the British Eighth Army in the marshy country between Lake Commachio and the Appenines. Three days later the US Fifth Army was to unleash the US II and IV Corps in an offensive aimed at Bologna and the plain to the northwest. The 6th South African Armoured Division was given an important role in the US Fifth Army plan.

During the night of 31 March /1 April 1945 the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade began its movement back into the line, and on 4 April 1945 took over command of the brigade sector from Combat Command A of the 1st US Armored Division. The 11th Armoured Brigade took over their sector from Combat Command B on 5 April 1945. The divisional sector laid between the rivers Reno and Setta and was held by the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade on the right and the 11th Armoured Brigade on the left. The river Torricella was the inter-brigade boundary. The 11th Armoured Brigade had the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles and two American units (19th Reconnaissance Squadron and 1st Battalion 135 RCT) under their command. The Americans were serving as infantry. The 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade was to move up later on the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade right. Certain regrouping would then take place between the two Brigades.

Early in March the Germans had withdrawn his line to the crest of the Sole-Caprara massif, and the South African forward defence lines were now about 1000 yards nearer to the enemy. The 77 Eastings Grid was the boundary line of two German divisions. The German 94. Infanteriedivision held the sector to the west, and there was little activity apart from some scattered shelling and harassing fire. An outline plan had been drawn up by Maj. Gen. W.H.E. Poole at the end of March. The initial attack was to be made on Mt. Sole-Caprara by the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade, which was to exploit to Mt. Abelle.





On the capture of the Sole-Caprara-Abelle area, the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade was to advance along the ridge running northeast of Mt. Sole, and capture Mt. Santa Barbara. The 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade was to cover the right flank. Thereafter the 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade was to take Mt. Giovule and Mt. Baco and destroy any German forces remaining between the Setta and the Reno. When this phase had been completed 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade was to be prepared to cross the Reno. All attacks were to be supported by the divisional artillery and air support was promised on an unprecedented scale.

The 6th South African Armoured Division was the left-flanking formation of the US II Corps. The US IV Corps was to open the battle on the US Fifth Army front by attacking in the mountains west of the Reno, and then the US II Corps was to launch its assault. Detailed planning for the 6th South African Armoured Division's attack began on 5 April 1945. The divisional commander met his Staff and brigade commanders, and they in turn had full discussions with their subordinates, and the commanders of supporting arms. The 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade carried out detailed patrolling to reconnoitre the enemy's outpost positions, and to decide on suitable lines of advance. There was little interference from the enemy, but the area had been heavily mined, and a number of casualties were suffered.

On the night of 7/8 April 1945 the first of a series of full scale artillery shoots was carried out against enemy positions on the 6th South African Armoured Division's front. The intention was to deceive the enemy regarding the time of the main assault and to shatter his morale and to induce him to disclose his defensive fire tasks. The second and third objects were certainly not achieved, and the enemy showed little interest in the elaborate bombardments.

Meanwhile, the great offensive had already begun on other sectors of the front. On 1 April 1945 a brilliant commando attack on the Adriatic coast threw the 162. Turkoman Division into disorder. On 5 April 1945 the Japanese-Americans opened an offensive along the shore of the Tuscan sea. The attack met with great success, and the threat to the naval base of Spezia brought German reserves from the Po Valley.

On 10 April 1945 an artillery and air bombardment surpassing anything seen in Italy, heralded the advance of the British Eighth Army. The enemy made the mistake of anticipating an attack along Route 9, while the main weight of the British Eighth Army fell in the area south of Lake Commachio. The enemy was shaken by the intense air and artillery bombardment, and disconcerted by the use of large numbers of flame-throwing tanks. On 10 April 1945 saw the British Eighth Army make deep penetrations and although the Germans rallied, and fought back with their usual skill and tenacity, they were never able to recover from the initial shock or amend their faulty dispositions. Retreat to the much vaunted Genghis Khan Line brought no security, and on 15 April 1945 the British Eighth Army captured Bastia, and threatened the flank of all the German forces in Italy.



It had been intended that the US IV Corps should open the US Fifth Army attack on 12 April 1945, but the weather was unfavourable for bombers and the offensive did not begin until 14 April 1945. By the evening of that day advance units of the 1st US Armored Division, on the left of the South Africans, had entered Vergato. Further to the west the 10th US Mountain Division had taken its objectives, and was thrusting forward with great determination. On 15 April 1945, the US II Corps began its attack, and the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade was launched against Sole and Caprara.

Although not as high as Mt. Stanco or Mt. Salvaro, the extremely steep, bush-covered slopes of Sole and Caprara presented a most formidable obstacle. The ridge running along the crest of Sole and extending northeast to Collina was a complete razorback, with no facilities for deployment. Mt. Abelle was considerably lower than Sole or Caprara, but it gave depth to the defence, and enemy posted here could shoot up any troops advancing down the northern slopes of these two mountains.



The 6th South African Armoured Division regrouped for the attack. On 9 April 1945, the 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade moved up, with its HQ located at La Torre. On 10 April 1945 the RNC came under command of the 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade, and the brigade took over the sector between Mt. Sole and the river Setta, to protect the right flank of the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade. The 13th South African Motorized

Infantry Brigade now consisted of the NMR/SAAF and the RNC with one Squadron of the SSB under command. On 8 April 1945, the RDLI relieved two Companies of the FC/CTH in the centre of the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade's front, thus releasing the latter battalion for the attack on Mt. Sole. On the same day the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles came under the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade command, and relieved the WR/DLR in the Brigades left sector. The latter were now available to attack Mt. Caprara. The 12th Field Squadron, SAEC was ordered to support the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade, which had one Squadron of PAG under command.

On 11 April 1945 Maj. Gen. W.H.E. Poole addressed the Officers and men of the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade down to the platoon sergeants and put them in the picture. On 13 April 1945 the enemy broke contact on the British Eighth Army front southeast of Bologna and it was suspected that a general withdrawal had been ordered. Patrols were sent out, and one from the RDLI got within 200 yards of the crest of Sole. A blaze of fire established that the enemy was holding the position. Deserters confirmed this, and stated that extra ammunition had been issued to meet the expected attack, and orders had been given to fight to the last man.

On the night of 14 April 1945 the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles made a successful two platoon attack on an enemy post (Casa Poggiolo) which would have threatened the left flank of the attack on Caprara. 15 April 1945 was fine and clear and the blue sky augured well for the air bombardment and at 13:00 the heavy bombers started to come over. For an hour and a half a steady stream of bombers in line abreast or Vic formation passed across the sky, but they dropped their loads well north of the divisional front. At 16:15 the first fighter bombers appeared and dropped special liquid fuel type bombs on the slopes of Mt. Caprara. There was a terrific flash of flame in each case followed by billowing black smoke. Every fifteen minutes six aircraft swooped down on Sole and Caprara, coming in extremely low and letting loose a mixture of fire-bombs and high explosives. Some aircraft used rockets and cannon-shell. Apart from a little machine-gun and cannon fire there was no reaction from the enemy.

Indeed, although the bombardment was most spectacular and did much to encourage the troops, the results achieved were negligible. A few Germans suffered burns, but the enemy was well concealed in caves and dug-outs and the attacks made little impression. One fighter-bomber straffed the FC/CTH dump area, nearly exploding the mortar ammunition. Casualties were caused and a panic started among the Italian porters. At 22:30 the artillery of the US II Corps and the divisional artillery supported by selected troops of tanks, opened the most violent bombardment that the South Africans had seen in the campaign. The fire was so concentrated that it seemed more impressive than Alamein or Cassino. Under cover of the guns the WR/DLR and FC/CTH went into the attack.

It was about a mile from FC/CTH assembly area to the crest of Sole, and the axis of advance lay along a ridge leading up to the mountain. "C" and "D" Companies, FC/CTH led the attack and crossed their start line at 23:00. The enemy fired his mortar in defensive fire, but casualties were light, and at 23:50 "C" and "D" Companies, FC/CTH started to climb Mt. Sole. Nearing the crest "C" Company, FC/CTH was held up by mines, but without waiting for the mines to be cleared, a party of five men dashed through the mines and reached the summit. One of the men was killed, but the party caught the enemy coming out of his deep shelters, and used their bayonets and grenades with good effect.

Passages were cleared through the minefields and "C" and "D" Companies, FC/CTH both got platoons on to the summit. By 04:30 hours Mt. Sole was firmly held with the German mortar fire increasing in intensity, but the artillery and 4.2" mortars brought down counter-mortar fire and broke up weak attempts to counterattack.

Meanwhile, a grim struggle was being waged for Mt. Caprara. So steep are the slopes of Caprara that the only suitable approach is from the direction of Caprara village. This meant that the WR/DLR had to make a long march from the assembly areas in the Mt. Termine area, skirt the southern slopes of Mt. Caprara, take Caprara village, and then assault up the steep, shaly slopes of the mountain. At 20:30 "A" and "B" Companies, WR/DLR moved off from their assembly area to the forming up point, situated in a valley south of San Martino. "A" and "B" Companies, WR/DLR had not yet arrived at the forming up point when their difficulties began with advance parties, laying lamps to indicate the start line, were fired on by the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles on the left flank.

As soon as the artillery barrage opened, the German artillery and mortars came to life, brought down their defensive fire tasks, and laid searching fire along the gullies. "B" Company, WR/DLR was caught in heavy concentrations of artillery and mortar fire when moving up from the forming up point, and suffered many casualties. The advance of "A" and "B" Companies, WR/DLR continued on Caprara village, but "B" Company, WR/DLR's losses were so heavy, that at midnight



“C” Company, WR/DLR received orders to take over their task. Throughout the night the start line was subjected to intense mortar and artillery fire, and the Italian stretcher-bearers became demoralised. Cape Corps batmen were improvised into stretcher-bearing parties. “B” Company, WR/DLR was soon reduced to 17 men and “D” Company moving up in support, had 32 casualties between the Start Line and the first bound.

At 02:00, “A” and “C” Companies, WR/DLR skirted Caprara village and began the assault up the precipitous mountain. At this stage communications became almost impossible. “A” and “C” Companies, WR/DLR for a time lost contact with each other but continued the advance meeting stiff resistance, wire obstacles were encountered and casualties suffered on Shu mines causing “A” Company, WR/DLR to move over to “C” Company, WR/DLR. Halfway up the mountain “A” and “C” Companies, WR/DLR were pinned down by machine-gun fire emanating from a pill-box.

As further progress could not be made after several attempts, and as daylight was fast approaching, in which event would leave the companies in a precarious situation, the company commanders decided to join forces and storm the obstacle. This they did, making a desperate bayonet charge up the steep almost precipitous slopes, and rooted the enemy out of pillbox, foxholes, and dugouts.

The area round the crest was found to be alive with mines, and small arms fire came from the Mt. Sole direction. By 08:00 the firing died down, and “A” and “C” Companies, WR/DLR dug in on their objectives. Throughout the morning the enemy continued to mortar the axis of advance. Three PAG tanks succeeded in getting onto the neck between Sole and Caprara, but another troop which followed the track through San Martino ran into mines, and two tanks were immobilised. The attack on Mt. Caprara cost the WR/DLR 168 casualties, of whom 24 were killed.

The enemy still contested the northwest slopes of the mountain, but the battalion held positions providing observation over Mt. Castellino and the Caprara-Abelle valley. It was now possible for the FC/CTH to exploit to Mt. Abelle. The morning of 16 April 1945 passed quietly with only intermittent mortaring by the enemy. At 17:30 “A” and “B” Companies, FC/CTH moved to the attack on Mt. Abelle supported by artillery and mortar fire. A dangerous cross-fire developed from Point 606 to the north east of Mt. Sole, and this position was engaged by the artillery and battalion 3” mortars. Mt. Abelle was captured after slight resistance, but machine-gun fire from Point 606 continued to be troublesome. During the operation “B” Company, RDLI moved on to the eastern crest of Sole to give flank support. Towards last light an enemy counterattack on the WR/DLR came in from the direction of Campodello. The artillery brought down defensive fire and the 4.2” mortars, which had been brigaded for the action, joined in with their heavy bombs. The infantry then charged down the slope and put the enemy to flight.

Thus by the evening of 16 April 1945 the capture of the three main features – Mt. Sole, Mt. Abelle and Mt. Caprara – had been successfully completed. The American divisions of the II US Corps were not so fortunate in their attacks east



of the Setta. After violent fighting on 16 April 1945, the Germans still held Monterumici and Mt. Adone. On the other hand, west of the Reno, both Vergato and Mt. Pero were now in American hands. The success of the South African attack was due to the sheer determination of the assaulting infantry coupled with the sound tactical judgement of the battalion, company and platoon commanders.

The artillery support was heavy and accurate, but the German dugouts were so deep and well-constructed that the enemy suffered little from artillery fire.

On the night of 16/17 April 1945, the RDLI began their task of exploiting along the ridge running northeast from Mt. Sole. In their advance to the start line “A” and “C” Companies engaged and drove back an enemy counterattack force advancing on Mt. Sole. Confusion was caused by having to fight for the start line and considerable machine-gun fire was encountered. Points 606 and 551 were occupied, but Collina was not reached. Towards dawn a counterattack on Point 606 was repulsed, while the FC/CTH beat off a raid on the northwest slopes of Mt. Sole. During the night the RDLI took 30 prisoners for a loss of 12 wounded. Subsequent information showed that the advance of the RDLI had dislocated a strong attempt to recapture Mt. Sole.

During the afternoon of 17 April 1945, patrols of the WR/DLR got across to Mt. Castellino and reported that it was clear of the enemy. The RDLI, however, failed in its attempts to reach Collina. The Germans held the position in strength,

and their mortar fire was heavy. The ridge was a complete razor-back with no opportunities whatsoever for deployment, while the enemy positions along the very crest of the ridge were largely immune to artillery and mortar fire which was ineffective if it fell either slightly short or slightly over. At 20:40 on the night of 17/18 April 1945, "C" Company, RDLI launched a set-piece attack on Collina. Despite concentrated artillery and mortar support, the attack was repulsed. The German fire was heavy and they launched a number of rockets at close range. One of these wounded the company commander and knocked out a whole platoon. It seemed as though the 6th South African Armoured Division was in for a long and bloody struggle on the ridge leading to Mt. Santa Barbara, but the morning of 18 April 1945, brought a miraculous change.

On 17 April 1945, the US II Corps had warned that a breakdown of enemy resistance might take place at any moment, and preparations should be made for a rapid follow-up. The stern resistance to the RDLI seemed to disprove this optimistic theory, and plans were considered for pushing the PR and the ILH/KimR down the Reno, in the hope of attacking the Collina - Santa Barbara ridge from the rear. At 08:00 on 18 April 1945, however, two deserters on the 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade front brought news that 157. Gebirgsdivision had received orders to withdraw during the night. Reports from 88th US Infantry Division stated that Monterumici and Mt. Adone had been abandoned.

The RDLI at once pushed forward patrols and first Nuvoleta and then Mt. Santa Barbara were reported clear. A number of prisoners were picked up, who confirmed the order to retreat to the Genghis Khan Line. It was fairly certain however, that the Germans would have to fall back to the Po River. The Germans had no alternative to a rapid withdrawal on US II Corps front. On 17 April 1945, the British Eighth Army captured Argenta and threatened a breakthrough to Ferrara. On US IV Corps front, the 10th U.S Mountain Division had made a remarkable advance and reached Mt. Pastore, thus outflanking the so-called Genghis Khan Line. The Germans were on the run and the pursuit to the Alps had begun.

### The Pursuit to the Alps

The 6th South African Armoured Division was re-organising for the pursuit, but a delay was inevitable while US II Corps adjusted its dispositions. On the evening of 18 April 1945, the 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade had occupied Mt. Giovo and Mt. Baco without resistance. Reinforced by the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles and with the SSB temporarily under command this brigade was ordered to secure a bridgehead over the Reno, and continue the advance until relieved by 11th South African Armoured Brigade. The latter brigade, with the FCity/CTH under command, was to act as the main thrust of the 6th South African Armoured Division. The 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade with the PAG under command was to support the main thrust. The situation was so fluid that it proved impossible to adhere to the pre-arranged plans. Four American divisions, and the 6th South African Armoured Division, were all trying to debouch into the Po Valley west of Bologna, with mines and demolitions blocking the few available roads. But for the US Fifth Army engineers and staff, the traffic congestion did not become acute, and the US 34th Infantry Division was able to enter Bologna on 21 April 1945.

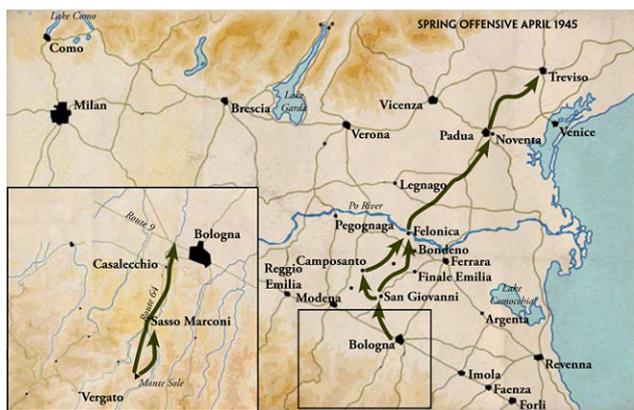
The 6th South African Armoured Division had virtually no more fighting in the Appenines. The one aim of the Germans was to get to the Po River crossings, but left a considerable number of stragglers in the mountains, and several hundred prisoners were picked up during the thrust down Route 64. These stragglers seldom showed any fight. The SSB leading the advance of 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade reached the outskirts of Casalecchio on the evening of 20 April 1945, and then the 11th South African Armoured Brigade with the SSB back under command, passed through on 21 April 1945.

The long bloody struggle in the mountains was over, and the fertile plains of northern Italy lay ahead.

On 21 April 1945, the 6th South African Armoured Division was given the task of leading the advance of US II Corps. The advance was to be carried out with the utmost speed and boldness on a broad front. German rearguards and delaying positions were to be by-passed. Important road centres, stream crossings, etc., to be held until relieved by the infantry divisions. 11th South African Armoured Brigade was directed through San Giovanni to Finale Emilia and the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade to Camposanto. Both brigades were to seize crossings over the Panaro River. The 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade was to concentrate north of Route 9 in divisional reserve. The PR was detached from the 11th South African Armoured Brigade command, and was ordered to protect the 6th South African Armoured Division's right flank, and contact the British Eighth Army in the vicinity of Bondeno. The American units under the command of the 11th South African Armoured Brigade had now left.

By-passing Bologna, the tanks of the SSB rumbled off at 10:30 on 21 April 1945. After many weary months the 11th South African Armoured Brigade had returned to mobile warfare. The tank crews were filled with tremendous enthusiasm and were determined to make the most of the opportunity. Sweeping up the long straight road to San Giovanni, the SSB soon started to collect prisoners and stragglers. At 11:00 hours shots were exchanged with enemy tanks, supported by self-propelled guns and panzerschrecks. The SSB was confined to a strip of ground on both sides of the road, bounded by a railway line on one flank and a dyke on the other. After a severe fire-fight the SSB tanks fought their way forward to within

11-miles of San Giovanni, but further progress was barred by a blown bridge. The SSB knocked out two Panzer IV tanks and PaK40 guns, for a loss of three Sherman's disabled. Meanwhile, the ILH/KimR and "A" Squadron, SSB struck opposition at Calderara Di Reno to the east of the railway line, and the village was bombed by the 4/22 Field Regiment.



A Panzer IV was put out of action and the place was occupied that evening. The 11th South African Armoured Brigade rounded up 300 prisoners on 21 April 1945, and identifications from many battalions illustrated the confusion of the retreat. Further to the east the PR reached Longara at nightfall, after meeting considerable opposition from panzerhrebs and losing two Shermans but they managed to round up 150 prisoners. It had been a successful day for the South Africans, but the country was badly

cut by dykes and canals, and the going was by no means easy.

San Giovanni was occupied by American troops on the night of 21/22 April 1945, and the advance of the 6th South African Armoured Division was resumed on 22 April 1945, on a two brigade front with the 11th South African Armoured Brigade advancing on Finale Nell Emilia while the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade advancing on Camposanto. The 6th South African Armoured Division's orders were to seize the crossings over the Panaro River at all costs. The SSB, with "B" Company, ILH/KimR under command, met considerable opposition just north of San Giovanni. The Germans had organised a very strong anti-tank defence with guns and Panzers concealed among houses and hayricks. "B" Squadron, SSB, executed a flanking movement, and after severe fighting the Germans withdrew. Another strong rear-guard position was encountered at Decima. "B" Squadron, SSB, again moved to a flank, while the ILH/KimR assisted the tanks by taking out Snipers and Panzershrebs. At nightfall the column was still some 5 miles south of Finale. The SSB claimed the destruction of 7 Panzers, with 8 Shermans and 3 Stuarts being destroyed or disabled.

The WR/DLR with "C" Squadron, PAG, and one Battery of 1/6 Field Regiment under command, led the advance of 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade, and moving very fast through San Giovanni and Crevalcore, reached the outskirts of Camposanto at 12:45. There was no opposition, and progress was not impeded by demolitions or mines. Endless columns of American marching troops were passed on the road. The Panaro has high banks overgrown by grass, and the river is unfordable on foot. "B" Company, WR/DLR, leading the advance, reached the bridge at Camposanto at about 10:30 and found it intact. Camposanto lay on the northern bank of the Panaro. American troops had already reached the river, but drew back in the face of heavy small arms fire.

The WR/DLR made an attempt to rush the bridge with an infantry platoon, but the platoon was driven back by machine-gun fire along a fixed line. For two hours nothing was achieved, and it was impossible for the troops to show themselves without being shot. The Germans were not able to demolish the bridge from a distance and tried to send parties on to the bridge to destroy it. These were driven back by the fire of the WR/DLR. Finally PAG tanks were brought up to give supporting fire and artillery concentrations were laid on. Covered by this fire, three Carriers loaded with troops rushed the bridge resulting in 46 prisoners taken in Camposanto.

The WR/DLR had achieved a notable success. On the evening of 22 April 1945, the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade received orders to hand over Camposanto to an American unit, and to move with all speed along the south bank of the Panaro to Finale Nell Emilia. The plan was designed to trap considerable enemy forces caught between the converging US Fifth Army and British Eighth Army, and still south of the Panaro. The German army in Italy was now in its death-throes. The pace of withdrawal was limited to that of animals and infantry, all the reserves had been engaged, and Allied aircraft speedily turned the Po crossings into deathtraps. On 21 April, 1945, a British Eighth Army Armoured column burst out from the Argenta area, and driving along the Reno occupied Reggio Renaticio that night. Sweeping on in a northwesterly direction the British Eighth Army spearheads reached the outskirts of Bondeno on the evening of 22 April 1945. A battle of annihilation began between the Panaro and the Reno.

Both 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade and 11th South African Armoured Brigade were now directed on Finale. This small town lay on the northern bank of the Panaro River, and now that Bondeno was lost, the bridges across the Panaro at Finale were virtually the only escape route for the numerous German forces in the Cento area. The Panaro was not a formidable obstacle, but its steep banks form an impassable obstacle for vehicles. There were two bridges at Finale - a stone bridge leading into the town, and a wooden bridge some hundreds of yards to the east. Although the SSB had halted about 5 miles from Finale on the evening of 22 April 1945, the Germans in that area had already felt the weight of the 6th South African Armoured Division. On the evening of 22 April the 7/23 Medium Regiment observed a great num-

bers of vehicles moving along the roads into Finale, where upon the 7/23 Medium Regiment and the 4/22 Field Regiment put down a series of concentrations and did tremendous damage.

The advance of 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade was led by the RDLI with "B" Squadron, PAG under command. The RDLI column advanced rapidly along the south bank of the Panaro, and by 20:45 on 22 April 1945, the troops were within a mile of Finale. Here they struck against the flank of an enemy column of vehicles and Panzers which was moving into the town. Confused fighting broke out in the darkness, and two PAG tanks were destroyed. But the RDLI maintained positions within 500 yards of the road, and the PAG tanks and battalion mortars fired steadily into the column.

During the proceedings the stonebridge was demolished.

The Germans opposing the RDLI then betook themselves to the wooden bridge and crossed the Panaro by this means with the fighting dying down at dawn, and a patrol of the RDLI entered Finale and found the place clear of the enemy.

At 07:05 on 23 April 1945, the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade received orders to concentrate and resume the advance through Camposanto to the Po. The RDLI was ordered to relieve the ILH/KimR and the 11th South African Armoured Brigade was ordered to clear up the Finale area and during the day the SSB, ILH/KimR and FC/CTH rounded up some 900 prisoners south of the town. The Germans had a number of trenches in the area, and considerable opposition was encountered from snipers and Spandau posts, but organized resistance broke down during the day. The utter confusion of the enemy is shown by the fact that prisoners were taken from no less than eight divisions. During the morning contact was made with British 6th Armoured Division.

The road leading into Finale was choked with vehicles of every description all jammed together in a shattered mass. From the bridge over the canal to the Panaro there was a solid mass of carts, oxen, mules and horses followed by trucks, guns towed and self-propelled and panzers. On the morning of 24 April 1945, a way had been bulldozed through the mass with many of the vehicles still smouldering. Prisoners stated that the initial block was caused by fighter-bombers, and then the artillery took full advantage of the congestion. German aircraft put in an appearance on the nights of the 21/22 April and 22/23 April and inflicted some casualties on the 6th South African Armoured Division. A Junker Ju-87 "Stuka" was shot down by "B" Troop of 1/12 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery.

On the morning of 23 April 1945, 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade began its drive to the Po. After a delay of some hours caused by the bridge at Camposanto being blocked by American traffic the WR/DLR crossed the Panaro at 10:30. The advance was pressed during the afternoon and "C" Squadron, PAG, which accompanied the advance guard, got in some effective shooting at disorganised groups. 150 prisoners were collected, but progress was hampered by American units moving along the roads in the same area. The WR/DLR column harboured some 5 miles from the Po. During the advance they noted that the northern sky was black with smoke, and that fighter-bombers were continually overhead.

On the afternoon of 24 April 1945, 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade reached the Po in the Felonica area. Large numbers of stragglers were trapped on the south bank and the area was littered with guns, panzers, transport, and war material of all sorts. The WR/DLR rounded up 487 prisoners and the RDLI 250. The latter battalion captured a complete German hospital and staff. The PR, which was acting in an independent role, also reached the Po River that day and took 363 prisoners. Opposition was sporadic and unorganised. The 11th South African Armoured Brigade completed the clearing up of the Finale area on 24 April 1945, while the 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade concentrated south of the Panaro ready to support the 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade.



Further to the west 10th US Mountain Division had crossed the Po River in the San Bennetto area. On the night of 24/25 April 1945, a RDLI patrol swam the Po River and reported that the north bank was only lightly held. This was fortunate for the Po at this point was over 150 yards broad, and a very difficult obstacle. Bridging material was not immediately available but five assault boats were brought up during the night. "A" and "B" Companies, RDLI crossed the river the next morning and established a bridgehead against slight opposition. 12th Field Squadron operated a raft for jeeps, carriers and 10 DUKWs (Amphibious Lorries) to ferry troops over. 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade Group concentrated on the south bank to follow up the crossing. More rafts arrived on 26 April 1945, but heavy rain made the banks of the river soft and muddy and greatly impeded loading operations.

The crossing of 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade was completed on 27 April 1945. The greater part of the brigade crossed via ferries, but 240 vehicles were sent over a bridge at Ostiglia.

Wholesale disaster was overtaking the Germans in northern Italy. On 25 April 1945, US 88th Infantry Division made a remarkable advance from the Ostiglia bridgehead and reached Verona. All lateral communication between the German forces in the plain was cut, and the retreat of German forces west of the Tyrol was finally closed when US Fifth Army spearheads took Como on 28 April 1945. The German Army Group C was now a mere skeleton force. All their energy had been expended south of the Po River and without weapons and ammunition their retreat had become a rout. Practically all the tanks, assault guns, and heavy anti-tank guns were lost or stranded for lack of fuel and there was little left of the artillery. In these circumstances it was hopeless for the German command to hold a line along the Adige, or even to put up a serious defence in the Tyrol. Strong defences had been constructed during the winter east of the Adige River, but neither troops nor guns were available to hold them.

On 27 April 1945, the RDLI led the advance of 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade to the Adige, and the river was reached in the Castagnaro area. At 14:20 "D" Company, RDLI commenced a crossing using a boat supplied by partisans. These were soon supplemented by American DUKWs, and during the evening the whole battalion crossed the river, together with a troop for PAG tanks. The crossing was unopposed and a number of stragglers were collected on the east bank. On the morning of 28 April 1945, the RDLI occupied Boschi, and at this point 12th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade passed into reserve. 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade with the PR under command was ordered to take the lead, with 11th South African Armoured Brigade moving in close support. The task of 6th South African Armoured Division was to maintain contact with the British Eighth Army, and protect the right flank of the US II Corps.

On the morning of 28 April 1945, 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade crossed the Adige near Legnago, on a bridge laid by American engineers. The NMR/SAAF led the way without waiting for the PR tanks to cross the river. No resistance was encountered until Noventa was reached, some 15 miles from the Adige. PR tanks were called up and the advance continued until the head of the column struck the strong defences of the Venetian Line, and came under heavy anti-tank fire with one Sherman destroyed and two Shermans immobilised. A group of PR tanks moved to flank the Germans and broke their defences west of the Legnaro -Vicenza road. Barbed wire obstacles and anti-tank ditches were not covered by fire. Pillboxes were found unoccupied. The 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade continued its drive to the Bacchiglione River, which was reached that evening. PR tanks advancing up the main Vicenza road were held up by a canal and a blown bridge, and were received with heavy fire. Accordingly the RNC with PR reconnaissance tanks under command, were ordered to move to Montegaldella.



The RNC collected a number of prisoners but failed to capture the bridge at this point in the face of machine-gun fire. The enemy blew the bridge in the early hours of 29 April 1945.

During the day the US 88th Infantry Division captured Vicenza after stiff fighting and the 2nd New Zealand Division reached the outskirts of Padua. On the night of 28 April 1945, the 6th South African Armoured Division HQ ordered the advance to continue on a two brigade front with the 11th South African Armoured Brigade advancing on Treviso and assisting the Americans in capturing that important town, while the 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade were to maintain touch with the British Eighth Army and follow a route south of the main Vicenza - Treviso axis. Both the 11th South African Armoured Brigade and 13th South African Motorized Infantry Brigade succeeded in capturing bridges across the Bacchiglione. Early on 29 April 1945, carriers of the ILH/KimR occupied Longare and found the bridge undamaged, while the RNC crossed by a bridge south east of Monte Galdella.

Both brigades drove on to the Brenta against slight opposition. They collected hundreds of prisoners, and reached Brenta that evening. "D" Company, RNC was involved in a sharp action at Limena, and the enemy's resistance was not overcome until the battalion mortars and the guns of 15th Field Regiment, RA had been brought into action. A PR tank was destroyed here. A RNC patrol crossed the Brenta at Curtarolo using a captured raft, and 8th Field Squadron threw a Bailey bridge over the river during the night of 29/30 April 1945. While reconnoitring the bridging site the commanding officer and 8th Field Squadron and two other ranks were killed by Panzershreck fire.

11th South African Armoured Brigade crossed at Curtarolo on the morning of 30 April 1945, and by nightfall was within three miles of Treviso. 500 prisoners were collected during the day, and it was clear that the war in Italy was virtually over. The New Zealanders were in Venice, and the Americans had taken Treviso. The 6th South African Armoured

Division concentrated in the Scorze area. From there it set off, on 1 May 1945, for Milan, to meet a threat from a German force.

En route the 6th South African Armoured Division heard of the surrender of the German Armies in Italy. 6th South African Armoured Division casualties in Italy totalled 5176, of which 753 were killed.

#### Axis Surrender and End of the War

Early on 2 May 1945 the German theatre commander, Generalfeldmarschall A. Kesselring, agreed to Fieldmarshal H.R.L.G Alexander's surrender terms and broadcast orders to ceasefire. By 3 May 1945, the 6th South African Armoured Division was northeast of Milan when General der Panzertruppe Fridolin Rudolf Theodor, Ritter und Edler von Senger und Etterlin delivered the surrender of the German forces in Italy to Lt. Gen. M.W. Clark in Florence. This was followed by Winston Churchill's announcement of the end of the war in Europe on 8 May 1945.

On 14 May 1945 the whole of 6th South African Armoured Division assembled on the Monza motor racing circuit, complete with its tanks, artillery and vehicles. A Guard of Honour was formed by the SSB, Maj. Gen. W.H.E. Poole's first command. As Prime Minister (Field Marshal) J.C Smuts was in San Francisco writing the preamble on Human Rights for the United Nation's Charter, he was represented by the Acting Minister of Defence, Commodore the Hon F.C. Sturrock who opened with a speech, bringing the 6th South African Armoured Division the thanks of Prime Minister and the people of South Africa for its part in the victory in Italy.

The 'Top Brass' included Lieutenant-General Mark Clark (15th Army Group), General Lucian King Truscott, Jr. (Fifth Army) and Lieutenant-General Willis Dale Crittenger (IV US Corps), all three having had the 6th South African Armoured Division under their command during operations from the Arno to the Alps. General Sir Pierre Helpperus Andries van Ryneveld and Major-General Francois Henry "Frank" Theron were the distinguished South African Generals present, together with senior Allied officers, including Italians.

The parade was led by the ubiquitous TAC Division HQ Command Jeep with its 2 Star Plate and, as usual, flying the GOC's pennant which so many men had seen during the year-long trek from Caddino. Maj. Gen. W.H.E Poole stood smartly at the salute as the battle-worn jeep came abreast of Commodore the Hon F.C. Sturrock. The Air OP pilots coincided their fly-past with the head of the huge march past. The Command Jeep then broke away, so that Maj. Gen. W.H.E Poole could join Commodore the Hon F.C. Sturrock at the saluting base. During the proceedings Lt. Gen. M.W Clark, presumably in his capacity as the senior US Officer in the theatre, decorated Maj. Gen. W.H.E. Poole on behalf of the President of the United States with the Legion of Merit (Commander), the Highest Award that could be made to a non-American citizen.



The South African brigades were then deployed to the Swiss and French borders for frontier duties with the 11th Armoured Brigade along the Swiss border, 13th Motorised Brigade around Turin and 12th Motorised Brigade in the Aosta Valley contiguous to the Franco-Italian border, which was drawn on the high ground separating the two countries. On 16 July 1945 the Italian Cremona and Mantova Battle Groups were placed under command of the 6th South African Armoured Division to assist in these duties, allowing some of the battalions to be withdrawn for repatriation to South Africa. The two Motorised Brigades were amalgamated and remained responsible for guarding duties in the province of Imperia until 18 August 1945 while the 11th Armoured Brigade was amalgamated with the division artillery.

Lt. Gen. M.W. Clark commented on the 6th South African Armoured Division's achievements during the Spring Offensive, stating:

*"One of my visits was to the 6th South African Armoured Division, under a most competent leader, Maj. Gen. W.H.E. Poole. This unit had previously been shifted to the Fifth Army front, and had performed splendidly under adverse conditions. It was a battle-wise outfit, bold and aggressive against the enemy and willing to do whatever job was necessary."*

*In fact, after a period of day-and-night fighting, the 6th South African Armoured Division had in an emergency gone into the line as infantrymen. When the snow stalled their armour they dug in their tanks and used them as artillery to make up for our shortage of heavy guns... Their attacks against strongly organised German positions were made with great élan and without regard for casualties. Despite their comparatively small numbers, they never complained about losses. Neither did Smuts, who made it clear that the Union of South Africa intended to do its part in the War - and it most certainly did. Enough said!"*

Lt. Gen. M.W. Clark – Military Memoirs

## Helwan Riots

By the beginning of April 1945, it had become obvious that the war was coming to a close and that the 6th South African Armoured Division as well as many other South African troops serving as divisional, corps and army troops would require transportation back to South Africa for demobilisation. On 1 May 1945, the Union Defence Force realised that no plans had yet been made to get all men back and instructions were prepared, whereby No. 1 and No. 5 Wings of the SAAF were to be merged to form No. 4 Group which was to be used in an Intensified Transport Service/Shuttle Service to move 5000 troops per month by air commencing 1 July 1945.



A further 15,000 men were to be transported home by sea during the second half of the year, resulting in the repatriation of 45,000 soldiers by the end of the year.

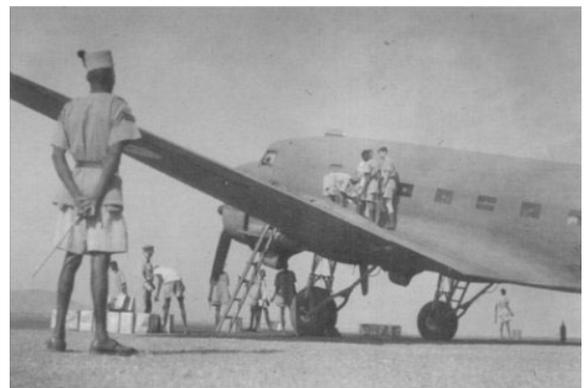
In addition to the 6th South African Armoured Division and other troops in Italy, there were thousands of recently released South African prisoners from the 2nd South African Infantry Division who had been captured at the battles of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk who had been held in Italy. And this also created problems as their numbers had not been factored into the demobilisation plans.

The staging depot at Helwan north of Cairo was soon overcrowded and by 20 August 1945, the depot, designed to hold 5000 men was holding 9000.

An official announcement on 9 August 1945, stated that 3000 – 5000 men were expected to be repatriated by sea at the end of the month, but less than a week later it was announced that the expected shipping had been delayed, and that further announcements would be made later. Food was in short supply and the lack of adequate numbers of chefs caused extended queues and delays at meal times. The standard of discipline deteriorated further as the men arriving at the depot were split up alphabetically by surname, and then according to their demobilisation categories.

Priority was determined by the length of service in the UDF, The basic principle was “First in, first out”. All the members of the UDF were classified in groups ranging from Group A with attestation dates between September 1939 and 30 April 1940 to Group M with attestation dates from 1 January 1945 onwards. White men and women, the Cape Corps and Indian and Malay Corps, and the Native Military Corps were grouped separately. Demobilisation took place on an individual basis rather than a unit basis since the whole dispersal depot machinery, which was built up during the war, was based on a system of individual discharges. This meant that men were grouped together with fellow soldiers and NCO's whom they did not know and unit structures were lost.

Military personnel within the Union were considered for demobilisation first, with the exception of those personnel serving in certain key positions and those whose demobilisation depended on the complete demobilisation of personnel from other theatres of war. The second stage commenced on the arrival of troops from areas elsewhere in Africa; and the final stage was reached on return of troops from other operations, those held P.O.W. and those on duties in enemy territory.



Delays in the repatriation process arose with problems relating to the reconversion of aircraft to passenger planes, shortages in finding fuel and a general lack of shipping space, created problems in the repatriation of soldiers from overseas. Some of the soldiers were of the opinion that the whole situation was pretty shocking and some described the air evacuation scheme as a complete failure. Some soldiers even questioned the sincerity of the government's promise of a speedy return and their smooth reinstatement into civilian life.

More changes in the official discharge policy led to a severe criticism and delays in finding suitable post-war employment. Initially, the discharges were to take place on a FIFO basis according to the soldier's date of attestation. However, this changed when the military authorities discovered that practically all A and B groups consisted of officers and NCO's; and decided to adopt a ratio scheme of 3 officers, 14 NCO's and 18 other ranks to be discharged in that order. Consequently, privates were released before officers who had a longer service record. This led to widespread criticism.

The soldiers felt that those who were most likely to be prejudiced by their return to civilian life being postponed, should receive priority.

Morale declined even further when it was decided that 500 volunteers would go home as a top priority to assist in the demobilisation process back in South Africa, their return home irrespective of their demobilisation category. In addition, all trading rights except those of the NAAFI were controlled by Egyptians; the men felt that they were being exploited



by inflated prices charged by these traders. There was also unhappiness over the two cinemas, when men who had bought tickets frequently found that they were unable to get in due to lack of space.

A protest meeting was held on 20 August 1945, where a crowd of 1500 men were addressed by various individuals. As the size of the crowd increased, the meeting became violent. The usually disciplined soldiers became a mob bent on trashing, looting and burning and their first objectives were the two Egyptian owned cinemas, which were set alight. The mob then split up and further Egyptian premises, blocks of shops, motor cars, bungalows and book stalls were set alight. They also set fire to one of their own messes and broke down and looted the NAAFI store.

Maj. Gen. W.H.E. Poole flew in from Italy to address the troops, promising that immediate steps were to be taken to speed up the rate of repatriation. To tighten up on discipline and improve morale at Helwan, the housing of troops on a unit basis was instituted and a Brigadier was appointed to command the depot. A public address system was installed to keep everybody in camp up to date on the latest news and free outdoor film-shows were implemented. On 26 August 1945, the Director General Officer - Administration (DGQ-A Italy and Egypt), appointed a court of enquiry to investigate, their report detailed the frustration and despondency related to overcrowding which had been one major contributing factor, as had the failure of the airlift to repatriate the published number of troops per day.

The first official statements on 24 and 31 May 1945, declared that the repatriation rate by air would be 500 a day. From 1 July 1945, this figure was amended to 300 a day. The average daily number of men repatriated during the first twenty days of July was only 108. The court assessed the total cost of the damage at £22,768,431. Then by 25 January 1946, 10,1676 men had been ferried back to South Africa with the last aircraft leaving Egypt on 26 February 1946, which included Maj. Gen. W.H.E. Poole.



