

CHAPTER V * * * * *

Preparations for the Offensive

WHEN the year 1945 dawned on the Fifth Army front there was little visible change in the situation which had prevailed for the last 2 months of 1944. The eastern part of the IV Corps sector continued quiet; the II and 13 Corps sectors remained relatively inactive. In the western half of the IV Corps sector the abortive attack of the combined German and Fascist Italian elements in the Serchio Valley had come to an end, and our lines had been restored to most of the positions held before the drive had begun just after Christmas. Winter had set in. Much of the front line was buried under blankets of snow, in some places to a depth of 18 to 24 inches. Patrol activity was limited; artillery fire by both the Germans and ourselves was at a minimum.

On 1 January the Germans were estimated to be capable of defending their positions and launching counterattacks to restore any losses of ground, fighting delaying actions in successive positions back to the strong defensive line of the Adige River on the northern edge of the Po Valley in the foothills of the Alps, or launching a large-scale attack. Although the enemy had built up his strength on the coastal flank to a total of 9 German and 12 Italian battalions and still constituted a threat in this sector, it was considered most likely that he would be content to adopt the first capability and hold his present line. A regrouping of Fifth Army in preparation for future operations was directed in the first operations instruction of the new year on 5 January. (*See Annex No. 1E.*) This regrouping continued throughout most of the month, the reliefs and changes of sectors culminating in the transfer of 13 Corps to operational control of Eighth Army on 18 January. Fifth Army continued to administer and supply this Corps.

A. THE DECISION TO WAIT

At the end of the first week of January active offensive operations by Eighth Army were brought to a halt northwest of Faenza along the line of the Senio River when 15th Army Group decided to postpone further large-scale offensive action by the two Allied Armies until the arrival of spring. Numerous factors were considered in arriving at this decision. By 1 April it was expected that fresh British and American divisions would be available and several well-trained British-equipped units of the new Italian Army would be ready for combat. An adequate stock of ammunition reserves would be built up by that date, all major combat elements would be refitted and rested, and the difficulty in predicting weather conditions during the winter would be eliminated. An active defense for the remainder of the winter was the mission assigned to Fifth Army. A number of limited objective attacks were planned in Operations Instruction No. 2 on 9 January to improve positions, to keep the enemy guessing as to our final intentions, and to provide better jumping-off places for use when the spring offensive was launched. (See Annex No. 1F.) The extensive regrouping of the Army which had begun on 5 January was continued during the remainder of the month, which passed relatively quietly along the entire front. Only a few small-scale raids, mostly designed to obtain prisoners, were carried out by our troops and by the enemy. Several sharp clashes occurred in the Mount Grande—Mount Cerere sector, in the high ground dominating Highways 6531, 65, and 64, in the Serchio Valley, and in the Strettoia hill mass near the coast when the opposing armies attempted to secure local vantage points.

Most of the units which had been detached from II Corps late in December were moved back to the central sector. On 5 January the 135th Regimental Combat Team returned from Viareggio to its former sector on Highway 65 where it reverted to control of the 34th Division; the following day the 365th Regimental Combat Team (92d Division), which had been previously attached to II Corps to provide an additional relief team for the infantry divisions on the east of the highway, moved west from the Corps sector to its own divisional sector; and on 8 January the 85th Division began movement to rejoin II Corps. To compensate IV Corps for these withdrawals, troops of the 86th Mountain Infantry, the first element of the newly arrived 10th Mountain Division to be ready for combat, were attached to the Corps on 5 January. These specialists in mountain fighting were put under command of Task Force 45 the following day and on 9 January relieved the 434th and 900th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalions and the British 39 Light Antiaircraft Regiment in the wild Apennine terrain in the center of the Corps sector northwest of Pistoia. The two relieved American battalions shortly became part of the new 473d Infantry.

On 10 January, following the return of the 365th Infantry to its area, the 92d Division assumed control of the Serchio Valley sector, allowing the 8 Indian Division to be placed in Army reserve in a rest camp near Pisa. Ten days later the 85th Mountain Infantry was attached to Task Force 45, and on 28 January the remainder of the 10th Mountain Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. George P. Hays, was placed under control of the task force.

Similar large-scale changes were made by II Corps. On 9 January the 85th Division began taking over positions held by the British 1 Division of 13 Corps in the Mount Grande area. Due to the extremely difficult terrain in this sector, relief operations were restricted to one battalion each night, and it was not until 17 January that command of the sector was assumed by the American Division and II Corps extended its boundary to the east. The 1 Division came under control of AFHQ and eventually was transferred to the Middle East. The 17 Indian Brigade on the extreme right of the Army line was relieved on 11 January by elements of the British 5 Corps and the British 6 Armoured Division, and the brigade then moved to Pisa to join the remainder of the 8 Indian Division. The 34th Division relieved Maj. Gen. Paul H. Kendall's 88th Division on 13 January; after 10 days' rest the latter returned on 24 January to take over from the 91st Division. Although these were the final physical movements of troops during the month, changes in command resulted in the 6 South African Armoured Division, which had been functioning as Army troops, being placed under II Corps on the 15th and 13 Corps, then composed of the 6 Armoured and 78 Divisions, passing to operational control of Eighth Army on the 18th. The new Fifth Army right boundary thus created paralleled the Firenzuola—Imola road 2 miles to the west to a point opposite Castel del Rio, where it turned north to skirt the east edge of Mount Grande and strike Highway 9 at Castel San Pietro, west of Imola.

At the end of January, II Corps was disposed with the 6 South African, the 88th, 34th, and 85th Divisions in the line from left to right and the 91st Division in reserve. The artillery strength of the Corps was increased by the attachment of the British 61 Heavy Regiment, which included eight 7.2-inch howitzers and two batteries of 155-mm guns. IV Corps positions were held by the 92d Division, Task Force 45 (10th Mountain Division), and the 1st Brazilian Division; the 1st Armored Division and the 8 Indian Division constituted the Army reserve. Throughout the winter months our troops improved and consolidated their positions, building a series of secondary defense lines on either side of Highway 65; at the same time they continued to get ready for the spring offensive.

The Germans also continued to improve their defenses protecting Bologna. The increased strength of these works enabled the enemy to reduce further his commitment against Fifth Army and to use some of these troops to relieve units opposing

Eighth Army. Marshal Kesselring, apparently recovered from his wounds, again took command of the enemy armies and shortly before the middle of January sent the 305th Grenadier Division into the line east of Highway 65 where it relieved both the 362d Grenadier and 42d Light Divisions. By 15 January these two divisions had been identified opposite Eighth Army. Later in January changes among Fascist Italian elements facing IV Corps were heralded by a new influx of deserters when the 1st Bersaglieri Regiment (Italia Division) replaced elements of the Monte Rosa Division along the Ligurian coastal sector. About 25 January the 157th Mountain Division moved into the line west of Highway 65, relieving the 4th Parachute Division, which also was shortly recommitted against Eighth Army. This was the first time this mountain division, which had recently been upgraded from a reserve classification after its employment along the Franco-Italian border, had been encountered by Fifth Army. Soon after the beginning of the new year the 710th Grenadier Division arrived in the Italian theater from Norway and was stationed near Venice. Late in January the 356th Grenadier Division departed to reinforce the German front in Hungary where it was identified northeast of Budapest by 15 February.

B. *ATTACKS OF THE 92D DIVISION*

4-11 FEBRUARY

After a month-long period of rest and reorganization following the fighting in the Serchio Valley during the last week of December, the 92d Division began the first of several limited objective attacks planned by General Truscott for the months of February and March. (*See Map No. 4.*) The division, its strength increased by the attachment of the 366th Infantry and various IV Corps troops, committed all four combat teams under its control in two separate operations, one designed to improve positions in the Serchio Valley and the other to achieve similar ends in the coastal sector on both sides of Highway 1.

The attack in the Serchio Valley was launched first, beginning on 4 February and initially encountering little opposition. The 366th Infantry, less its 3d Battalion which was holding the sector between Highway 1 and the Ligurian Sea, was assigned an attack zone on the west side of the Serchio River and the 365th Infantry a zone on the east side. The first day's attack met little enemy resistance when Company C, 366th Infantry, occupied Gallicano in strength and pushed patrols farther to the north. The 2d Battalion, 365th Infantry, likewise entered the villages of Castelvecchio and Albiano at the foot of the dominating 3,000-foot Lama di Sotto ridge east of the stream. These advances restored the few positions which had been lost in the German December attack.



The snow capped peaks of the Apennines rise steeply above the Serchio Valley



The coastal plain just north of Cinquale Canal; Highway 1 on the right



Infantry of the 92d Division move up on tanks through Forte dei Marmi



The 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion passes a ruined church in Querceta

The main offensive jumped off at dawn the following day. The 366th Infantry made advances of approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ mile, occupying the village of Calomini and opening the road running west from Gallicano to the village of Vergemoli. Scattered enemy resistance and numerous minefields were overcome, but stiffer opposition was encountered when attacks were directed against Mount Faeto, a peak which lay between Calomini and Gallicano. Company B twice advanced nearly to the summit of this feature, only to be driven back by small arms and mortar fire each time. Objectives were reached along other sections of the regimental line, however, and in the next 3 days some slight progress was made farther up the slopes of the mountain. The enemy apparently was resigned to permitting these gains, for he made no counterattacks in great strength.

On the east of the Serchio on 5 February it was not as easy. The defenders could ill afford to lose the Lama di Sotto terrain, which afforded excellent observation toward the German strongpoint town of Castelnuovo, about 2 miles due west of the ridge. The first assaults by the 365th Infantry appeared to take the enemy by surprise, and objectives were speedily reached. Some Fascist elements of the Italia Division, which were interspersed among the German troops of the 148th Grenadier Division, gave way, and in less than an hour after the 3d Battalion began the attack, important gains had been made. Company I occupied the village of Lama at 0710; at 0750 Company L passed through Sommocolonia and seized the high ground on the ridge southwest of Lama. Company K reached the ridge northeast of Lama at Mount della Stella, and all three units dug in to occupy the positions, which represented a gain of more than a mile from the line of departure.

Enemy resistance became stiffer the following day when the 2d Battalion began moving north from Castelvecchio across the southwest slopes of the ridge. Despite greatly increased enemy artillery and mortar fire, objectives were reached, and the line was consolidated with that of the 3d Battalion, which repulsed small counterattacks directed at Mount della Stella. The 1st Battalion relieved the 3d Battalion during the night of 7-8 February but had hardly gotten in position when the 2d Battalion, 286th Grenadier Regiment, began a series of fierce counterattacks to regain the ridge. The first, launched before daylight in company strength, was successfully beaten off by artillery fire. Another, in which the entire German battalion participated, overran Lama at 1725, took Mount della Stella and forced our troops back about 500 yards. The Germans struck the salient at Mount della Stella from three sides and worked down the ridge toward the rest of the 1st Battalion. Counterattacks continued on 9 February without additional success.

At 0630, 10 February, the 365th Infantry attacked to regain the ridge, committing three battalions, the 3d on the right, the 2d in the center, and the attached 2d Battalion, 366th Infantry, on the left. Heavy machine-gun fire and mortar bar-

rages were laid down by the Germans, but Italians of the 1st Bersaglieri Regiment collapsed, giving up 55 prisoners and enabling our troops to get back into Lama and onto parts of the ridge southwest of the village. This success proved only temporary. The Germans renewed their pressure, and before dark the enemy again infiltrated into Lama itself. Three additional enemy attacks on 11 February were beaten off until a fourth, estimated to include 200 Germans, forced us to make further slight withdrawals. Activity then died down in the valley with the important ridge remaining in enemy hands; our advanced posts were about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile forward of the original positions.

The attack in the coastal region was designed to improve positions to a general depth of about 2 miles, both in the mountains east of Highway 1 and north of a series of canals which cut the narrow plain between the highway and the sea. The Strettoia hill mass was the principal inland objective. The 371st Infantry operated in the right zone, entirely through rugged terrain, and the 370th Infantry, which had been in division reserve, took over the left half of the old 371st Infantry sector, with its left flank on Highway 1 and its right flank in the mountains. On the extreme left of the division the 3d Battalion, 366th Infantry, was formed into Task Force 1, which also included Company C, 760th Tank Battalion, a platoon of tank destroyers from the 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion, and the 27th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (1st Armored Division). Armor from the 760th Tank Battalion and the 758th Light Tank Battalion was also attached to the two regiments. Corps artillery battalions, chemical mortars, and fighter-bombers of XXII TAC directed by Rover Joe, supported the operation. Task Force 1 was to advance along the beach until it had crossed the Cinquale Canal near its mouth, and then turn inland toward Highway 1. The other two forces were to attack to the northwest in their zones.

The attack began at 0600, 8 February, with a rapid initial advance along the entire front across the relatively wide no-man's land which separated the opposing forces. By midmorning, however, stiff infantry resistance and intense artillery and mortar fire was encountered by all three forces. On the right the 371st Infantry, advancing with two battalions abreast, was pinned down after an 800-yard gain through heavy fire and minefields. Attacking in column of battalions led by the 3d Battalion, the 370th Infantry in the central zone ran into bitter resistance by noon. At the end of the day the regiment had moved ahead only about 1 mile.

The most severe opposition developed on the left flank where Task Force 1 was forced to operate in flat terrain, exposed not only to heavy small-arms fire from German troops of the 148th Fusilier Battalion and supporting mortars and field artillery, but also to big coastal guns firing from the La Spezia area. Task Force infantry, riding on the tanks of the 760th Tank Battalion, crossed the canal mouth without much trouble. Although the water was only about 30 inches deep and 90 feet

wide at this point, the beach was heavily sown with mines, which disabled two tanks almost immediately. After it had advanced 500 yards north of the canal, the force turned inland toward a coastal road which paralleled Highway 1, immediately encountering thick minefields. Heavy, accurate artillery, mortar, and machine-gun fire, which prevented engineers from bridging the canal inland from the exposed beach, also made it impossible for them to breach the minefield ahead of the force. The tank company attempted to break through the field to the road, only to lose four more vehicles in the mines. Despite the fire the entire force managed to reach the north side of the canal by 1700; at dusk Company B, 370th Infantry, came across to reinforce the infantry, which had suffered heavy casualties.

On 9 February both the 370th and 371st Infantry made limited gains, the former placing light elements on the summit of Mount Strettoia. The Germans hurriedly brought up the 285th Grenadier Regiment from reserve. These fresh troops immediately stiffened the defense of the 281st Grenadier Regiment on Highway 1 and in the Strettoia hill mass and launched counterattacks. Minefields covered by fire prevented the armor from advancing up Highway 1; the leading battalion of the 371st Infantry suffered such high straggler losses that it was unable to take advantage of the temporary break it had created in the German line the previous day. Task Force 1 continued to suffer heavily. The bridgehead north of the canal extended about 1,000 yards along the beach and 500 yards inland, but many of the tanks were forced to remain on the beach itself since maneuver inland was restricted by the mines. Enemy counterattacks at 0600 and 1100 were beaten off; a heavier thrust at 1730 pushed back the perimeter of the bridgehead lines. Remaining elements of the 1st Battalion, 370th Infantry, were committed to help hold the ground and were ferried over the canal on tanks. In the ferrying process three tanks of the 758th Light Tank Battalion fell into deep craters in the bed of the canal, drowned out, and had to be abandoned.

The next day, while the 370th Infantry held its positions, the 371st Infantry struggled to maintain a foothold east of the Strettoia hill mass against further counterattacks by the 285th Grenadier Regiment and reinforcing elements of the Kesselring Machine Gun Battalion, and Task Force 1 attempted to break through to Highway 1. More armor and personnel were lost in the thick minefields. At 1600 our infantry in the bridgehead were pushed back, and enemy troops almost reached the task force headquarters. At 1930 an order was received for the entire force to pull back south of the canal, destroying whatever tanks could not be evacuated. By the morning of the 11th it had withdrawn to points a mile south of the canal, after crews had burned the three stalled light tanks and destroyed the crippled mediums with point-blank gunfire from the few operational tanks. The 70-hour stand north of the Cinquale Canal cost the 760th Tank Battalion 16 medium tanks and the 758th

Light Tank Battalion 4 light tanks; forward observers from the 27th Armored Field Artillery Battalion lost 2 additional medium tanks. The 3d Battalion, 366th Infantry, lost 329 men killed, wounded, or missing.

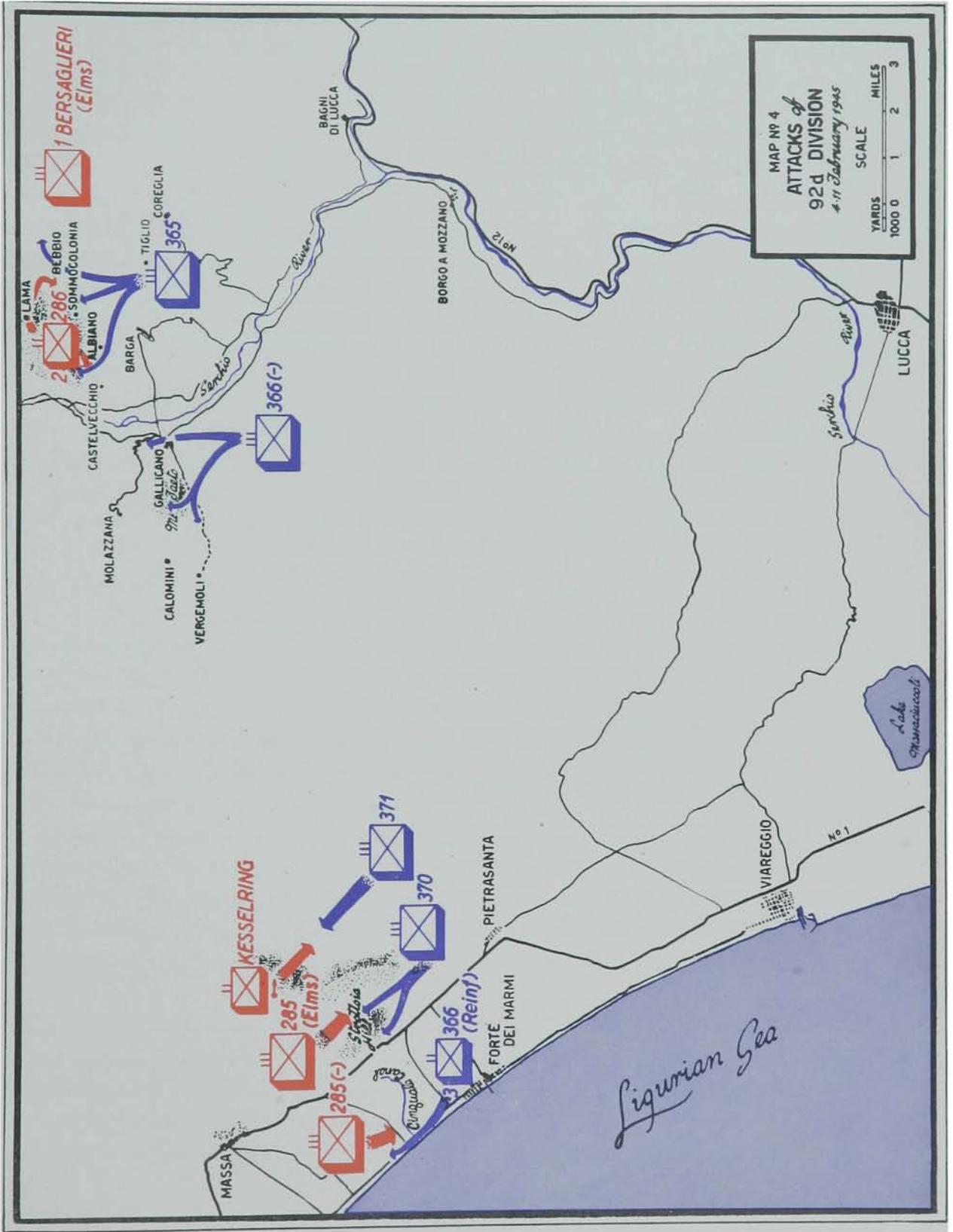
On 11 February offensive operations farther inland also ceased. A counter-attack against the 3d Battalion, 370th Infantry, disorganized that unit and recaptured most of the ground the regiment had taken. The 2d Battalion stopped the German attack and together with the 371st Infantry consolidated the positions then held, on approximately the same ground as that occupied before the offensive was undertaken. Within the next few days regrouping of supporting units took place, when several artillery units and the 84th Chemical Battalion were shifted to the eastern part of the IV Corps sector where further operations were soon to be started. The 1st Battalion, 370th Infantry, took over the extreme coastal sector; the 3d Battalion, 366th Infantry, withdrew to Viareggio for reorganization.

C. GAINS ALONG HIGHWAY 64

18 FEBRUARY-5 MARCH

The second limited objective attack planned for February as a preliminary move to improve positions before beginning any more extensive offensive was aimed at securing the high ground dominating a 10-mile section of Highway 64. The objectives of the attack outlined in Operations Instruction No. 4, dated 16 February (*Annex No. 1D*), were a series of mountain peaks and ridges roughly 5 miles west of the road and extending from a point opposite Porretta north to points south and west of Vergato, a distance of approximately 8 miles. In German hands these peaks — at a general elevation of 3,500 feet — afforded complete observation over most of the highway in this area and into our positions east of the Reno River. If occupied by our forces, the Germans would not only be denied the use of these valuable observation points, but we would be provided with good jumping-off positions for future offensive operations toward Bologna. The ground north of the objectives, although still very rugged, sloped gradually toward the Po Valley, and in this sector the enemy had not constructed such strong defenses as now faced our forces astride Highway 65.

The planned operations were much more ambitious than those which had recently ended without appreciable gains in the Serchio Valley and on the Ligurian coastal plain. Two IV Corps divisions, the 1st Brazilian Division and the fresh 10th Mountain Division, were to be employed in the attack, which was to be carried out in two phases. The first part involved seizure of the long-disputed Mount Belvedere and its two companion peaks, Mount della Torraccia and Mount Castello. The



second phase, which was to be begun after ground captured in the first was completely consolidated, required capture of additional ridges northeast of Mount Torraccia and Mount Castello, including Mount Grande d'Aiano, Mount della Croce, Mount Castellana, and territory surrounding the town of Castelnuovo. Occupation of these objectives would push our line as far as 7 miles west of Highway 64, place the ground dominating the highway almost to Vergato in our hands, and put us in position to neutralize the strongpoint in the town. We would also gain observation over much of the lower country to the north, toward Highway 9 west of Bologna. The valley highway lay about 20 miles north of the final phase line.

The most critical terrain feature included in Phase I of the projected attack was Mount Belvedere, its twin crest called Mount Gorgolesco, and the high ground along the saddle which connected it with Mount della Torraccia. This saddle was formed by a ridge 3 miles long, only slightly lower than the 3,736-foot Mount Belvedere and the 3,549-foot summit of Mount della Torraccia. These peaks and the ridge dominated not only the ground to the southeast but also the basin of the Panaro River, which extended for 6 or 7 miles to the northwest. One mile south of Mount della Torraccia lay Mount Castello, the third critical height in the immediate area.

West of our positions below Mount Belvedere and extending about 4 miles from northeast to southwest lay the even more rugged Serrasiccia—Cappel Buso ridge, anchored on the south by Mount Mancinello and on the north by Pizzo di Campiano. From Mount Serrasiccia, which rose to 4,526 feet almost in the center of the rocky mass, this ridge sloped slightly toward both extremities; the outstanding feature of it was an almost sheer 1,500-foot rock northeastern face. Pizzo di Campiano was nearly 100 feet higher than Mount Belvedere but despite its higher elevation the ridge did not afford observation over as much of the area. However, it did provide excellent observation on the reverse slopes of the Belvedere—Torraccia ridge, and therefore it was considered essential that this ridge be taken and the left flank thus secured before the main assault was launched.

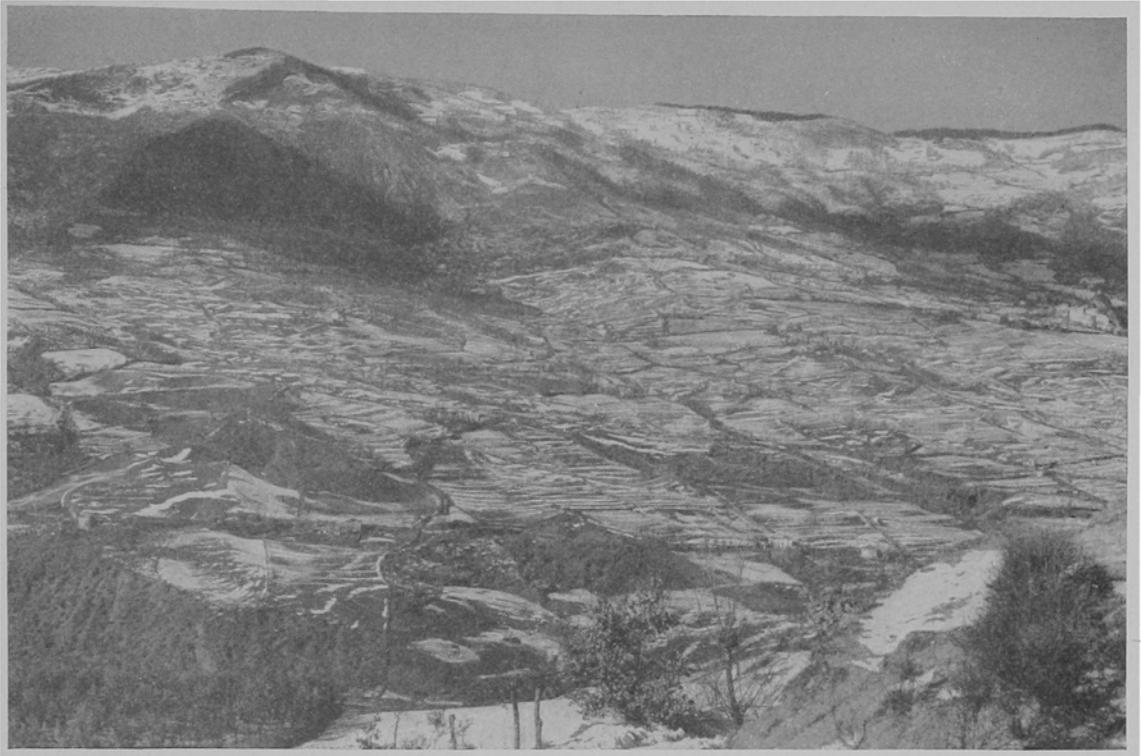
Over the entire mountain system concealment was possible only in scattered clumps of stunted, scrubby growth. The few roads in the sector were narrow, some of them less than two-way. The burden of supply would fall on the pack mule, the full-tracked Weasel, and jeeps, which could navigate some of the trails. By careful driving armored vehicles could be pushed forward in limited numbers, since in previous operations in the vicinity tanks had been as far up as the village of Querciola, on the ridge a little more than a mile southwest of Mount Belvedere summit. The sector was defended by the German 232d Grenadier Division, which was thinly spread along an 18-mile front with the 1045th Grenadier Regiment holding most of the Belvedere—Torraccia ridge, the 1043d Grenadier Regiment in the Mount Castello area, and the 1044th Grenadier Regiment scattered along the Serrasiccia—

Cappel Buso ridge and mountains to the southwest of it. In reserve were the 232d Fusilier Battalion and elements of the 4th Independent Mountain Battalion.

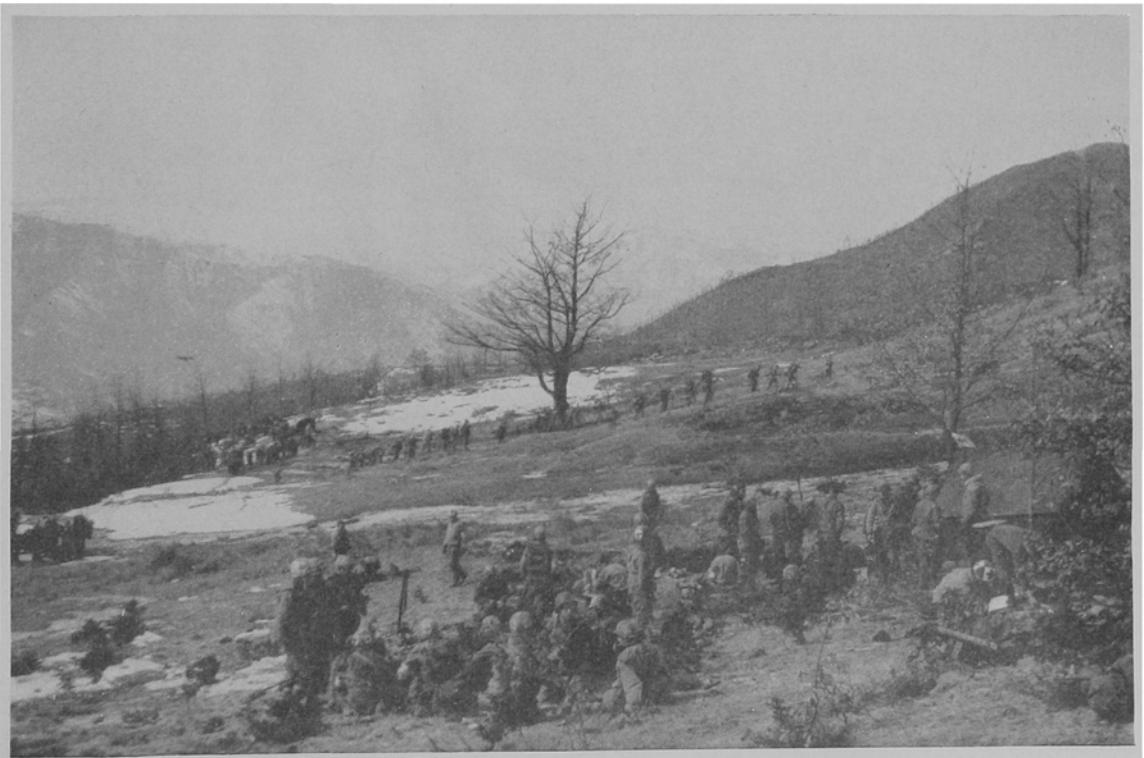
1. *The Belvedere Operation.* By the first of February the entire 10th Mountain Division was concentrated in the Task Force 45 sector, extending east from Bagni di Lucca, through the Cutigliano Valley, and facing Mount Belvedere on the right flank. Frequent long-distance patrols were instituted by the mountain troops to probe enemy defenses in the area and give the new units some combat experience before they were committed to full-scale attack. On 15 February the 473d Infantry was attached to IV Corps and relieved 10th Mountain Division elements in the Bagni di Lucca and Cutigliano areas; 2 days later the division assumed command of the eastern part of the task force sector adjoining the Brazilians, and the 473d Infantry took charge of the western half. The 10th Mountain Division was assembled in its new sector, the bulk of the units in the Lizzano area southwest of Porretta in the Silla River valley.

The preliminary attack to secure the flanking Serrasiccia—Campiano ridge before the main assault on Mount Belvedere and Mount Castello was launched began at 1930, 18 February. (*See Map No. 5.*) The mission, assigned to the 1st Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry, necessitated a spectacular assault up the sheer face of the cliff. Experienced mountain climbers, negotiating the steep rock wall in darkness which was partially dissipated by the artificial moonlight cast by searchlight beams, caught the 2d Battalion, 1044th Grenadier Regiment, by surprise while it was in the process of being relieved by elements of the 232d Fusilier Battalion. The enemy, thus hit while he was off balance, gave up the strategic heights after making comparatively little resistance.

Our mountain battalion attacked the ridge frontally, Company A moving against Mount Mancinello, Company B against Mount Cappel Buso, and Company C against Mount Serrasiccia. Company F, attached to the 1st Battalion, advanced against positions south of Mount Mancinello to provide left flank protection, and one platoon of Company A operated independently on the right flank to take the Pizzo di Campiano spur. The attack over this seemingly impassable terrain — so steep that in some instances troops found it necessary to use ropes to haul themselves up — caught the enemy completely unaware. At 0030, 19 February, Company B reached the lower slopes of Mount Cappel Buso before the first opposition was met in the form of small-arms fire. After a 1-hour skirmish the objective was seized; its garrison was mostly killed or captured. Similar confused resistance was met by the other companies. Company A reached the ridge at Mount Mancinello at 0045, closely supported by Company F, and at 0505 Company C attained its objective after a brief fire fight. The detached platoon of Company A reached the summit of Pizzo di Campiano after a hard 9-hour climb and successfully occupied the ridge in that area.



Long, thinly covered slopes lead up to the crest of Mount Belvedere



Behind the front—litter bearers, pack mules, and infantry moving up



The enemy is ahead; on the left smoke rises from fighter-bomber targets



An automatic rifleman covers a German-held house as his squad crawls up