

brigades for 6 South African Armoured Division, was to secure the right flank of the advance by blocking off the roads leading south from Sulmona, Opi and Atina. The New Zealand Division was on the southern flank of the Corps and advanced through San Biagio to Atina and Sora, on the road from Arce to Avezzano. For the advance in the valley the stages were to be, first the line Arce-Ceprano; secondly Ceccano and thirdly Valmontone, or near it, to link up with VI Corps. The two Corps would advance abreast, a great concentration of strength in so narrow a space.

The Germans were as well aware as we were of their position and of the danger of the centre of their line being rushed while their right was locked in a furious battle for Rome. At all events they must block the valley long enough to allow the withdrawal of their forces from the area to the south of it and ensure an orderly withdrawal into the "Caesar" line before Eighth Army joined hands with VI Corps. They also had to block the Sora and Subiaco roads to prevent a further envelopment by these routes, but this was a much simpler task for both roads run through narrow defiles on either side of the Simbruini mountains and can be held without much difficulty against any force which can advance up them. From a captured operation order it appears that they intended to hold the line of the Melfa river with 90 Panzer Grenadier and 1 Parachute Divisions but the order was issued too late; by the evening of the 24th the Canadians succeeded in forcing a crossing. This was a notable feat by 5 Canadian Armoured Division, which had advanced rapidly from the breach in the "Hitler" line with the right flank of its advance open since the enemy were still resisting 13 Corps in Aquino. The small bridgehead, only one company strong, resisted violent enemy counter-attacks all that night. Next morning, the enemy having withdrawn from Aquino and Piedimonte, 13 Corps was able to advance to the river line with 6 Armoured, 78 and 8 Indian Divisions, and the remainder of 1 Canadian Corps, which had been delayed by bad going and the inadequacy of routes forward, came up to the support of its advanced guard. There were now five divisions moving forward in the same general direction on a front of rather less than five miles and skilfully laid minefields and German delaying tactics added to the difficulty of bringing so large a force to bear in so restricted a space.

13 Corps' plan provided for an advance up the northern side of the valley. The Corps axis was to run through Arce, exclusive of Ceprano, to Frosinone where it would swing right handed to run more or less parallel with Route 6 through Alatri to Genazzano. It was impossible to get started, however, until the enemy had been cleared from Aquino and an attempt to pass 6 Armoured Division south of Aquino involved it in confusion with 5 Canadian Armoured Division which was using the same axis; an undetected minefield caused further delay. They got across the Melfa on the 25th and advanced on the early morning of the 26th directed on Arce; the Canadians to the south advanced at the same time towards Ceprano. Shortly before Arce Route 6 runs through a defile formed by the main mass of Monte Cairo on the right and, on the left, by two prominent hills known as Monte Grande and Monte Piccolo, both rising about seven

hundred feet above the general level of the valley. Monte Piccolo had been occupied by a small advanced detachment of 1 Guards Brigade late on the 26th but during the night 1 Parachute Division infiltrated back onto both hills and prepared for a stubborn defence. An attempt to force the defile on the 27th ran into heavy enfilade fire and we were obliged to desist from this attempt and withdraw the small force from Monte Piccolo. For the next two days attack and counter-attack continued and it was not until late on the 28th that the Germans evacuated Arce and fell back behind the upper Liri, which here cuts across Route 6 at right angles. Meanwhile the Canadians had made an assault boat crossing of the Liri south of Ceprano on 27th May. It was a difficult operation in face of heavy enemy artillery and small arms opposition but the town was captured by midday. Our bridgehead was still only supported by ferries and it was not until the afternoon of the 28th that a hundred and twenty foot bridge was completed over which the armoured brigade was to pass to advance to Frosinone. It had to be used instead, however, by 78 Division which 13 Corps had sent round to the south to outflank the enemy defenders of the Arce defile. This delayed the pursuit by the Canadian armour.

The first few days of the break-out by VI Corps had gone so well that the first object of the operations could be deemed to be secured; we were already threatening Route 6 and had destroyed or driven off all the enemy on the right flank of the original bridgehead. However the Hermann Goering Division had now begun to arrive in the Valmontone area where it had been joined by part of 92 Infantry Division from north of the Tiber and by units of 4 Parachute and 65 Infantry Divisions withdrawn from the left flank of the bridgehead. It had suffered heavy losses from air attacks, for its move from Leghorn had been so precipitate that it had mainly been made by day; but we knew its quality and that it was likely to put up a very stout defence. It was therefore decided to change the direction of VI Corps' attack and throw the main weight against the weakened left shoulder of the bridgehead in a drive to secure a line from Lanuvio to Campoleone station. Early on the 26th General Clark issued orders for the change, which he described as "a new attack along the most direct route to Rome". The intention was to continue the drive towards Valmontone with 3 Division, reinforced, and to employ for the new drive the 34th, 45th and 1 Armoured, supported by 36 Division, which had not been used for its original mission owing to the speedy success of the first attack. Within the very short space of twelve hours from the decision being taken the new attack was under way. Troops of 3 Division with their supporting tanks advanced with great dash to Ardena, which they surrounded and captured next day. They were unable, however, in face of stiffening enemy resistance, to establish themselves across Route 6. 36 Division, which was to form the link between this drive and the main attack on the left, advanced towards Velletri, driving the enemy back into their prepared defensive line in its sector.

The new attack towards Lanuvio jumped off at 1100 hours on the 26th simultaneously with 3 Division's attack; the successful shifting