

grudgingly committed, again in small detachments, on 18th May. Its initial losses were extremely heavy.

On the 18th, while the attempt was being made to rush the "Hitler" line at Aquino, the Canadian Corps on 13 Corps' left was advancing to contact with the line. South of the Liri the French had captured Esperia and Sant' Oliva and the two mountains overlooking Pontecorvo, Monte d'Oro and Monte della Commune. II Corps had captured Formia and was about to enter Itri and Gaeta, both occupied next day. The battle had become fluid, and I took steps to increase the pressure. It was almost near the time for the breakout from Anzio and I therefore ordered 36 United States Division to the bridgehead; its arrival was spaced out over four days and we hoped it would pass unnoticed. It was extremely difficult to decide on the exact date for the VI Corps attack. General Truscott, the Commanding General, had asked for three days' notice, rather than the twenty-four hours in the original orders, so as to give him two nights to get his assault troops into position; it would have to be done by night, for by day the enemy had too good observation. This faced me with rather a difficult problem in prophecy, for the breakout would have to be timed carefully to fit in with Eighth Army's advance and it would not be easy to forecast where they would be in three days' time. On the main front Eighth Army were ordered "to use the utmost energy to break through the 'Adolf Hitler' line in the Liri valley before the Germans have time to settle down in it". The Poles were directed to press on to Piedimonte to turn the line from the north and the French, after reaching Pico, were to turn northwards, if at all possible, and envelop the southern end. If they could strike into the rear of the enemy facing Eighth Army, directed on Ceprano, we should be able to surround a good proportion of their force.

The operation for the capture of Pico proved to be a major one. Fearing just such a manoeuvre as I had planned Kesselring had strongly reinforced the area with his best troops from reserve, 26 Panzer and 90 Panzer Grenadier Divisions (both less large detachments) and was bringing over to their assistance the greater part of the two divisions from the Adriatic sector.* As a result the French made little progress on the 19th but on the 20th captured Monte Leucio, a high and dominating mountain between Pico and Pontecorvo. They were driven off it by a German counter-attack on the 21st but recaptured it on the 22nd; on the latter date, after two days of violent and fluctuating fighting, they finally captured Pico. This delay meant that their thrust northwards would now have less chance of cutting off any important German forces, for Eighth Army was about to assault the "Hitler" line and expected, once that was broken, to make fairly rapid progress, especially on the left. II Corps, to the south, were pushing on, entering Fondi on the 20th and reaching Terracina on the 23rd. The French were therefore ordered to advance north-west as well as north, directed on Castro dei Volsci and Ceprano. The main assault would be a combination of two great drives; by Eighth Army through the "Hitler"

line and up the Liri and Sacco valleys and by VI Corps from Anzio on to Valmontone. The French and II Corps were to clear up the mountainous triangle between the two drives.

Breach of the "Hitler" Line.

In spite of their losses since the attack began and the defeat of their right wing, Tenth Army were still determined to defend the "Hitler" line in the valley between Piedimonte and Pontecorvo. The defences were even stronger than in the "Gustav" line which had already given Eighth Army so much trouble; they varied between five hundred and a thousand yards in depth and the main system, of reinforced concrete emplacements, was linked by tunnels and communication trenches into a mutually supporting whole. The main weakness was the lack of troops to man the defences but Kesselring had all the same ordered the strongest resistance. Eighth Army between 20th and 22nd May was preparing for the assault. Following the failure of the surprise attack on Aquino on the evening of the 18th heavier, but still hasty, attacks had been mounted on the 19th by 78 Division on the right and 1 Canadian Division on the left; these ran into heavy fire which showed the defences to be as formidable as had been expected. An attack in full strength would be necessary. The main blow was to be delivered by the Canadian Corps north of Pontecorvo while 13 Corps would maintain pressure at Aquino and concentrate forward ready to advance abreast of the Canadians. The Poles, who had captured Villa Santa Lucia on the 19th, were to continue the attack against the strongly defended hill town of Piedimonte which they had started on the 20th. 8 Indian Division, after its relief by the Canadians, had been sent back east of the Rapido; General Leese now decided to bring it forward again to reinforce 13 Corps, together with 6 British Armoured Division. These moves led to considerable congestion, a foretaste of the serious traffic jams which were to be a feature of the Liri valley operations.

The Canadian attack began at 0600 hours on the 23rd and met very stiff resistance. Our casualties were heavy, particularly in 1 Division, and the equally severe enemy losses showed the effort which had been made to hold the line. By noon on the 24th, however, we had cleared the whole position, except for Aquino, and 5 Canadian Armoured Division was exploiting rapidly towards the River Melfa which crosses the valley at right angles to the course of our advance and offered the next delaying position for the enemy's rearguards. It was certain, however, that it could only be a delaying position; the Germans must now withdraw in as good order as possible to the "Caesar" line south of Rome where Tenth and Fourteenth Armies could join hands to form a connected front barring any further advance north. It was a faint hope now. Tenth Army was a beaten force and, on the day the "Hitler" line was breached, Fifth Army began its attack from Anzio which was soon to reduce Fourteenth Army to the same state. On the same day Kesselring ordered forward his last useful formation in Italy, the Hermann Goering Division from Leghorn. This was the first of the formations which the Italian offensive diverted from the western front; I commented at the

* 305 and 334 Infantry Divisions; they were replaced by 278 Infantry Division from Istria.