

preparation almost as though it were not there. Only two assets now remained to Kesselring to retrieve the situation: the excellence of his lateral communications and the fact that the "Gothic" line had been built on the forward slopes of the range. The importance of the former factor in allowing a rapid reinforcement I have already emphasized; the latter meant that there was still one more ridge between the Allies and the plains, known from the village on its summit as the Coriano ridge. The Canadians were already over the Conca, on 2nd September, and 5 Corps were about to pass 1 Armoured Division through in a dash for the flat country beyond. Just in time Kesselring succeeded in manning the Coriano ridge with 1 Parachute, 26 Panzer and 29 Panzer Grenadier Divisions; these three excellent divisions, aided by very heavy rain from 5th to 7th September, resisted all attacks between the 4th and the 12th both on the ridge itself and on its southern flank at Gemmano.

As Eighth Army's offensive developed its full extent the enemy was forced to economize strength on the remainder of his front by withdrawing into the "Gothic" line. This was essential if he were to be able to make further reinforcements available for his left; it was also a natural measure of precaution in case a real breakthrough was achieved for, apart from LXXVI Corps, now engaged with Eighth Army, the rest of the German troops were still well south of the watershed of the Apennines. The withdrawal began on 30th August. LI Mountain Corps, between Urbino and Pontassieve, moved straight back into the line on a timed programme, releasing one division for the central sector, and 10 Corps, following up, made contact with the line on 3rd September. At the same time the enemy opposite Fifth Army began to pull back. On the extreme right they went back almost directly into the "Gothic" line. Opposite 13 Corps, however, the enemy stabilized on 3rd September on the line of hills north of Florence: Monte Morello, Monte Senario, Monte Calvana and Monte Giovi. IV Corps followed up across the Arno on 31st August and II Corps on 1st September. Little resistance was met and we were able to occupy the northern part of Pisa on the 2nd, Lucca on the 6th and Pistoia on the 12th.

This enemy withdrawal made it easier to concentrate forward the Fifth Army troops which were to launch the second punch of my two-handed attack on the "Gothic" line. Moreover, in the course of the withdrawal Kesselring still further weakened his centre, from which he had already removed 29 Panzer Grenadier Division, by relieving 356 Infantry Division and sending it over to the Adriatic. I decided, therefore, that the time was almost come for the Fifth Army attack to go in. I visited Eighth Army front on 8th September and it was clear to me from what I saw there that we could not continue our advance on to Rimini until we had driven the enemy off the Coriano ridge. This would need full preparation and would probably take two or three days more. I explained the situation in a signal next day, 9th September, and concluded by saying that for these reasons I had decided to unleash Fifth Army who would now go ahead with their offensive in the centre. The enemy's forces there were as weak as we could

ever expect them to be and he was obligingly withdrawing from the high ground north of Florence without serious resistance, which saved us time and trouble. As soon as Fifth Army had forced the enemy back to the "Gothic" line they would launch a full-scale attack to break through and by that time I hoped Eighth Army would be just about ready for their attack on the Rimini positions and that we should be able to prevent Kesselring from shifting reserves from one Army front to another by keeping up a series of heavy blows by our two Armies in turn. The weather had improved and I hoped for a fine spell—another reason for launching Fifth Army then.

All preparations for Fifth Army's attack had been made by 8th September. The main blow was to be delivered by II Corps but, in order to gain surprise, its concentration was to be secret and it was to be launched into the attack through 13 Corps. The plan was that 13 Corps should attack first with 8 Indian Division to capture the line of hills from Monte Morello to Monte Giovi, already mentioned, then, in the second phase, II Corps would pass through the left of 13 Corps with its four divisions (34th, 85th, 88th and 91st) and advance up the axis Florence-Firenzuola. 13 Corps would shift its main thrust to the right and continue to advance up the two roads Dicomano to Forli and Borgo San Lorenzo to Faenza. IV Corps was to exert the maximum pressure in its area with 6 South African Armoured Division, a Negro Regimental Combat Team and "Task Force 45" and release 1 Armoured Division for Army reserve to be used if a chance of exploitation arose.

This plan could not be carried out in its original form, for on 8th September the enemy withdrew voluntarily from the line of hills which was to have been 13 Corps' objective in the first phase. This was gratifying in itself and represented a further gain in that it gave us the chance of launching an attack on an enemy already engaged in withdrawing which, as Eighth Army's experience had shown, was one of the surest means of obtaining surprise. On 10th September, therefore, 91 and 34 Divisions of II Corps passed through 1 British Infantry Division on the left of 13 Corps, astride Route 65, and began an advance directed on the "Gothic" line north of the River Sieve. Considerable gains were made on the 10th and 11th as both Corps pressed on across the Sieve in face of little resistance, capturing Dicomano, Borgo San Lorenzo and Scarperia. The Germans offered only delaying resistance as they drew back into the "Gothic" line but the weight of the Allied attack surprised and disconcerted them and pushed them back quicker than they had expected or were prepared for. It was not until the strong position of Monte Calvi was captured on the 12th that it became clear that this was not merely an attack to gain contact with the line but to break through it.

#### *Simultaneous Attacks by Fifth and Eighth Armies.*

On the night of 12th September Eighth Army reopened its attack on the Coriano ridge and in the early morning of the 13th Fifth Army began the assault of the main "Gothic" line positions in the centre. This marked the beginning of a week of perhaps the heaviest fighting on both fronts that either Army had