

Opening of the Offensive.

In the Order of the Day issued before the attack I stressed the connection between the blow about to be delivered to the enemy in Italy and the assault from the west for which the world was waiting. The Combined Chiefs of Staff had directed that, for the sake of security, the connection could not be directly asserted and, after careful consultation with Washington and London, the most I was allowed to say was "From the East and the West, from the North and the South, blows are about to fall which will result in the final destruction of the Nazis and bring freedom once again to Europe, and hasten peace for us all". But, however concealed, no-one could miss the significance of the event and no sentence was more gratifying to those who had long years of Mediterranean campaigning behind them than the words which followed: "To us in Italy has been given the honour to strike the first blow".

In the late afternoon of 11th May the guns at Cassino and in the Liri valley ceased fire. By an odd coincidence the German artillery also ceased fire and a strange, impressive silence fell on the front. This caused much conjecture; the reason, we subsequently discovered, was that the Germans were intending to carry out reliefs at Cassino that night and were anxious to avoid hostile reaction. After an hour or two of this suspicious silence we opened up again with moderate harassing fire. On Fifth Army front also the day wore on quietly, with desultory artillery fire. The weather was cloudy with a little rain but the night was fine, except for ground mist in the Liri valley, and the forecast for the next seven days was good. At 2300 hours the whole of the artillery of Fifth and Eighth Armies, some two thousand guns, opened with a violent counter-battery programme. The Fifth Army infantry attack followed immediately, 13 Corps three quarters of an hour later and the Polish Corps two hours later, at 0100 hours on the 12th. It was soon clear that, having already achieved strategic surprise, we had now added tactical surprise. Besides the reliefs already mentioned which were going on at Cassino Tenth Army was carrying out a reorganisation of command in the Liri valley. The headquarters of 44 Division, from north of Cassino, was being brought down to take command of the five German battalions then opposing 13 Corps. As a result of the attack it never took over and went back to its old sector again; the confusion caused can be imagined and must have both assisted our attack and prevented the German higher command from forming a true picture of the situation.

The first definite success was the capture of Monte Fauto by the French, four hours after the attack began. II Corps made some progress into the enemy's line of defences but met most violent opposition, as did the French after their first local gains. North of Cassino the Poles attacked with great dash across the broken rocks and scrub, seamed and pitted by four months of bitter battles and, at the cost of heavy casualties, seized "Phantom Ridge," north-west of the Monastery. It was an exposed position and, as soon as damaged communications were restored, German artillery and mortars made it untenable. The Corps Commander therefore ordered a withdrawal to the start line at 1400 hours on the 12th. In

13 Corps sector 4 British and 8 Indian Divisions each assaulted the crossings of the Rapido with two brigades up. The stream was flowing fast, both sides were putting down smoke to add to the thick mist provided by nature and, though the enemy artillery had been very largely silenced, the infantry in their deep dug-outs were much less affected. Once across the river the leading troops soon plunged into a thick and continuous network of bunkers, wire, minefields and concrete emplacements. 8 Indian Division managed to make good its footing on the west bank and two bridges were completed by next morning in the divisional sector; 4 Division was unable either to enlarge its narrow bridgehead or, for the whole of the next day, to replace its precarious ferries with bridges.* The Eighth Army position, therefore, by the evening of 12th May was not quite as favourable as I had hoped; the right hand Corps was back where it had started, the left hand Corps had gained only about half of the objectives which it was intended to capture in the first two hours. Fifth Army, too, had made no significant progress and were still heavily involved with the strong enemy defences facing them without having achieved a breakthrough. Nevertheless I felt justified in reporting that evening that both Army Commanders were reasonably satisfied with the opening stages of the battle. Provided we could bring our full strength to bear before the enemy could reinforce all would go well but, I added, "there is no doubt that the Germans intend to fight for every yard and that the next few days will see some extremely bitter and severe fighting." The forecast was fully justified.

The firm resistance offered to Fifth Army on the first day of the attack began to weaken on the 13th. The two German divisions facing our six had been ordered to resist to the last in their prepared positions; this meant that when their resistance was overcome there would be few survivors to oppose our further advance. The French enjoyed a particularly heavy numerical superiority—and exploited it with great *élan*—and the advantage of good training in mountain warfare. On this day they succeeded in capturing Monte Majo, the key to the whole "Gustav" line in their sector, and pushed 1 Motorised Division up the Garigliano, capturing Sant' Andrea, Sant' Ambrogio and Sant' Apollinare and thereby clearing the whole west bank of the river. II Corps made small advances in the coastal area, but were still meeting very stubborn resistance. It was clear, as I reported that night, that the Germans still intended "to fight it out where they stand." This was particularly noticeable on 13 Corps' front also. It had seemed likely to me that, once the "Gustav" line was breached by a successful crossing of the Rapido, the Germans would offer only delaying resistance in front of the "Hitler" line in order to preserve sufficient strength for a successful defence of that line. They could scarcely hope to eliminate our bridgehead by counter-attack for they had practically no mobile reserve for such a purpose. However they showed no signs of weakening but fought with the utmost vigour to resist any advance up the valley, pulling in

* As an example of the losses in ferries, in 10 Brigade sector on the right of 4 Division, all but five boats out of forty had been lost by 0800 hours on 12 May and by 1600 hours there were none left.