

January, to follow the enemy's example and reinforce the vital points at the cost of weakening the Adriatic sector.

The first attack north of Cassino, between 24th and 31st January, had had limited success. 34 United States Division, in hard fighting, secured a bridgehead over the Rapido about two miles north of the town and, pressing up into the hills beyond the river, captured two outlying spurs and the village of Cairo. To their north the French, supported by an American Regimental Combat Team, captured Colle Belvedere and pushed further into the mountains towards Terelle. II Corps was now in a position to swing the direction of its attack from west to south. 36 Division, still weak from its losses in the Rapido crossing, was brought in to guard the western flank by holding Monte Castellone, captured by 34 Division on 1st February, and the 34th began attacking on the 2nd along the ridge from Colle Majola on to the rear of Monastery Hill. Hopes were high and General Clark signalled me on that day: "Present indications are that the Cassino heights will be captured very soon". He asked for a directive on the employment of the New Zealand Division.

I had already decided that the development of the situation at Anzio and the stubborn enemy resistance on the main front made necessary a reinforcement of General Freyberg's* forces if they were to be able to carry out the task assigned. I had therefore ordered General Leese on 30th January to despatch 4 Indian Division, which had newly arrived in the country, to come under command of General Freyberg in an *ad hoc* New Zealand Corps. 4 Indian Division had had the longest experience in actual operations of any Allied formation and had recently been doing some training in mountain operations.† I told General Leese: "I fully realise that this will put out of court any possibility of offensive operations by you". On 3rd February I put the New Zealand Corps under command of Fifth Army, from Army Group reserve. I still felt the need for a formation under my hand to influence the battle and therefore signalled Eighth Army on the 4th to be prepared to release 78 Division within seven to ten days. General Leese was naturally very perturbed at this proposal to take away a fifth division; not only would it render any offensive action quite impracticable and upset the system for reliefs of tired formations but he feared that it might even lead to a loss of security on his front. This, however, was a risk which I was prepared to take; the Adriatic sector was now unimportant to either side; both were gathering their maximum strength for the decisive battle under the snows of Monte Cairo and among the canals of the Pontine Marshes.

The attack by 34 United States Division continued to make progress but the enemy was now steadily reinforcing. Leaving 5 Mountain

Division to oppose the French he decided to strengthen the mixed group of 44 and 71 Divisions which was defending Cassino itself and the Monastery with 90 Panzer Grenadiers, brought down from the Anzio front. Against these excellent troops II Corps was unable to make progress. It had got into the outskirts of the town and was within striking distance of the Monastery hill; indeed it was only a mile from Route 6 down below, but it was a mile packed with defences held by fanatical troops and broken up by mountain ridges and gullies. The first battle of Cassino was a German success; its retention now was a matter of German prestige.

I had refused to commit the New Zealand Corps, my *Corps de Chasse*, until it was certain that II Corps could not take the position. The New Zealanders had relieved the Americans south of Route 6 on 6th February to allow the latter to concentrate for the attack; but it was now clear that they would be obliged, not merely to debouch through a gateway flung open for them, but to capture the gate themselves. II Corps went over to the defensive on 12th February. My plan now was for 4 Indian Division to capture Monastery Hill while the New Zealanders would seize a bridgehead over the Rapido. The Corps would then exploit up the Liri valley, but this was not to start until weather conditions were favourable enough to allow the movement of armoured forces off the roads. At the same time I ordered Fifth Army to make plans for resuming the offensive with VI Corps.

Time was urgently pressing, for it was known that a great enemy counter-attack against the Anzio bridgehead was being prepared. In the event the two attacks went in on the same day, 16th February. A preliminary to the New Zealand Corps attack was the destruction of the Monastery of Monte Cassino by air bombardment and artillery fire. This famous building had hitherto been deliberately spared, to our great disadvantage, but it was an integral part of the German defensive system, mainly from the superb observation it afforded. It is doubtful, however, whether the ruins after the destruction were not more valuable to the enemy than the intact buildings; as we were to find in the town of Cassino below, heavy bombardment often produced better defensive positions than it destroyed. The attack which went in on the 16th made no progress. 4 Indian Division ruefully decided that the Cassino position was almost as strong as Keren, still their invariable standard of comparison. The only gain below the mountain was a small bridgehead over the Rapido opposite the railway station. 78 Division, which had been put under command of New Zealand Corps on the 8th, arrived in the area on the 17th, having been held up by deep snow on the way from Eighth Army front. On the 24th it took over from the New Zealanders south of the railway, the latter relieved 34 United States Division in the north end of Cassino and the remaining elements of II Corps, on Monte Castellone, were relieved by the French Expeditionary Corps on the 26th.

Fourteenth Army's Counter-attack at Anzio.

The preliminary moves in the enemy's planned counter-offensive against the bridgehead took the form of an attack to clear the "Factory" area to secure a firm base for

* His Excellency Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg, V.C., G.C.M.G., K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O.

† One of our most serious handicaps in Italy was the lack of formations trained and organized for mountain fighting. I had 4 Moroccan Mountain Division for just over three months and eventually got the American 10 Mountain Division, in February 1945, for the last three months. I had frequently asked for the only British Mountain Division, the 52nd. This division was held in reserve in the United Kingdom, presumably for projected operations elsewhere. In fact it was never employed in mountain warfare but was retrained and eventually deployed in Holland in the autumn of 1944.