

and bad weather. Ground was gained by both divisions, but it was impossible to remain and impossible to push on in the weakened condition to which the divisions had been reduced.* On the 12th General Clark decided to withdraw, an operation which was successfully accomplished on the night of the 14th. Meanwhile VI Corps had been driving at the northern defences of the Mignano Gap. 3 Division had already been successful in capturing Monte Cesima, an outlying hill mass on the north side of the gap, and 45 and 34 Divisions battered their way into the mountains in front of them to extend the line northwards. But Monte Lungo, in the mouth of the gap, was a harder nut to crack. It is a great, bare, scrub-covered mountain ridge dominated from either flank by higher enemy-held ground and 3 Division was tired after fifty-six days of continuous operations. On 13th November General Clark represented to me that the time had come to pause and regroup; any further repetition of the attacks we had been making would exhaust divisions to a dangerous degree.

While Fifth Army was attempting to break into the Winter Line on the west coast, Eighth Army in the east was advancing to make contact with the left flank of the same line. This was based in their sector on the line of the River Sangro from the mouth for some fifteen miles upstream and then on the forward slopes of the great Maiella *massif* behind the Casoli-Pescocostanzo road. The strongest part of the line was the extreme north, where defences had been under construction since early October. The Sangro here runs in a channel varying from three hundred to four hundred feet wide and a foot deep but after heavy rain it rises rapidly, filling the entire river bed with a depth of five feet or more and a rate of flow measured on one occasion at seven knots. There are steep hills on the right bank, giving good observation; on the left bank there is a flat plain for about two thousand yards and then a steep escarpment, rising abruptly some hundred and fifty feet. It was on this escarpment that the main enemy defence works were established. "Our position," wrote the Commander of the German 65 Division in an Order of the Day, "is naturally very strong and it is rendered considerably stronger by our numerous and excellent defence works."

78 Division reached the right bank of the river from the mouth to as far south as Paglieta on 8th November and immediately began to organise patrols across it to dominate the plain on the left bank. 8 Indian Division, the left hand formation of 5 Corps, was longer in forming up to the line and the enemy did not withdraw completely across the river in their sector until 19th November. At that time the coastal sector was held by the recently arrived 65 Infantry Division, a relatively inexperienced formation, with 16 Panzer Division supporting it in reserve. To the south 1 Parachute Division held a front of some twenty-five miles in the mountains. Before the main Eighth Army attack began 16 Panzer Division was withdrawn to proceed to the Eastern front; after the attack went in 26 Panzer Division had to be hurriedly brought back from the Mignano sector, where

it had been as hurriedly sent when Fifth Army's attack looked serious, and 90 Panzer Grenadier Division was brought down from northern Italy.

General Montgomery's plan for the attack envisaged a heavy, well-prepared assault on the coastal end of the line. 5 Corps was to command the main thrust with 78 and 8 Indian Divisions, and the recently arrived New Zealand Division, under Army Command, was co-operating on their left. 8 Indian Division had continued to advance on the left of the Corps' front until the Sangro was reached; it was then relieved by the New Zealanders and went into reserve behind 78 Division. The latter was to seize a bridgehead, the Indians were to break into the line, then 78 Division was to come into the lead again and exploit on to Pescara and simultaneously the New Zealanders were to strike across the river directed on Chieti, from where they were to swing southwest down Route 5 to develop the desired threat against the Avezzano area. D-day was laid down as 20th November in orders published on the 16th, but both the timing and execution of the plan were strongly affected by the weather. It was essential to make full use of our command of the air and our superiority in armour, and both depended on reasonably fine weather. On the 20th the weather broke completely and we could only establish a small bridgehead; on 23rd November the river was in flood and rendered all bridges useless; the same happened on 25th November when the attack had again been scheduled. The main attack eventually went in on the 27th with 8 Indian Division leading. Mozzagrogna, a key point in the defences, was captured on the 29th and by the next day a bold use of our armour against ground considered impassable by the Germans gave us the whole ridge above the Sangro from there to the sea. In the meantime the New Zealanders had got across the river and on 2nd December captured Castelfrentano. The Division's next objective was Orsogna, which was attacked unsuccessfully on 7th December and again on the 14th equally without success. The enemy had been reinforced and the weather was abominable. Further to the right 8 Indian and 78 Divisions advanced to the River Moro, capturing Lanciano and San Vito on 3rd December. 1 Canadian Infantry Division now relieved 78 Division, which had suffered ten thousand battle casualties in the last six months.

The battle of the Sangro had driven the enemy from strong prepared positions and inflicted on him heavy casualties. But thanks to the difficult nature of the ground and the violence of the winter weather, and the enemy's ability to relieve tired troops with fresh, Eighth Army had been unable to break through the enemy's dispositions or seize any vital ground. The difficult "ridge and furrow" country of the Molise offered few chances of a decisive success to an Army attacking, as Eighth Army had always done, across the grain of the country. The further north we pushed our advance the more numerous and close together were the river lines. The prospect was little better for the time when the Army should have turned westwards into the gap between the Gran Sasso and the Maiella where the Via Valeria runs through a series of terrifying defiles. It was one of our most serious handicaps

* 56 Division had been fighting continuously since the landing at Salerno on 9 September. It was under strength then and its subsequent losses had been heavy, particularly in officers and N.C.O.s.