

Arezzo, between Rome and Florence. I consider this a very satisfactory speed in Italian terrain, and the more so when it is remembered that, after the fall of Rome, I was being forced to make detachments to other fronts while Kesselring was being strenuously reinforced. I had admittedly the advantage of operating in a country whose inhabitants were well disposed. This was especially noticeable in Tuscany, where the local population frequently gave valuable information to our troops on matters of tactical importance, such as the location of enemy minefields. When we entered Florence some of the population engaged in skirmishes with supporters of the Fascist Republican Government and assisted our troops with information on German dispositions north of the river. I should also like to pay tribute to the courage and constancy of many hundreds of brave Italians, of all classes, who at the risk and sometimes forfeit of their lives, sheltered and protected Allied prisoners of war, crashed airmen and liaison officers operating behind the enemy lines. But it was a hard-fought struggle all the way, except for the first two weeks in June, and one which is infinitely to the credit of the troops of all nationalities under my command, for the German is a master in retreat and can seldom be hustled or panicked. I was determined to employ the minimum troops in the pursuit, to have the maximum strength for the attack on the Apennines. The result was that they were hard driven, and only the greatest enthusiasm and skill could have made the plan a success. I should like to mention particularly my three armoured divisions 1 United States, 6 British and 6 South African. Central Italy is not really cavalry country; it offers, on the contrary, innumerable opportunities for the anti-tank gun ambush; but these three divisions gave a superb demonstration of that dash in the attack and tenacity in retention of captured objectives which have in this war distinguished the armoured descendants of the old mounted arm.

PART IV.

THE GOTHIC LINE BATTLES.

The "Gothic" Line.

In the region of the upper Tiber the Apennines, which have hitherto formed the backbone of Italy, turn north-west and run across the peninsula to join the Maritime Alps on the French border, thus cutting off Central Italy from the basin of the Po. This sudden bend has always interposed a sharp line of division, political and economic, between the thickly populated plains of Lombardy, intensively cultivated and at the same time highly industrialized, and the mountainous peninsula whose urban centres and industry are more widely dispersed on historically important river sites. From the military point of view the barrier is a first-class strategic obstacle. An army advancing from the south finds that what has hitherto been its best and broadest avenue of approach, the western coastal plain, comes suddenly to a dead end when it reaches the Magra river, just east of La Spezia. The eastern coastal belt, hitherto by far the less useful, now comes into its own for it continues round the angle of the bend and offers the only passage on the level into the plains of the Po valley. In spite of this great advantage, how-

ever, it retains the characteristics which have made it inferior hitherto, as a route for an army, to the western coastal route. It would be truer to say that the coast road, Route 16, offers the only passage on the level, for the spurs descending from the central chain run right down to the coast in the form of a continuous series of ridges, not high, at least near the sea, but not easy for the passage of troops. The soil, too, is heavy and movement is difficult after rain. The few roads which run parallel to Route 16, all of them narrow and badly surfaced, switchback up and down these ridges through small villages. More important still, the whole foothill region is intersected, at right angles to the direction of advance, by numerous water obstacles, some quite large rivers and some mere torrents but all liable to sudden flooding from the proximity of their mountain sources. They give a foretaste of the still more serious obstacles which face the attacker round the elbow of the mountains where broad embanked rivers flow north-eastwards across his path through the muddy plains of the Romagna.

Between the two narrow coastal belts the mountains present an unbroken front about a hundred and forty miles long and fifty to sixty miles deep. There are no natural routes across them but the historical importance of the cities of the Arno valley on the one hand and the Po valley on the other has been such that no less than eleven roads, of all classes, have been constructed to link the two districts. Not all of these can be considered for military use. The two routes which lead from Viareggio through Aulla to Parma and Reggio, Routes 62 and 63, run through the wildest and deepest part of the Apennines; this disadvantage is not so serious as the fact that access to their starting point at Aulla is almost impossible, for the two-mile coastal belt is commanded by a towering mountain wall on its right. Two roads lead from Lucca to Modena, one up the Serchio and down the Secchia and the other, Route 12, over the Abetone Pass, four thousand three hundred feet high; the former is particularly bad but both are tortuous and difficult and the latter runs for eighty-five miles through the mountains which are here still very broad. From Pistoia Route 64 leads to Bologna, with a branch on the north side of the mountains to Modena. This is a reasonably good road, just over sixty miles long. Florence is the most important road centre with two roads leading to Bologna, one via Prato and the other over the Futa Pass—the latter with a branch to Imola via Firenzuola—a road to Faenza via Marradi and one to Forli via Dicomano. The most important is Route 65, the direct route to Bologna. The distance between the two cities is sixty-seven miles but the main chain of the Apennines begins at the Sieve river so that the actual distance through the mountains is only fifty miles. The highest point on the road is the Futa Pass, two thousand nine hundred feet, and the Pass of Il Giogo, on the lateral road to Firenzuola to the east, is a little lower. From the upper Arno valley at Bibbiena Route 71 leads to Cesena; it is difficult of access and of inferior quality but is only fifty-five miles long. Its disadvantage is that, like Route 67 from Florence to Forli, it leads into a corner of the Romagna, well away from any important objective.