

ATTACK ON THE MAIN ENEMY POSITION—
MORNING OF 6TH MAY—D2

25. The main enemy position faced South across the narrowest portion of the isthmus of Antsirane and is based on two old but solid and well-concealed forts: Fort Caimans on the West, and Fort Bellevue on the East. These are joined by a continuous line of trenches about 2,000 yards long which cover the flat top of the isthmus. On each flank there are steep scrub covered slopes down to mangrove swamps which border the sea. Three roads run through the isthmus. The most Westerly one leading to Ambararata, and the central one, leading to the South, run between the two forts and are covered by concrete pill boxes with 75 mm. guns where the roads cross the trench position. The third road leads around French Bay to Ankorika, and passes through the broken ground to the East of Bellevue fort. Although it avoids the main line, it is covered by a few detached defence works. In front of the trench line runs an uncompleted anti-tank ditch. The trench line is well sited and is covered from direct observation at distances greater than about 300 yards by minor irregular features. However, the pill boxes have sufficient height to enable them to fire down the roads for some 1,000 yards; and the command given by the forts enables one 75 mm. sited on top of each fort with 360 degrees traverse to cover by direct fire the area in front of the line to about the same range. The isthmus is flat with slight undulations. It is fairly open although there are a number of spaced out bushes and trees, and a considerable amount of thin scrub and maize plantations. About 1,200 yards behind the defence line is the native village, through which all the roads lead, and beyond that, 2,000 yards from the defence line, are the outskirts of Antsirane.

26. Brigadier Festing met his battalion commanders at Brigade HQ. at 2300 hours. He issued orders for an attack on the enemy defence line by three battalions. On the right 2 South Lancashire Regiment were to move out at 0200 hours through the mangroves and broken country along the shore to get behind the enemy line, 1 Royal Scots Fusiliers in the centre and 2 East Lancashire Regiment on the left were to attack frontally at 0530 hours. 455 Light Battery was to support this attack with the six guns which were now available; and the Fleet Air Arm were asked to bomb and machine gun the enemy defences between 0500 hours and 0530 hours, almost an impossible task in the bad light.

2 South Lancashire Regiment moved off in an Easterly direction at 0200 hours. On reaching the Eastern edge of the isthmus, they advanced North through the broken ground and mangroves. Progress was extremely slow and difficult, but aided by the darkness, and later by the defilade given by the edge of the isthmus, two companies and Battalion HQ. penetrated the enemy line, killed or captured detachments watching this flank, and occupied Anobozaka Barracks which is on this side of the isthmus about 1,200 yards behind (North) of Bellevue fort. Thence they attacked Westwards harassing or capturing enemy artillery, machine gun and mortar positions, capturing or stampeding the pack horses and mules of the enemy artillery and occupying positions, whence they could

ambush and fire on vehicles moving up to the front line on all roads. They took many prisoners and eventually got detachments into position about 200 yards behind the enemy trenches. Only man-pack wireless sets could accompany the assaulting infantry and these, after a long night cross-country march over very difficult ground were ineffective, and Liaison Officers from Brigade were unable to get further forward than the two rear companies of the Battalion which were held up short of Fort Bellevue. Similarly messengers and parties escorting prisoners to the rear from advanced Battalion HQ. and the leading company found themselves unable to get back. Brigade HQ. therefore did not know of this success in time to exploit it and in fact thought that the leading half of this battalion had become casualties or prisoners. The action of this battalion, however, resulted in heavy casualties to the enemy and in the capture of nearly four hundred prisoners, the majority of whom were eventually got back to our lines. In addition to this, the effect of this penetration on the morale of the enemy command and troops was later found to have been great. It was not until 1400 hours that Brigadier Festing learned of the true position on this flank from Lieutenant-Colonel M. M. Alston-Roberts-West commanding 2 South Lancashire Regiment, who, with a small escort, had at last been able to make his way back through the enemy lines. In the course of this affair Lieutenant-Colonel West got over 35 enemy to his own gun.

Meanwhile the frontal attack by 1 Royal Scots Fusiliers and 2 East Lancashire Regiment had been held up after casualties in men and carriers. The leading troops of these battalions got very close to the enemy trenches and continued in action there for the rest of the day, although cut off by fire from their company and battalion commanders, and they were assumed to be casualties.

Shortly after daylight, the enemy opened fire with 75s and mortars on all troops in the exposed plateau area. Casualties began to mount up and 455 Light Battery was forced to withdraw from its position by shell and mortar fire. About this time there was a slight withdrawal of our leading troops to avoid continuation of casualties.

27. I arrived at Brigade HQ about 0700 hrs. It was quite clear that the attack had failed. It was an unhappy moment. The whole of 29 Independent Brigade was deployed or being deployed, and with the disappearance of many of the leading troops in the dawn attack, assumed to be casualties, units were considerably under strength. A good deal of most irritating enemy sniping and unaimed rifle fire was going on. To this was added shelling from 75s which was a good deal more terrifying than effective. The shelling set fire to the bush, which caused further embarrassment, but the troops, under the personal leadership of the Brigadier and the unit commanders, re-occupied their original positions after the fire had passed. These fierce and rapidly spreading bush fires caused no serious casualties, but resulted in considerable confusion and loss of equipment. Very little artillery had as yet come into action owing to trouble with *Bachaquero*; and what there was in action, had great difficulty in