

in this winter campaign that our front was divided so rigidly into two by the spinal barrier of the Apennines. It meant an inevitable loss of flexibility, for the two armies were often fighting what were almost independent battles and, owing to differences in nationality and equipment it was not easy for me, as it was for Kesselring, to switch units and formations from one side of the barrier to the other.

During the period of Eighth Army's attack on the Adriatic sector Fifth Army had been resting and regrouping its troops in accordance with the orders of 16th November. The next operation was divided into three phases. The high ground dominating the Mignano Gap was to be captured in sections, first that to the south, and then that to the north; in Phase I, that is to say, Monte Camino, Monte La Difensa and Monte Maggiore were to be captured and in Phase II Monte Sammucro, combined with an attack westwards along the Colli—Atina road; Phase III, the main advance into the Liri valley, was only to be initiated on Army orders after the completion of the first two phases. Of the three British and six United States divisions in Fifth Army at the beginning of the period, two, 7 Armoured and 82 Airborne, (less one Regimental Combat Team) were being withdrawn to the United Kingdom. 1 United States Armoured Division began arriving at Naples and 1 Special Service Force, six battalions of specially trained mixed American and Canadian troops, also came under command.* 2 Moroccan Division was due to arrive in the first week of December. II Corps Headquarters arrived from Sicily in October and took over command of the centre of the line with 3 and 36 Divisions on 18th November; VI Corps now commanded on the extreme right with 34 and 45 Divisions. 1 Armoured Division remained in Army reserve; it was not expected that it would be used until the Liri valley was reached, when it would debouch through II Corps. The Germans had also been reinforcing; 29 Panzer Grenadier Division came in from reserve and 44 Infantry Division, an Austrian formation, from Slovenia. 5 Mountain Division arrived from Russia in December.

The first phase of the new attack, the capture of the mountains on the south side of the Mignano Gap, was planned as a very deliberate operation, as an example of how a large, semi-isolated mountain mass should be captured. The assault was to be made by two Corps, 10 south and II north, supported by very heavy artillery fire and the greatest weight possible of air attack. The enemy was to be made to believe that our intention was to attack further south, across the lower Garigliano, by various measures, including naval bombardment between Minturno and Gaeta and feint attacks by 23 Armoured Brigade in the plain between Monte Massico and the river. The operations began with a subsidiary attack on the southern end of the mountains on the night of 1st December and on the next night, while the heaviest concentration of artillery yet fired in the Italian campaign pounded the enemy positions on the heights, 56 Division started for the second time up the steep slopes of Monte Camino. Simultaneously

1 Special Service Force and 36 Division attacked the northern third of the mountain mass to gain Monte La Difensa and Monte Maggiore. Air support on that day was heavy and for the first time was not reduced by weather. Both Corps' attacks were successful. On 6th December 10 Corps captured the summit of Monte Camino, which they had almost secured on the 3rd but failed to hold against counter-attacks, and on the 9th Rocca d'Evandro was captured. This brought 10 Corps to the Garigliano all along its front. II Corps captured La Difensa on 3rd December and held it against strong counter-attacks, and on the 8th captured and mopped up Monte La Remetanea. 36 Division's attack on Monte Maggiore, the northernmost and lowest peak, had succeeded by the night of the 3rd; counter-attacks were repulsed and by the 7th the position could be considered secured. Between then and the 11th 10 Corps took over the whole of the feature from II Corps.

Between 29th November and 9th December VI Corps on Fifth Army's right made diversionary attacks along the axes of the Colli—Atina and Filignano—Sant' Elia roads. Very little ground was gained in tangled and difficult country, with peaks rising to over twelve hundred metres. 2 Moroccan Division began to relieve 34 Division on the Corps' right on 8th December. Phase I of the Army Commander's plan was now, however, completed with the capture of the Camino massif and Phase II was ordered to start on 7th December. In this phase 10 Corps had a minor defensive rôle; the principal objective was the clearing of Monte Sammucro and this was assigned to II Corps. VI Corps was to continue to drive westwards along the roads to Atina and Sant' Elia but on a larger scale facilitated by the accession to its strength of the fresh and mountain trained Moroccan Division. It was hoped that by attacking on so wide a front the enemy would be sufficiently stretched to prevent him massing for the defence of Cassino.

The bitterest fighting took place for Monte Sammucro and the village of San Pietro in Fine below it. The attack began on 7th December; the first two high points on Sammucro were seized without exceptional difficulty but after that our troops were held until the 13th by severe German counter-attacks and heavy mortar and artillery fire. On the 8th the Italian Motorised Group failed in an attack on Monte Lungo, in the throat of the gap. The second battle for San Pietro opened on the 15th and succeeded, though at heavy cost in casualties, by the 17th; Monte Lungo was also occupied and, north of the village, we forced our way further along the knife-edge of Monte Sammucro. This was bitter mountain fighting, with great use of artillery and gains in territory small compared with the time consumed and the losses suffered. There was still another enemy position, almost equally as strong as San Pietro, just a short distance ahead, based on the western end of Monte Sammucro and the lower hills covering the village of San Vittore. But 36 Division was exhausted and on 29th December had to be relieved by the 34th before San Vittore was taken. The VI Corps attack on the right had also made little progress against difficulties of ground and stubborn enemy defence; by the end of the year it could only be said to have kept level with the advance of II Corps with

* 1 Italian Motorised Group, in about brigade strength, which came under command on 31 October, was used once in an offensive role, but was subsequently employed on less active sectors for which its state of armament and training made it more suitable.