

CHAPTER X * * * * *

Stalemate at Cassino

A. *THE LULL IN THE BATTLE OF CASSINO*

THE period 20 February-15 March was one of regrouping and planning by both sides after nearly a month of heavy fighting on two fronts. Artillery exchanges, vigorous patrolling, small-scale infantry actions, relief of units, build-up of supplies, and air activity characterized the 24-day lull. During this time the enemy launched a strong attack at Anzio, 28 February-3 March, but he undertook no serious offensive action on the southern front. Allied troops at Anzio were concerned largely with holding the beachhead until main Fifth Army could advance up the Liri Valley. The FEC and 10 Corps continued to maintain their defensive positions.

Along the southern front bad weather restricted air activity on many days. Support required by VI Corps demanded most of the Allied air facilities in Italy, although some strategic bombing was carried out against marshalling yards and communications centers in the Rome, Viterbo, Civitavecchia, Florence, and other areas. Except for tactical reconnaissance air on the southern front was unusually inactive. Long-range destructive fires by 240-mm and 8-inch howitzers hit bridges in the Liri Valley and to the west of 10 Corps. At least 12 highway and railroad bridges were destroyed between 19 February and 20 March. Corps and division artillery continued counterbattery and harassing fires throughout the period. Enemy artillery, though less active than our own, kept roads and bivouac areas under sporadic fire.

There were few changes along the New Zealand front other than those previously noted. The 88th Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. John E. Sloan, came under II Corps on 22 February and at the end of the month began to move the 337th, 338th, and 339th Field Artillery Battalions forward to relieve the 36th Division Artillery still in line. The 2d Battalion, 351st Infantry, was relieved by the 3d Algerian Division on 2 March and rejoined the 88th Division preparatory to moving into the 10 Corps sector. The British 78 Division took over the left sector of the New Zealand front on 23 February, and the 7 Indian

Brigade with five battalions under command took over the 4 Indian Division front for defense. Extensive changes were under way in the Garigliano sector as part of the broader program of regrouping the Allied forces in Italy.

During the lull in offensive activity that began about 20 February, the enemy continued his preparations to carry out Hitler's order that Cassino must be held at all costs. This relatively quiet period gave the Germans an opportunity to regroup their forces along the entire Gustav Line. Numerous shifts were made, principally to give needed rest to tired units and to reassemble divisions after several weeks of having been split haphazardly along the beachhead and the Gustav Line. By the middle of March the readjustment had been practically completed. (See *Map No. 18*.) The 90th Panzer Grenadier Division was in reserve at Frosinone; the 44th Grenadier Division was out of the line but sent units into the Terelle area from time to time, and on 20 March moved one and possibly two regiments to the Sant'Ambrogio sector. The 8th Panzer Grenadier Regiment rejoined its parent organization (3d Panzer Grenadier Division) at the beachhead, and the 103d Reconnaissance Battalion found employment fighting partisans north of Rome.

The 94th Grenadier Division held the southern sector from the sea to Ausente Creek; on its left the 71st Grenadier Division assembled to take over the Castelforte area by 7 March, with elements of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division on north as far as Sant'Ambrogio. From that point to Cassino the line was held by the 3d Battalion, 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment. Cassino and the surrounding hills to Mount Cairo were garrisoned by the 1st Parachute Division, the best enemy unit in Italy. The 3d Parachute Regiment was in Cassino, the 4th Parachute Regiment was in the hills north and west of town, and the 1st Parachute Regiment was on the south slope of Mount Cairo. In and around Cassino the 3d Parachute Regiment was disposed with the 1st Battalion on Monastery Hill, Castle Hill, and Point 236, and the 2d Battalion in Cassino with three companies of the 3d Battalion attached. Elements of the 44th Grenadier Division filled the gap from Mount Cairo to north of Terelle; the line from that point northeast was held by the 5th Mountain Division. Thus the enemy disposed of more than five divisions along the southern front, with one complete division and part of another in reserve.

B. PLANS FOR THE ASSAULT OF 15 MARCH

During the attack by the New Zealand Corps on 15-20 February the 4 Indian Division had been unable to capture Monastery Hill. This failure by ex-

perienced mountain fighters was caused largely by the terrain and the enemy's use of it. Offensive operations had to be confined to a narrow front where advance through the mountains was slow and supply problems were great. The enemy, thoroughly familiar with the terrain, was able to reinforce any threatened area, while his superb observation posts made possible the quick and efficient concentration of defensive fires.

General Freyberg therefore decided that Monastery Hill should be attacked from Cassino, a decision that required the capture of the town and the ridge Castle Hill-Point 165-Point 202-Hangman's Hill. Cassino could be attacked from the east or from the north. Strong defenses, the Rapido River, ground conditions, road limitations, and dominating enemy observation from Monastery Hill were all unfavorable factors which combined to make the eastern approach undesirable. An attack from the north, as originally attempted by II Corps, was favored because the infantry already held the northern part of the town and an all-out air attack might neutralize enemy defenses to permit a successful assault with minimum losses. Approaches could be developed with less enemy interference than might be experienced if the major effort were made from the east. The attack on Monastery Hill from the north would be facilitated by moving along the ridge from Castle Hill to Hangman's Hill, a natural approach to the Abbey itself.

Orders by the New Zealand Corps on 21 February outlined an attack in four phases. (See *Map No. 17.*) In Phase I the 4 Indian Division was to capture Point 445 and construct positions sited to cover Castle Hill, the western edge of Cassino, and the eastern slopes of Monastery Hill with fire. The air bombardment of Cassino and subsidiary targets would constitute Phase II. In Phase III the 2 New Zealand Division with Combat Command B attached was to capture Cassino and Castle Hill, then form a bridgehead over the Rapido along Highway 6. The 4 Indian Division was to cover the assault on Castle Hill, prepare to take it over, go on to capture Monastery Hill, and cut Highway 6. Phase IV was to be the exploitation into the Liri Valley, with the 4 New Zealand Armoured Brigade under the 78 Division to pass through the Cassino bridgehead and capture Sant'Angelo from the north. Combat Command B under the 21 New Zealand Battalion was to exploit west along Highway 6, and the 78 Division would cross the Rapido near Sant'Angelo. One regimental combat team of the 36th Division was to be alerted for further exploitation. Since the air force was to play such an important part in the operation, it was to set D Day and H Hour. The proper use of tanks in support of the infantry required three successive days without rain, and the air program required good visibility.

No attack in the experience of Fifth Army had received the massive air and artillery preparation that was arranged to precede the New Zealand Corps assault. One group of medium bombers (B-25 Mitchells) was scheduled to begin the air bombardment of Cassino at 0830, 15 March, followed by a second group of Mitchells at 0840. Heavy bombers (B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators) were to come over at 0850, 0900, and at 15-minute intervals thereafter to 1115. Then on the same schedule three groups of mediums (B-26 Marauders) were to carry on with the last group over the target at 1200. During the morning A-20 fighter-bombers were to hit gun positions in the Liri Valley southwest of Cassino while light bombers (A-30 Baltimores) bombed the Aquino airfield. Three groups of heavies were to attack bridges over the Liri in the morning and afternoon. In the afternoon the Mitchells were to bomb gun positions near Piedimonte, with the heavy bombers hitting Piedimonte, Pignataro, San Giorgio, Pontecorvo, Aquino, and Ceprano. At 10-minute intervals during the 4 hours 1300-1700 waves of 8 fighter-bombers were to attack the railroad station, the Colosseum, and road junctions south of Cassino. A-20's were to hit road junctions between Pignataro and Aquino, and A 30's were to bomb the Castrocielo-Highway 6 junction.

Artillery pieces of II Corps, 10 Corps, the FEC, and the New Zealand Corps were to fire prearranged concentrations on gun positions, strongpoints, observation posts, and other targets, aided by continuous observation and adjustment by tactical reconnaissance aircraft. Seven hundred and forty-six guns and howitzers were to participate. These fires, beginning at 1200, would continue throughout the afternoon. One hundred and forty-four 25-pounders of the New Zealand Corps were to fire a rolling barrage at about 1245, creeping from end to end through Cassino, with the infantry following at from 100 to 200 yards. The combined air-artillery program was expected to pulverize Cassino, destroy strongpoints, disrupt communications, neutralize enemy artillery, and inflict heavy casualties on the infantry.

C. SECOND NEW ZEALAND ATTACK ON CASSINO

15-23 MARCH

1. *Air and Artillery Preparation.* Most of the extensive air program was carried out as planned on 15 March. Five hundred and three medium and heavy bombers dropped 1184 tons on and around Cassino. Cloud cover in the afternoon kept 120 B-17's and 140 B-24's from finding their targets to the rear of Cas-



Cassino as it appeared before our attack, looking toward Castle Hill.



Dust and smoke eddy upward from the ruins of Cassino during the bombing, 15 March 1944.

sino; but fighter-bombers were very successful in their afternoon sorties. Between 1300 and 1500 49 fighter-bombers dropped 18 tons on the Cassino railway station; from 1345 to 1630 96 P-47's, A-36's, and P-40's hit the Colosseum area south of Cassino with 44 tons; and between 1500 and 1700 32 P-40's and A-36's bombed the forward slopes of Monastery Hill with 10 tons. Another 34 tons were dropped on miscellaneous targets by 66 A-20's and P-40's.

Promptly at 1200 the terrific artillery concentrations began, followed by the rolling barrage at 1240. During the period 1200-2000 195,969 rounds were fired, most of it by New Zealand and 10 Corps artillery, as follows:

<i>Weapon</i>	<i>Number of Pieces</i>	<i>II Corps</i>	<i>NZ and 10 Corps</i>	<i>FEC</i>	<i>Totals</i>
3-inch gun	72	3,582	3,582
105-mm howitzer	156	13,408	..	9,513	22,921
155-mm howitzer	120	7,911	..	8,662	16,573
4.5-inch gun	48	..	10,828	2,071	12,899
155-mm gun	60	3,228	..	3,750	6,978
8-inch howitzer	48	4,327	..	640	4,967
240-mm howitzer	10	388	388
25-pounder	312	..	118,475	..	118,475
5.5-inch howitzer	56	..	9,114	..	9,114
7.2-inch howitzer	8	..	72	..	72
Total	<u>890</u>	<u>32,844</u>	<u>138,489</u>	<u>24,636</u>	<u>195,969</u>

The tremendous weight of bombs and artillery fire on 15 March did not destroy the enemy's defenses in Cassino and on Monastery Hill. Previous bombing and shelling together with German demolitions had already reduced many of Cassino's buildings to rubble. Protected by cellars, steel and concrete pill-boxes, caves, and tunnels, the German troops suffered comparatively few casualties. Two companies of the 2d Battalion, 3d Parachute Regiment, lost all but a score of men. Other units were shaken and depleted but were still able to offer resistance. Many ammunition dumps were blown up, poorly protected weapons were destroyed, but the enemy's heavy weapons and artillery were only partly neutralized. A careful assessment of the bombing and shelling warrants the conclusion that it neither overcame the enemy's resistance nor ap-

preciably reduced his morale. When the New Zealand infantry attacked they were subjected to extremely heavy mortar fire; when our tanks advanced they found the route blocked by craters and debris.

2. *The Action.* (See Map No. 17.) The 6 New Zealand Brigade with the 19 New Zealand Armoured Regiment struck the first blow on 15 March to capture Cassino. Infantry elements withdrew from Cassino before the bombing began, then moved forward behind the barrage at 1200. The 25 New Zealand Battalion entered from the north, with the 26 New Zealand Battalion following. Craters and debris caused by the bombing blocked the tanks that attempted to spearhead the assault. Nevertheless, in bitter house-to-house fighting the 26 New Zealand Battalion, assisted by the 24 New Zealand Battalion, penetrated to the near vicinity of Highway 6 within the town itself by 1900; further progress was hampered by a torrential rain throughout the night. The 25 New Zealand Battalion stormed Castle Hill from the south and captured it at 1630, although isolated strongpoints continued to hold out. During the attack on Castle Hill the 7 Indian Brigade covered the assault from the north.

Moving down from the Cairo-Mount Villa area, the 5 Indian Brigade took over Castle Hill at 2230 and pushed on to the west in the heavy rain. The 1/4 Essex remained on the hill to consolidate, except for one company which took Point 165 to the southwest. Two companies of the 1/6 Rajputana Rifles also reached this point, and one company of the 1/9 Gurkha Rifles went on to take Hangman's Hill early on 16 March. In Cassino during the 16th the 26 New Zealand Battalion gained about 200 yards south of Highway 6 on the east edge of town and was fighting near the Continental Hotel. Two troops of tanks had come in on the highway under cover of smoke. Damage to the road from the north still blocked that approach. Farther south the 5 New Zealand Brigade approached to within 300 yards of the railroad station. Throughout the fighting on 16 March XII Air Support Command supported the attack with continuous bombing of enemy positions in the railroad station area and Monastery Hill. Enemy air was also active. At 1750 the Luftwaffe sent 18 planes to bomb the Bailey bridge over the canal southeast of the station. This attack damaged but did not destroy the bridge.

Intentions for the night 16-17 March called for capturing Point 236 (another hairpin bend southwest of Point 165), reinforcing the 1/9 Gurkhas on Hangman's Hill, and moving two more troops of tanks into Cassino. Early in the morning of 17 March an enemy counterattack forced the 1/6 Rajputana Rifles to fall back from Point 236 to Point 165. This attack was apparently intended to recapture Castle Hill, but the 1/4 Essex held firmly. On Hangman's Hill

the entire battalion of the 1/9 Gurkha Rifles consolidated as best they could under constant fire from the Abbey above.

On 17 March one squadron of 16 tanks and the 26 New Zealand Battalion, which struck south from Cassino, had 2 tanks in the railroad station by 1145 and also captured in the afternoon the " Hummocks " 200 yards to the south. Previous assaults on the station had been made from the east along the railroad bed. This attack from the north undoubtedly achieved an element of surprise, threatening to cut Highway 6 south of Cassino and link up with the Gurkha Rifles on Hangman's Hill. Progress during the first three days of the New Zealand Corps attack was satisfactory if not spectacular. Most of the ridge from Castle Hill to Hangman's Hill was in Allied possession; two-thirds of Cassino had been captured; and the line extended south beyond the railroad station. The key to the situation was still Monastery Hill. The 1/9 Gurkha Rifles on Hangman's Hill were less than 500 yards from the Abbey, and less than 300 yards separated the 24 and 25 New Zealand Battalions from the southern edge of Cassino. Short as these distances were, our forces were unable to break through.

During the night of 17-18 March the 4 Indian Division continued to consolidate its grip on the ridge. Porter parties succeeded in getting supplies through to the 1/9 Gurkha Rifles on Hangman's Hill. This unit on 18 March sent one company to the east to occupy Point 202, and in the afternoon fighter-bombers dropped more supplies on Hangman's Hill. Most of the fighting on 18 March was in Cassino where the 25 New Zealand Battalion and tanks were unsuccessful in two attempts to wipe out enemy units which had infiltrated in the night into the northwest corner of the town below Castle Hill. One company of the 24 New Zealand Battalion passed through the 1/4 Essex on Castle Hill, went on to Point 202, and attacked the southwest corner of Cassino. Machine-gun fire from Point 146 broke up this attack.

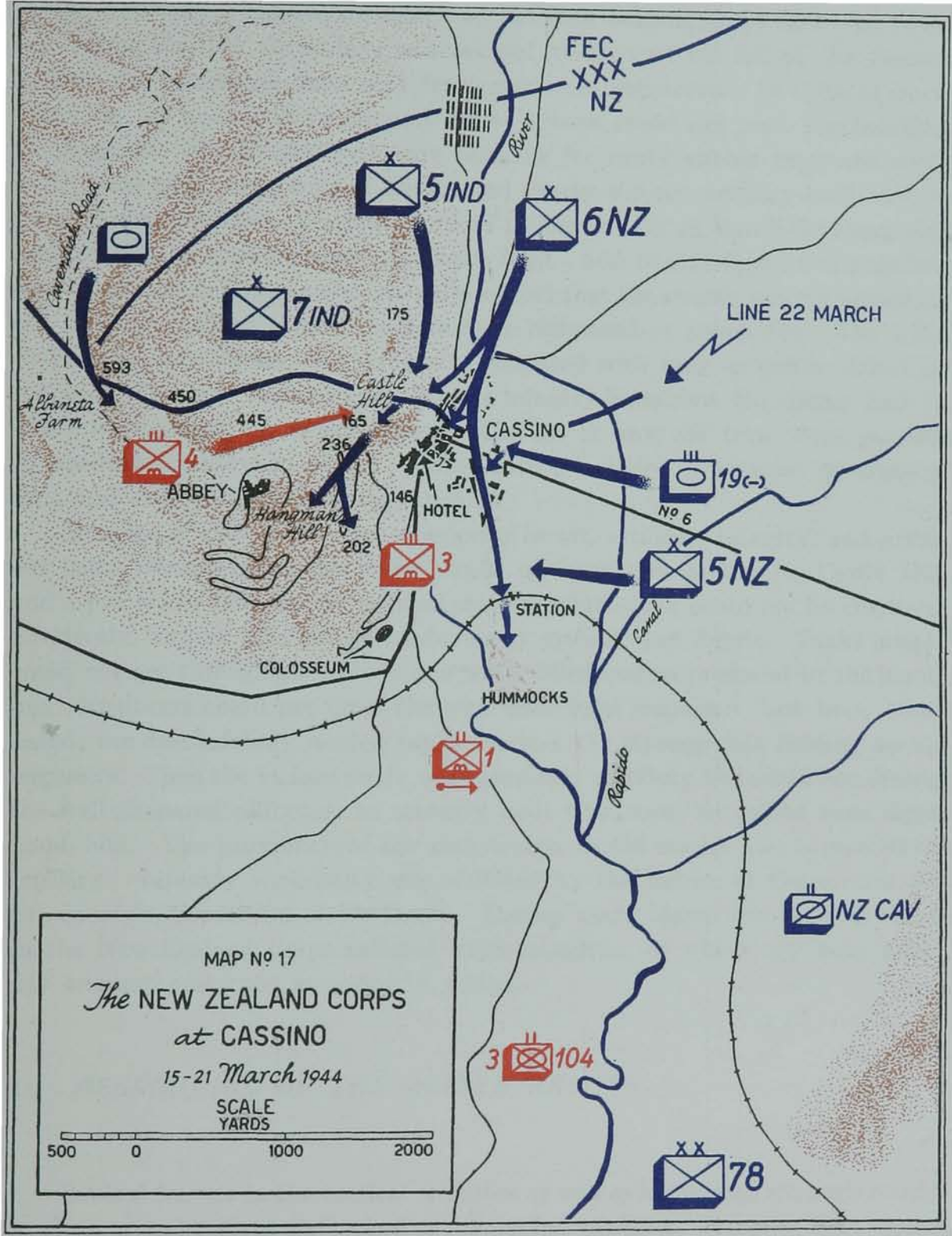
A strong assault on the Abbey was planned for 19 March, with the 1/4 Essex moving from Castle Hill to positions on the right of the 1/9 Gurkha Rifles. H Hour was to be 0600. When the infantry had reached the summit, a force of American and New Zealand tanks was to advance on the trail from Albaneta Farm to clear the area to the northwest. The tank route, known as Cavendish Road, was a mountain trail winding south from Cairo village. The 28 New Zealand (Maori) Battalion was to attack from Highway 6 to clear the southwest part of Cassino. The enemy ruined these plans. Early in the morning of 19 March the 1st Battalion, 4th Parachute Regiment, counterattacked down the ravine running northeast from the Abbey. In a vicious drive the paratroopers captured Point 165 by 0900 and swept on to assault Castle Hill. Two companies were practically annihilated in this attempt; but the seizure of Point 165 isolated our

troops on Hangman's Hill and Point 202 (1). Tanks of the reconnaissance squadron of the 7 Indian Brigade made a diversionary attack down Cavendish Road, but soggy ground and minefields held them up 500 yards southwest of Point 468. Artillery fire forced them to withdraw. In Cassino the 28 New Zealand (Maori) Battalion fought in the area of the Continental Hotel, where enemy tanks were emplaced in the lobby.

During the night of 19-20 March the New Zealand Corps regrouped to continue the offensive while enemy artillery and mortar fire reached an unprecedented level. The 6 Royal West Kents, 36 Infantry Brigade (78 Division), relieved the troops on Castle Hill; the 23 New Zealand Battalion relieved the 25 New Zealand Battalion in the north part of Cassino, and the 6 New Zealand Brigade took over the south sector of Cassino. An attempt to get porter parties through to Hangman's Hill failed, making supply by air drops necessary. There was very little action other than the house-to-house fighting in Cassino on 20 March against a reinforced enemy. The 78 Division boundary was moved north to a point midway between Highway 6 and the railroad station.

The attack that jumped off at 2300, 20 March, resulted in no gains. The 6 Royal West Kents attempted to recapture Points 165 and 236, but again enemy units infiltrated toward Castle Hill and our troops fell back to protect that position. On the right one company of the 2/7 Gurkha Rifles failed in an attempt to occupy Point 445. The 21 New Zealand Battalion south of Highway 6 attacked west in an effort to reach Points 202 and 146. This attempt also failed, and progress was equally disappointing on 22 March. The New Zealand Corps called off the battle. At the end of action on 23 March the enemy was still firmly established in Cassino, with one center of resistance in the northwest and another in the southwest. Six battalions of Allied infantry had been committed, but gains were insignificant in view of the casualties suffered. Isolated units still held Hangman's Hill and Point 202, but the enemy controlled Points 236 and 165. Although engineer resources had been used to the utmost to open up routes, our armor could not be employed decisively. These factors led to the decision to halt the offensive and to consolidate on Castle Hill and in the eastern part of Cassino. During the night of 24-25 March the 1/9 Gurkha Rifles withdrew from Hangman's Hill and C Company, 24 New Zealand Infantry Battalion, gave up Point 202.

(1) At this time two companies of the 1/4 Essex, one company 2/7 Gurkha Rifles, and one company 4/6 Rajputana Rifles were on Castle Hill and Hill 175; Hangman's Hill and Point 202 were held by the 1/9 Gurkha Rifles, two companies 1/4 Essex, one company 4/6 Rajputana Rifles, and one company 24 New Zealand Battalion.



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3. *Summary.* The second attack by the New Zealand Corps made fair progress during the first three days and seemed to forecast the fall of the Cassino fortress. In succeeding days very few gains were registered. In spite of overwhelming air and artillery support Allied troops could not rout the fanatical paratroopers, who fought with rare tenacity for every rubble heap and every wall. More than 1,100 tons of bombs and nearly 200,000 artillery shells fell on the enemy in the space of a few hours on 15 March. By 25 March the staggering total of 588,094 artillery shells had been fired. Add to this figure the large volume of mortar shells, and one can only marvel that the enemy was not annihilated. Enemy artillery pieces in action were estimated at about 240. The Luftwaffe made 217 sorties over our lines, compared with very extensive Allied air support. The New Zealand Corps had 24 infantry battalions, the enemy had 14. There were about 16 enemy tanks in Cassino at any one time, with possibly 90 available in the Liri Valley. Allied armor included 579 tanks, 59 armored cars, and 128 self-propelled support guns.

In spite of this impressive superiority in air, artillery, infantry, and armor our gains were these: a few more blocks of courtyards and walls, Castle Hill, and a precarious hold on the railroad station. Our armor could not be employed effectively because of cratered roads, soggy ground, and debris. Tanks simply could not get through the rubble and water-filled craters produced by the bombing. Engineers could not clear the way until local resistance had been eliminated; but the infantry needed tanks to clear the strongpoints holding up the engineers. Thus the vicious circle was complete. Artillery fire could not destroy the well prepared pillboxes, so strongly built that some withstood even direct bomb hits. The proximity of our own troops to the enemy also hampered the artillery. Infantry superiority was nullified by the nature of the terrain and the enemy's disposition of his forces. During 15-26 March the three divisions in the New Zealand Corps suffered 2106 casualties, of which 287 were killed, 237 missing, and 1582 wounded in action.

D. *REGROUPING OF THE ALLIED ARMIES*

Several factors in the tactical situation as well as long-range strategic considerations brought about an extensive regrouping of Allied forces in Italy during March. 10 Corps was in a stalemate west of the Garigliano; the FEC could not move until the Cassino bastion had fallen; and neither II Corps nor the New Zealand Corps had yet been able to break into the Liri Valley. The

Eighth Army front had been stripped as much as possible and could provide no more divisions for Fifth Army. General Alexander's problem therefore was one of creating fresh reserves while planning for the attack to break the Gustav Line.

Various proposals and plans crystallized in a series of conferences at Allied Central Mediterranean Force (ACMF) headquarters in February and were summarized in written orders on 5 March. The 46 Division of 10 Corps was to be relieved by the British 4 Division, and the American 88th Division would relieve the British 5 Division in the quiet coastal sector. At the same time the Anzio beachhead needed reserves to bolster VI Corps. This problem was to be met by sending in the 5 Division after its relief early in March. The 34th and 36th Divisions of II Corps would be available after necessary rest and reorganization; the former went to the beachhead, and the latter engaged in strenuous mountain training for the next drive. Looking forward to resuming the drive on Rome, General Alexander planned to have II Corps and the FEC replace 10 Corps on the south. Eighth Army would shift west of the Apennines for an eventual attack through the Liri Valley, with the British 10 and 13 Corps, 2 Polish Corps, and 1 Canadian Corps under its command. Along the Adriatic the line would be held by 5 Corps directly under command of ACMF.

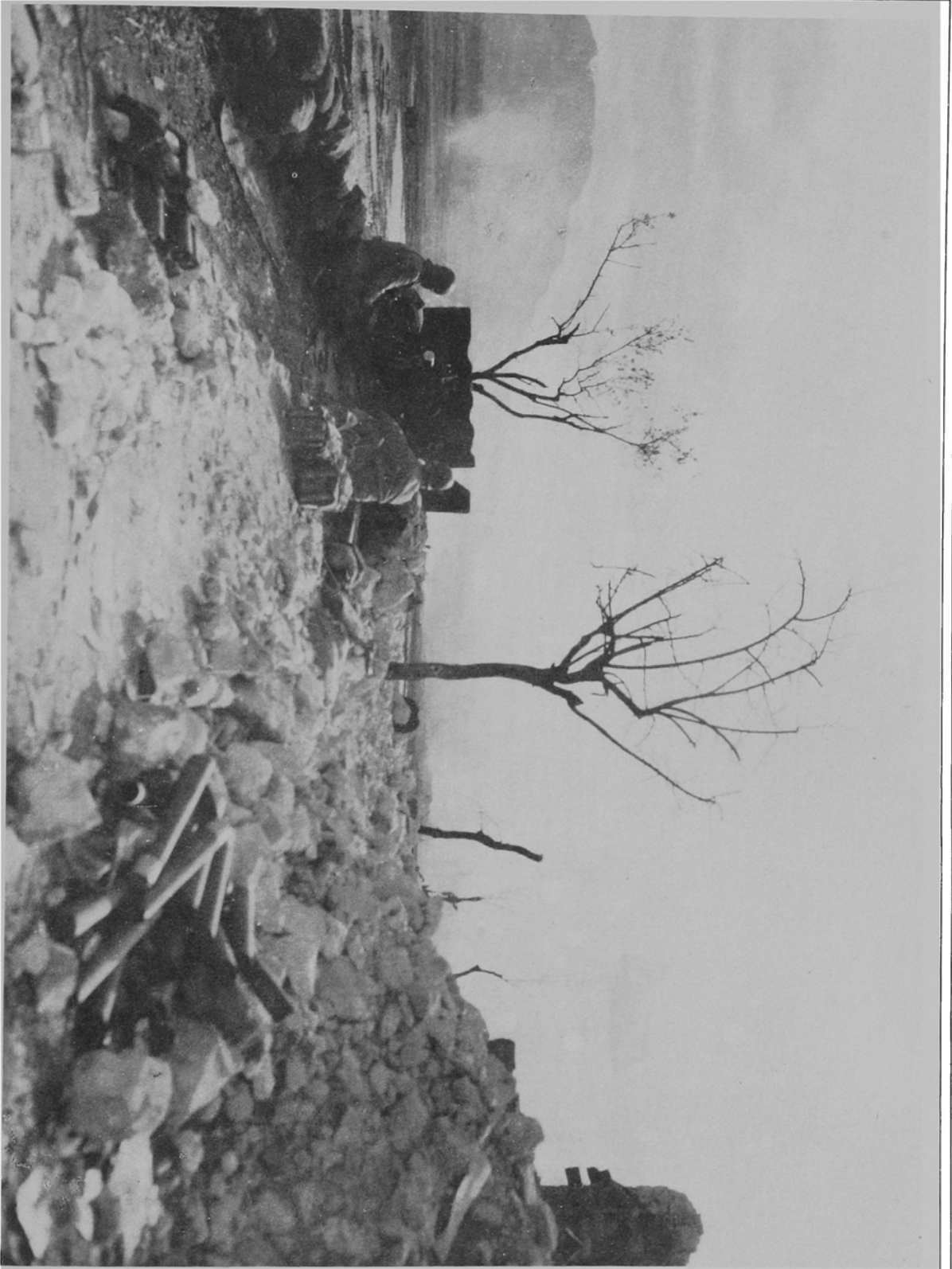
The relief of 10 Corps began on 3 March when the 349th Regimental Combat Team (88th Division) took over the 17 Brigade sector. Next to arrive was the 350th Infantry, which relieved the 13 Brigade on 5 March. On the same day the 5 Division sector passed to the 88th Division. On 8 March the 351st Infantry relieved the 201 Guards Brigade. Between 25 February and 10 March the British 4 Division relieved the 46 Division, which prepared to leave the theater. The 5 Division began to move for Anzio on 5 March to relieve the 56 Division at the beachhead. Other reliefs were carried out gradually as Eighth Army sideslipped to the left. By 26 March 2 Polish Corps had relieved the FEC, and the New Zealand Corps was disbanded. French units gradually took over the north sector of the former 10 Corps area, with the 4th Mountain Division relieving the British 4 Division on 20 March. The new boundary between Fifth and Eighth Armies went into effect on 27 March; and at 0800, 29 March, command of the sector south of the Liri River passed to II Corps and the FEC.

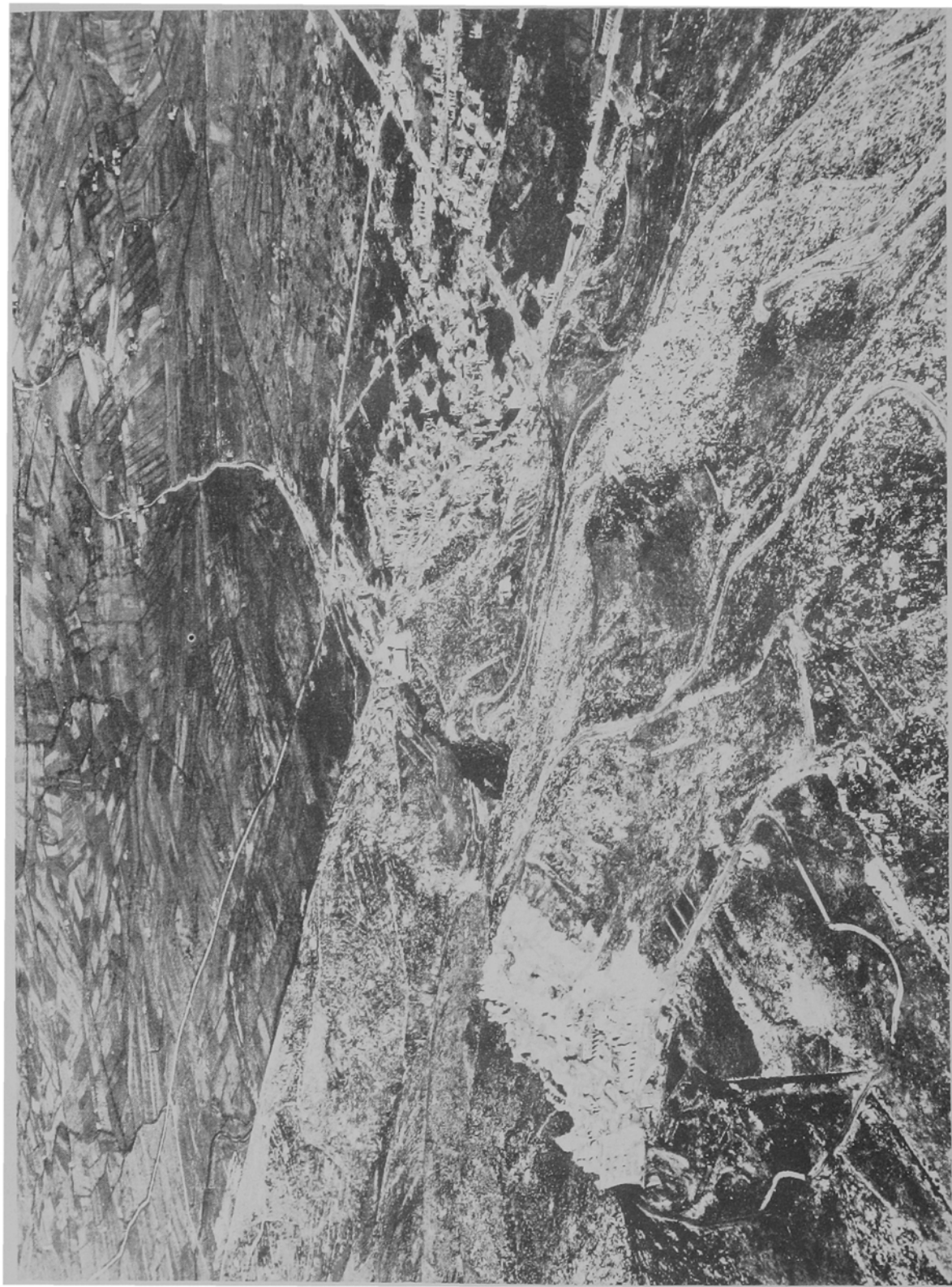
This peninsula-wide regrouping of two armies involved an extraordinary amount of motor traffic. Moving supplies, troops, and headquarters while at the same time fully manning a long line and carrying on the Cassino offensive in March required close co-ordination and the most detailed planning. In the event of a breakthrough in the Liri Valley troops must be kept available to exploit to the northwest. Extraordinary precautions had to be taken to prevent

the enemy from learning about the reorganization. At least some measure of success was achieved, since the Germans continued for some time to shoot propaganda in English to the Moroccan mountain troops south of the Liri River. When the May drive on Rome began, enemy intelligence grossly underestimated the strength of the Allied armies massed for the attack (1).

(1) For further details on the failure of enemy intelligence, see Fifth Army History, Part V.

A 57-mm antitank gun in position just north of Cassino. In the background, Mount Trocchio.





Its superstructure in ruins, the Abbey of Montecassino still commands every approach.