

The Brazilians northwest of Porretta in the vicinity of Mount Castello were the object of the first of the two major German assaults launched during December at critical points on the central and eastern sectors of the Army line. Mount Castello lies 3 miles east of Mount Belvedere, which the Germans had lost and then regained during November, and on 3 December they attacked to improve their defense system in the area. Elements of the 1044th Grenadier Regiment (232d Grenadier Division) infiltrated against the 11th Brazilian Infantry shortly before midnight on 2 December. The attacks were renewed before dawn on 3 December, and some penetrations were made before our positions south of the mountain were fully restored later in the day. Action flared in this vicinity again on 12 December when the 1st Brazilian Infantry and the 900th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion of Task Force 45, attempting to extend their positions in the general vicinity of Mount Belvedere, made little progress.

Similar lack of success ultimately ended efforts of the 6 South African Armoured Division to gain possession of the Mount Sole hill mass in the Setta Valley. On 9 December elements of the 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles began operations against this dominating feature, sending small attacking forces against the northeastern portion of the mountain. Positions on the lower ridges were successfully occupied, but attempts to clear additional ground met with severe enemy resistance; on 15 December a determined counterattack by the 2d Battalion, 35th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment (16th SS Panzer Grenadier Division), drove the South Africans back from their recently won positions. The lines were again consolidated essentially the same as they were before our initial assault.

More violent and prolonged fighting took place to the east of II Corps in the left side of the 13 Corps sector. In a dawn attack against the British 1 Division on 12 December the 3d Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment (1st Parachute Division), succeeded in getting a foothold on Mount Cerere to the east of Mount Grande. In nearly a day of severe small-unit clashes the 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders pushed the paratroops back and reoccupied the lost ground. Farther to the east, along the Castel del Rio—Imola road, the British 6 Armoured Division attacked the next day in an attempt to aid Eighth Army as directed in Fifth Army Operations Instruction No. 36. A successful penetration down this road would have provided a threat to the rear of the Germans on Highway 9 who were blocking Eighth Army's northwestward push.

The attack was pointed toward Tossignano, a village north of Castel del Rio which had long been the scene of patrol clashes. Preceded by a heavy artillery and mortar barrage, leading companies of the 2 Rifle Brigade succeeded in placing two platoons in the village at 0720 and by midafternoon increased the garrison strength to five platoons. Bitter fighting raged as the 755th Grenadier Regiment (334th

Grenadier Division) put up stiff resistance. German mortars and artillery heavily interdicted the road leading to Tossignano and it became impossible to reach the town with additional reinforcements during daylight hours. The enemy finally cut all communications and in overwhelming force surged into Tossignano on 15 December, killing or capturing most of the garrison. Some elements of the British forces managed to retire to the nearby hamlet of Borgo Tossignano while Allied artillery and dive bombers blasted Tossignano itself. The unsuccessful attempt to wrest this advanced post from the enemy cost the British approximately 200 officers and men.

3. *Attack in the Serchio Valley.* (See Map No. 2.) Evidences of a build-up of German forces opposite the thinly held western sector of the Army front were detected and confirmed by the middle of December. Partisan and prisoner of war reports that the enemy was rebuilding bridges and repairing roads in the upper Serchio River valley which had previously been destroyed were substantiated by aerial photographs. Dismounted enemy troop movements were reported in the towns of Castelnuovo and Piazza al Serchio where Italian Alpine units and an increasing number of Germans were said to be concentrating. Prisoners spoke of a "program" being planned for 28 December. Other sources set 26 December as the date. These reports were noted by the new Army commander, General Truscott, and weighed in the light of a new German counteroffensive then under way in France and Belgium, the success of which might conceivably inspire counterattacks on other fronts. This enemy capability, which had already been studied and evaluated, was again reviewed. It was estimated that five enemy divisions could be based in the La Spezia area. The 148th Grenadier Division and elements of the Monte Rosa and San Marco Italian Divisions were already in the western sector, and there were some indications the 157th Mountain Division might be moving to that vicinity. The Italia Division also was said to be en route south. Reliefs effected by the enemy in other parts of the Fifth Army sector and on the Eighth Army front might make it possible to free three other divisions, the 16th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, the 26th Panzer Division, and possibly the 5th Mountain Division, to back such an attack. The limited capabilities of the enemy, however, to effect rapidly any large-scale movements were well known. As an objective for a push down the coast, the Germans would have the port of Leghorn, the main base of the American forces. The great harbor and its installations was at that time protected by one division, the 92d, an inexperienced infantry unit under the command of Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond, which was rather widely extended over a broad front.

Meanwhile plans for our own offensive continued with Christmas night tentatively set for the II Corps jump-off. At the same time shifts of units calculated to improve the over-all tactical disposition of the Army were being made. On 23 De-

cember Operations Instruction No. 37 attached the 339th Regimental Combat Team (85th Division) to IV Corps. (*See Annex No. 1C.*) The 337th Regimental Combat Team (85th Division) and two brigades of the 8 Indian Division were shifted to the west from reserve and 13 Corps, respectively. The former unit was attached directly to the 92d Division while the latter were placed under its operational control. In addition to these forces the 84th Chemical Battalion, the 755th and 760th Tank Battalions, two 155-mm howitzer and one 155-mm gun American field artillery battalions, and two regiments (battalions) of British 5.5-inch guns were detached from II Corps and ordered to the vicinity of Lucca. The remaining combat team of the 85th Division, the 338th, was held in readiness to repel counterattacks in the 1st Armored and 91st Division zones when II Corps began its winter offensive. By Christmas Day both the 19 and 21 Indian Brigades had closed in the area around Lucca. IV Corps was placed in command of the 92d Division sector, and the South Africans reverted to Army control.

Following probing thrusts by his patrols on the night of 25 December, the enemy early on the 26th launched several limited attacks in the rugged mountains on a 6-mile front astride the Serchio River. The valley attacks were accompanied by a marked increase in artillery fires along the coast, but no additional action developed in that sector. West of the river Italian elements and Germans hit the 1st Battalion, 370th Infantry, near Molazzana, 4 miles south of Castelnuovo, and Company G, 370th Infantry, at the village of Calomini, south and east of Molazzana. East of the river larger units, identified as belonging to the 285th and 286th Grenadier Regiments (148th Grenadier Division), attacked the villages of Sommocolonia, Tiglio, and Bebbio, where the 2d Battalion, 366th Infantry, and other elements attached to the 370th Regimental Combat Team held outposts. It was estimated that the enemy was attacking with approximately one battalion down each side of the river in the first assaults, which were launched without great artillery preparation but which were accompanied by heavy mortar barrages.

Early in the morning infiltrating Germans occupied part of Calomini; by 1400 Company G had been driven from the village. The 1st Battalion, 370th Infantry, also gave ground, although fighting on the west side of the river died down considerably. Pressure was renewed in increasing strength on the east side where Austro-German mountain troops from the Mittenwald Mountain Battalion joined in the battle. Sommocolonia, Tiglio, and Bebbio were all occupied by the Germans before darkness. Led by Italian guides, the enemy had outflanked these villages by climbing the ridge to the east and attacking southwest down the slopes into the hamlets before dawn. Austrian and Italian Alpine troops, some of them dressed as partisans, spearheaded the assault. Two platoons of Company E, 366th Infantry, were practically surrounded at Sommocolonia, and only 17 of 60 men managed to escape from

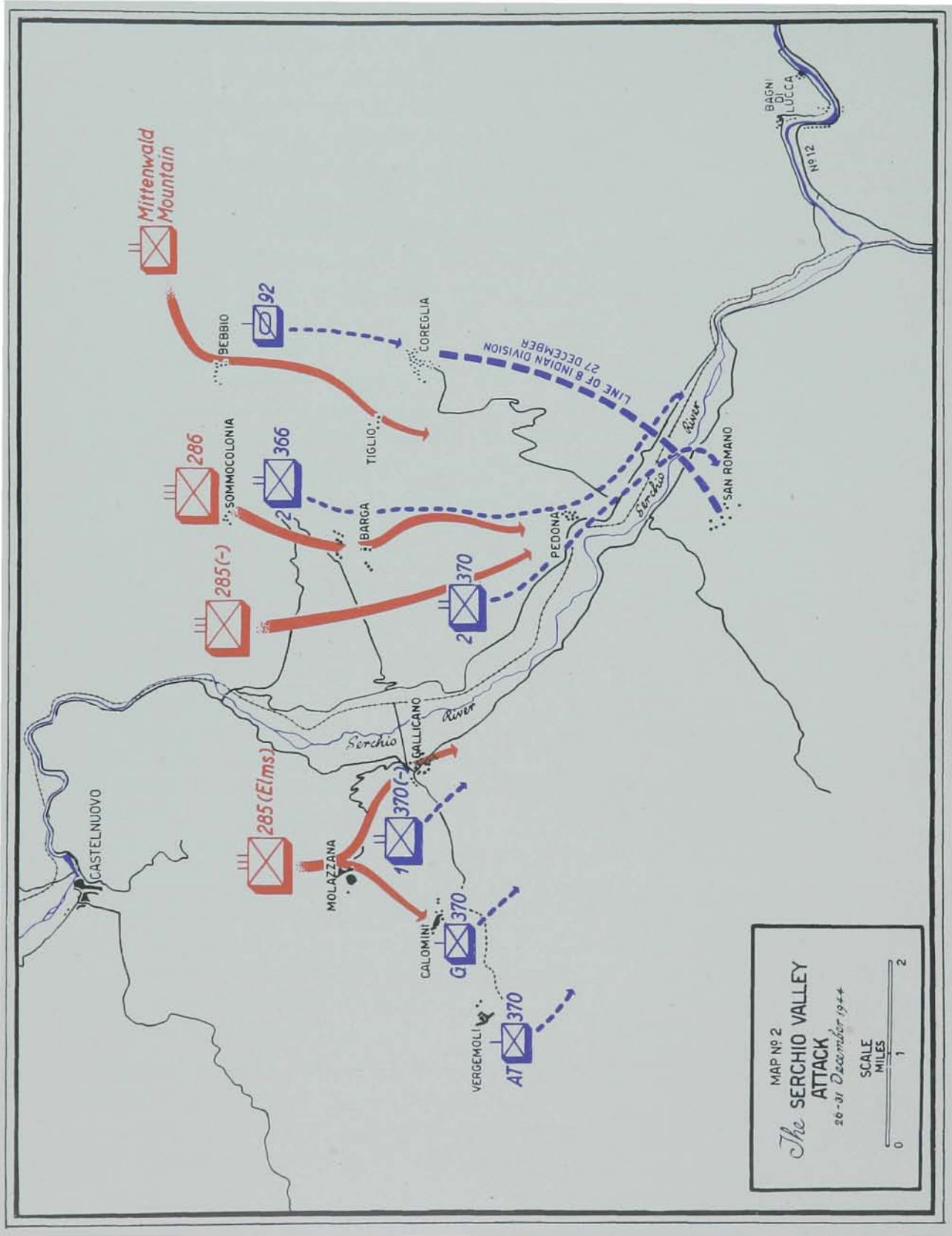
the town. A platoon of the 92d Reconnaissance Troop was overrun at Bebbio although the troop managed to gather most of the men together and retired in good order, falling back to previously prepared defense positions near Coreglia.

The 2d Battalion, 366th Infantry, retreated slightly more than 2 miles and held positions along a line from Gallicano, west of the river, across the stream and through Barga and Coreglia. Shortly before noon Company G, 366th Infantry, suffered high casualties and, becoming badly disorganized, fell back, leaving a gap about 500 yards wide along the east bank of the river. The road leading to Barga was uncovered, and other elements of the battalion were forced to give ground. The 370th Infantry headquarters was threatened and forced to withdraw; the advance command post of the 92d Division also took new positions farther in the rear. The 1st Battalion, 370th Infantry, after losing the Calomini outpost, was generally firm southwest of Molazzana, a mile northwest of Gallicano, but relinquished Gallicano on its right flank and fell back to conform to the new line established by the 366th Infantry units. Company F, 370th Infantry, which had been engaged in preparing secondary defense positions west of the Serchio, was hurriedly moved across the stream to fill the gap created by the collapse of Company G, 366th Infantry.

To prevent the enemy attack from developing into any formidable threat to our supply lines the 1st Armored Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. Vernon E. Prichard, was detached from II Corps and sent west to the vicinity of Lucca. The 135th Regimental Combat Team (34th Division) was also attached to IV Corps and moved near Viareggio. The 8 Indian Division moved up behind the 92d Division elements.

The Germans renewed the attack at dawn on 27 December, the weight of their effort centered in the area between Gallicano and Coreglia. Smaller thrusts were made west of the river around Molazzana where additional slight withdrawals were made by our troops. The attack on the east, however, continued to make steady progress against the 366th Infantry elements and parts of the 2d Battalion, 370th Infantry. Barga was evacuated in the morning. The enemy captured two undamaged 57-mm guns and turned them against the 366th Infantry, which also lost most of its heavy machine guns. By 1300 our troops had fallen back from their second defense line, and the Germans had penetrated through the center as far as the village of Pedona, on the Serchio River 2 miles due south of Barga.

The 19 Indian Brigade, moving northwest from Bagni di Lucca, established a line stretching northeast-southwest from Coreglia across the Serchio to San Romano, a village slightly more than 1 mile south of Pedona, and by darkness the 92d Division troops had passed back through the Indians. They were then moved westward across the river behind the 1st Battalion, 370th Infantry, and on the left flank of the 8 Indian Division, which assumed command of the valley sector. At 2200 Indian patrols made contact with the Germans.



MAP No 2
The SERCHIO VALLEY
 ATTACK
 20-31 December 1944
 SCALE
 MILES
 0 1 2

The following day the enemy began to retire, and our patrols reported only slight contact when they moved forward to probe German dispositions on both sides of the Serchio. After XXII Tactical Air Command had hit the enemy on the 27th with more than 200 sorties, it followed up with 228 fighter-bomber and 24 medium bomber sorties on the 28th to assist our counterattack. In the next 2 days, 878 additional sorties were flown over the Serchio Valley and areas behind it while the 19 and 21 Brigades continued pushing back small enemy covering forces. Barga was cleared on 29 December, Sommacolina was reoccupied on 30 December, and on the last day of the year patrols penetrated into Galliciano, Bebbio, and Molazzana against only feeble small-arms resistance. The object of the German attack was not clear, although one officer prisoner said it was a reconnaissance in force which might have been exploited had not our reinforcements been encountered. Approximately 5 battalions had been involved, including 1,000 Germans and 300 Italian troops. At the end of the action the lost positions had been almost entirely restored.

4. *Positions at the Year's End.* Whatever the enemy's intent had been in his Serchio Valley attack, it contributed to conditions which influenced the decision further to postpone the projected push against Bologna. On 28 December Fifth Army Operations Instruction No. 38 announced postponement of the assault and placed all Army troops on a 9-day alert for resumption of offensive operations. (*See Annex No. 1D.*) IV Corps was directed to protect the Leghorn supply base at all cost, II Corps was to hold its positions, and 13 Corps was to continue affording assistance to Eighth Army wherever possible. The 1st Armored Division remained at Lucca in Army reserve.

At the end of the year the Fifth Army front lines were essentially the same as they had been for the preceding two months. The concentration of troops at Lucca had resulted in greatly thinned lines in the II Corps sector. When the 1st Armored Division was moved, the 91st and 88th Divisions extended their battalions across the entire sector and pinched out front-line elements of the 34th Division; that division (less one combat team), under command of Maj. Gen. Charles L. Bolte, was placed at Monghidoro in Corps reserve. The 17 Indian Brigade took over the sector previously occupied by the 8 Indian Division; the remainder of the 13 Corps front showed no change. In the IV Corps sector the 92d Division, reinforced by the two brigades of the 8 Indian Division, held the coastal sector as far inland as the Serchio Valley; east of the valley positions of Task Force 45 and the 1st Brazilian Division were unchanged. The 85th Division was in Corps reserve. The 6 South African Armoured Division continued defense of its sector under direct Army command. The first elements of a major reinforcement for Fifth Army were received on 27 December when the 86th Mountain Infantry arrived at Leghorn. The remainder of its parent unit, the 10th Mountain Division, was scheduled to reach Italy in January.

The Germans had thinned their lines in the central sector opposite II Corps. Both the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division and the 98th Grenadier Division were transferred to the Eighth Army front before the middle of December. The 362d Grenadier Division took over the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division sector east of Highway 65, but no replacement of the 98th Grenadier Division was made. The 1st Parachute Division extended the width of its sector, and the 4th Parachute Division did likewise shortly before Christmas when the 16th SS Panzer Grenadier Division was taken from its position astride Highway 64. About the middle of December Marshal Kesselring was reported wounded by a strafing Allied plane. General Heinrich von Vietinghoff, commander of the German Tenth Army and considered one of the most able enemy commanders, took Kesselring's place, and Lt. Gen. Joachim Lemelsen of Fourteenth Army reportedly replaced Vietinghoff in directing the more active Tenth Army, which was opposing the advance of the British.



Infantry come out of the front lines on Mount Grande, past trucks and Weasels



A German shell hits a target in the town of Loiano on Highway 65



Engineers working on a trail, while an Indian mule train passes by



Ammunition for the pack howitzers, at the end of the supply line