

MAP No 6
The Drive across the PO VALLEY
 21-26 April 1945
 SCALE
 MILES
 10 5 0 10 20

The enemy now seeks to delay our advance while he reassembles his broken and scattered forces in the mountains to the north. You have him against the ropes, and it now only remains for you to keep up the pressure, the relentless pursuit and enveloping tactics to prevent his escape, and to write off as completely destroyed the German armies in Italy.

Now is the time for speed. Let no obstacle hold you up, since hours lost now may prolong the war for months. The enemy must be completely destroyed here. Keep relentlessly and everlastingly after him. Cut every route of escape, and final and complete victory will be yours.

1. *Into the Mountains.* (See Map No. 7.) The drive the last 6 days as Fifth Army fanned out to finish off the enemy was designed to capture as many enemy as possible in the valley and forestall the formation of the Tyrolean army reportedly being organized in the mountains. The Adige River proved no serious obstacle to our forces, and neither did the nearly unmanned defense line beyond it. The very fact that our forces could practically at will roam across country 20 miles a day indicates clearly enough the state of the enemy organization. Nonetheless, the Germans still tried to get as many troops as they could out of the valley to the comparative safety of the Alps, and single units often fought fiercely to cover their retreat. In no case, however, did those actions constitute a real threat to the advances of our columns. Not infrequently our rear columns found places reportedly taken and cleared by leading elements again in the hands of the enemy; the simple fact was that no front lines existed, and the countryside literally swarmed with Germans from a wide variety of units, many apathetically awaiting capture and others attempting to pass unobserved through our thin lines and into the mountains.

II Corps crossed the Adige 26–28 April on a broad front of three divisions, each operating in several highspeed motorized columns paced by armor, and raced toward Vicenza, 30 miles east of Verona and 20 miles northwest of Padua. Vicenza was cleared on the 28th after hard fighting by the 350th Infantry. The Corps attack then spread north, and the 88th Division, which had been travelling astride Highway 53, fanned out to the left into the hills and into the Brenta and Piave River valleys north of Bassano and Treviso to round up the fleeing enemy there. The 85th Division, attached to II Corps on the 30th, took over the job of moving up the Piave Valley on the 1st; the 88th Division was thus able to concentrate its efforts on the Brenta Valley and the roads leading into it in accordance with Fifth Army Operations Instruction No. 11 of 1 May (See Annex No. 11), which directed II Corps to push north and seize Highway 49, preparatory to continuing the advance on Innsbruck via the Brenner Pass.

The 91st Division in the Corps center, meanwhile, took over the drive down

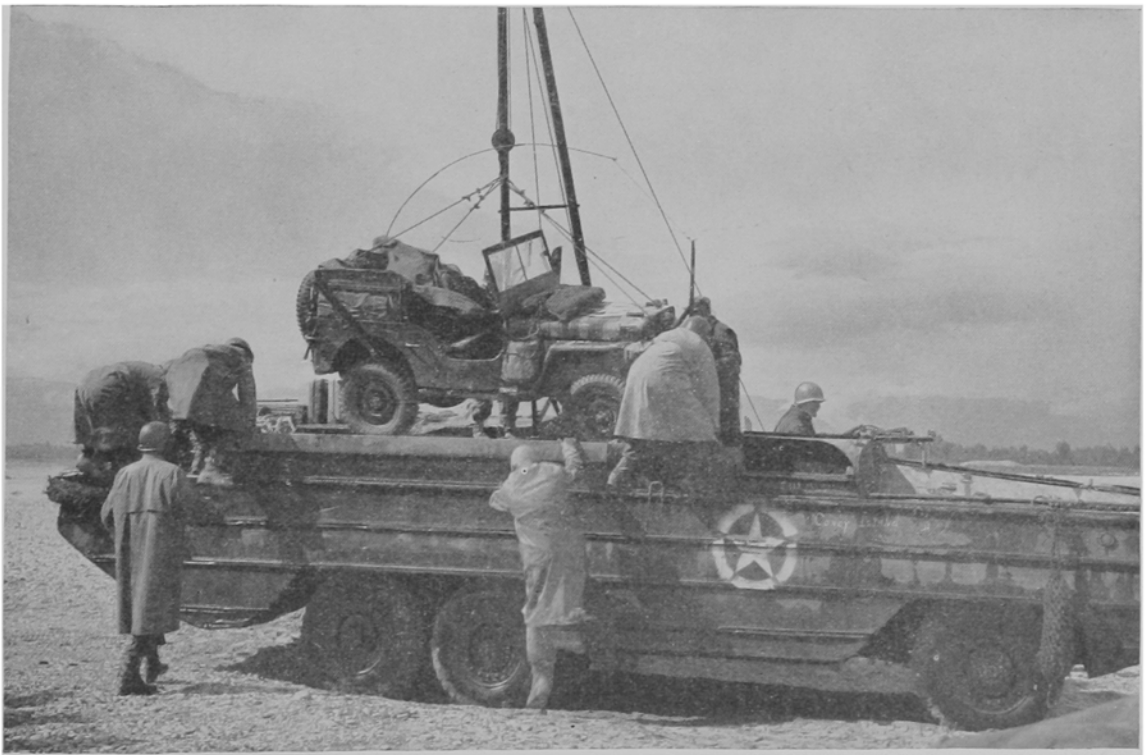
Highway 53 on the 29th, crossed the Brenta and by the 30th had raced eastward 35 miles into the city of Treviso, 15 miles north of Venice. On the II Corps right the 6 South African Armoured Division crossed the Adige at Legnago on the 28th, paralleled the 91st Division east and north toward the town of Longare, south of Vicenza, and then swung east on an axis parallel to and about 5 miles south of the 91st Division axis on Highway 53. Early on the 29th Eighth Army was contacted at Padua. Later in the day the South Africans started crossing the Brenta and moved to an area southwest of Treviso. The advance of the 6 South African Armoured and 91st Divisions had taken them to the end of the Fifth Army zone in this direction; the advance was halted, and, while the 91st Division continued to mop up enemy resistance in its area, the South Africans assembled and started movement to the Milan area. The move was still in progress on the 2d.

On the Fifth Army left IV Corps units moved out to breach the Adige Line and to block off the exits from Lake Garda to Lake Como. On the 26th the 85th Division simply walked through the Adige Line north of Verona and then reverted to Army reserve to assist either corps in Fifth Army if the bold thrusts to east, north, and west ran into difficulty. The 10th Mountain Division moved up the east shore of Lake Garda toward the exits of Brenner Pass and in the demolished tunnels of the east lake shore drive ran into the most difficult fighting it had experienced since the breakthrough in the Apennines. Against fierce opposition the 10th Mountain Division, operating under Army control after 28 April, reached the head of Lake Garda at Torbole; after considerable fighting around the head of the lake the towns there were reported clear on the 30th. Meanwhile the 85th Mountain Infantry made an amphibious operation across the lake to Gargnano on the 30th in a vain effort to catch some high Fascist officials, among them Mussolini. The Fascists were gone, but the regiment continued unopposed along the western shores of the lake to Riva. By 2 May the 86th Mountain Infantry had established road blocks at Arco, 5 miles up the Sarca Valley from Riva.

On the IV Corps left the 1st Armored Division moved across the Po. On the 26th Combat Command A started north and, meeting only scattered opposition en route, rolled through Brescia and Bergamo to reach by the 28th the town of Como on the western arm of the lake of the same name 20 miles north of Milan. Combat Command B followed across the Po on the 27th, drove to the Ghedi Airport south of Brescia, and then swung west on an axis south of and parallel to that of Combat Command A. On the 29th, the same day that Troop B, 91st Reconnaissance Squadron, found Milan in the hands of the partisans, the 1st Armored Division consolidated positions north and east of that city; Combat Command A on the right, Combat Command B on the left, Task Force Howze in the center, and the 81st Reconnaissance Squadron patrolling on the left flank. By the 29th the 81st Reconnaissance



The 91st Division crosses the Adige River at Legnago, 27 April 1945



The pursuit of the enemy continues—ferrying vehicles over the Brenta River



Action in the last days consisted chiefly of dealing with snipers



Everywhere were little knots of prisoners as our troops sped forward

Squadron had pushed to the Ticino River. The next day a IV Corps task force formally occupied Milan. In 3 days the 1st Armored Division, roaring across country day and night against only scattered opposition, had driven a wedge between enemy forces in the mountains and those still in the plain. In order to strengthen the long thin line the 1st Armored Division had drawn across the top of the valley and to assist mopping up the large enemy forces west of Milan, the 34th Division and the Legnano Group were moved to the vicinity of Brescia on the 28th and 30th. The former unit had been relieved by the BEF at Piacenza early on the 28th, doubled back to the east to cross the Po, and by the night of the 29th had closed in the Brescia—Bergamo area to block the escape routes west of Lake Garda. During this shift the 34th Division moved 150 miles in a little over 24 hours. It then proceeded west and on 1 May relieved 1st Armored Division reconnaissance elements on the Ticino River northwest of Milan and then took Novara west of the Ticino and 25 miles west of Milan the next day against no opposition; elements were also sent northwest 30 miles to Biella at the edge of the mountains. Drawing the noose across the top of the valley left surrender as the only alternative to the forces south of the mountains and west of the Adige.

2. *Action on the West.* Fifth Army's long thrust straight north from the Apennines to Lake Garda and thence across the top of the valley to the east and west had first split the German armies in Italy in two and then slammed in their faces the door of retreat to the Alps. During that same period three other nearly separate drives were in progress: on the east the British Eighth Army chased the Germans north along the Adriatic coast; on the west the 92d Division, under 15th Army Group, pursued along the Ligurian coast to Genoa; and south of the Po the BEF and the 34th Division rounded up enemy forces caught in the Apennines. The latter project was completed successfully by the 29th, and the next day the 11th Infantry (BEF) moved via Highway 9 to Alessandria, 45 miles southwest of Milan in the Lombardy plain, to establish contact with the 92d Division on the left; other BEF elements on the right meanwhile crossed the Po and cleared Cremona. Alessandria was reached on the 1st, but IV Corps and 92d Division contact had already been established by the 100th Battalion, 442d Infantry, and the 91st Reconnaissance Squadron at Pavia near the confluence of the Po and the Ticino Rivers 20 miles south of Milan.

Along the Ligurian coast the 92d Division had, by the 22d, seized all but the Aulla stronghold in the old Gothic Line; upon losing his defense positions the enemy started to withdraw and the chase began. Orders of the 24th directed a swift drive up the coast to Genoa, 35 miles away, by the 473d Infantry, while the 370th Infantry pushed northeast down Highways 62 and 63. This latter thrust became a serious factor in the squeeze applied to the 148th Grenadier and the Italia Bersaglieri Divisions when they were cut off from the Po by the BEF and 34th Division. Along the

coast, meanwhile, the chase got in full cry after the 25th when Aulla fell to the 442d Infantry. This regiment was transferred to the coastal zone and was recommitted on the right flank of the 473d Infantry, which was advancing up Highway 1 to Genoa. Opposition was scattered, and at 0930, 27 April, Genoa was ours. The city garrison, 4,000 troops commanded by General Meinhold, had already surrendered to the partisans the day before, but the port garrison and a detachment of marines on top of a hill overlooking the harbor held out until the next day when a threat of annihilation brought them around. On the right the 442d Infantry moved swiftly around Genoa 30 miles to the north into the Lombardy plain to capture Alessandria and its garrison of 3,000 men on the 28th; there contact was established with the BEF—92d Division and IV Corps contact had already been established at Pavia. Turin was reported clear on the 30th, and on the same day the 473d Infantry joined French colonial troops on the French—Italian border at the coast. By that time the Germans in northwest Italy were surrendering on every side. On 30 April the 92d Division was attached to Fifth Army.

3. *Eighth Army Pursues along the Adriatic.* On April 21st, when Fifth Army was pouring out on to the Po plain, Eighth Army pulled up to Bologna. Early in the morning 2 Polish Corps threw a cordon around Bologna from the east as it pinched out 10 Corps and took over Eighth Army's left flank. The general direction of Eighth Army's offensive had now been shifted from northwest to due north; north of the Po it swung to the northeast. 5 Corps now committed the 6 British Armoured Division on the right, and the tanks dashed northwest across the flat plain to Bondeno, 10 miles west of Ferrara on the 23d in an effort to effect a junction there with II Corps and thus surround and destroy large German forces trying to get to the Po. Enemy delay forces fought hard and with some success to hold open the escape routes, and when the junction finally did occur on the 24th near Finale, 7 miles southwest of Bondeno, it achieved only partial success. The 1st and 4th Parachute Divisions, the 26th Panzer Division, and the 278th Grenadier Division managed to get across the Po in relatively good condition but with little armor or artillery. Nevertheless, as was also the case before Fifth Army, enemy losses in personnel and equipment before Eighth Army south of the Po were very large. Incessant air attacks took a heavy toll, and the 6 British Armoured Division cut off many troops as it slashed through and around the enemy to reach the Po at several places between Ferrara and Bondeno.

On 25 April the 2 New Zealand and the 6 British Armoured Divisions established bridgeheads over the Po against slight opposition, and the pursuit continued to the Adige 15 miles to the north. The enemy counterattacked a 56 Division crossing near Rovigo on the 27th and forced a brigade back to the south bank, but the New Zealanders crossed the Adige farther west at Badia against only slight opposition.

By 29 April the entire south bank had been cleared. To the north, however, the enemy offered fierce resistance before relinquishing Padua to the New Zealanders and Venice to the 56 Division, the latter at 1800, 29 April. On the coast Chioggia, 15 miles south of Venice, fell to Italian troops of the Cremona Group on the 30th; on that date 5 Corps went into Army reserve. Eighth Army had now virtually destroyed the German Tenth Army and was driving rapidly toward Austria and Yugoslavia. The 6 British Armoured Division seized a bridge over the Piave southwest of Conegliano on the 30th, and the New Zealanders established a bridgehead farther south. At 1500, 1 May, the 2 New Zealand Division established contact with troops of the Yugoslavian Army at Monfalcone less than 20 miles northwest of Trieste. By 2 May, when hostilities ceased, the armor had fanned out northwest and east of Udine, and the New Zealanders had entered Trieste at 1600.

D. SUMMARY OF THE APRIL ATTACK

The spring offensive, begun on 14 April, was preceded by months of preparation: improvement of positions; constant air attacks on enemy factories, communications, and supply lines; accumulation of supplies and river-crossing equipment; elaborate cover activities to mislead the Germans as to our intentions; and finally a series of diversionary thrusts designed to draw in the enemy's reserves. The actual focus of the impending assault was concealed by blacking out units, cautious concentration of forces behind screening troops and a simulated shift of II Corps to Eighth Army. On 2 April Eighth Army on the east conducted a successful Commando raid on Comacchio Spit. Three days later the 92d Division (reinforced) launched a strong offensive up the Ligurian coast toward La Spezia and Genoa. On 9 April, 5 days ahead of Fifth Army, Eighth Army attacked in force north and northwest up the Po Valley. Thus by the time the Fifth Army offensive began the Germans were already tied down on a broad front and unable to shift their units to stem a full-scale offensive.

The Fifth Army attack was divided into three separate assaults. On the 14th, IV Corps led off west of the Reno. The next day II Corps began a dual thrust east of the river; the 6 South African Armoured Division and the 88th Division jumped off at 2230, and 4½ hours later the 91st and 34th Divisions attacked. Each attack was preceded by an elaborate air and artillery preparation; the II Corps attack alone was heralded by 75,000 shells. Three days of fighting reminiscent of the Gothic Line slugging were climaxed on the 16th by a break-through of the 10th Mountain Division; the breach was widened rapidly by the commitment of the 85th Division through the 1st Armored Division and the shift of the 1st Armored Division to the left

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of the 10th Mountain Division. By the 18th the enemy defenses were crumbling all along the line, and II Corps overran the strongly defended Mount Sole, Monterumici, and Monte Adone positions. II Corps then shifted its drive to the left in a four-division thrust astride the Reno River; the 88th Division was moved over between the South Africans and the 85th Division. On the 20th IV Corps was pouring out into the plain. The next day II Corps reached the plain and captured Bologna. Fifth Army then raced for the Po, six divisions abreast. Crossings of the Po began on the 23d, and the offensive continued north to Verona. By 26 April the German armies were split in two, and the 10th Mountain Division was ready to drive on the Brenner; the 1st Armored Division was on its way to block off exits between Lake Garda and Lake Como, supported after the 28th by the 34th Division; and II Corps was swinging northeast with three divisions to Vicenza and the northeastern exits. South of the Po the BEF and the 34th Division had driven to Piacenza astride Highway 9 in order to head off LI Mountain Corps troops attempting to escape from the mountains. Three days later the major exits were closed, and enemy mass surrenders were in order.

Before the attack began on 14 April supply installations were set up in forward areas in anticipation of supporting the army in all parts of the valley. After the break-through Modena was established as a base supply area, but the quartermaster units which served in direct support of the fighting units remained flexible. Class I supplies, a large proportion of which due to the tactical situation were hard rations, were sent forward from the rail transfer point established in Florence on 1 April. From that point these shipments were made up for forward truckheads; they were supplemented by stocks in reserve dumps, and toward the end of the month in the Army base dump at Modena. In order to keep pace with the troops after the break-through the truckheads were displaced forward at approximately 2-day intervals. By the close of the drive the truckheads were serving 38,000 square miles. The tens of thousands of prisoners also constituted a heavy drain; during 1 April-2 May 237,173 prisoner rations were issued. At the close of the campaign the situation was considerably alleviated, however, when MTOUSA announced a new prisoner ration based on captured enemy food stocks. In a mobile situation such as developed after the break-through the fuel supply problem could easily have become so critical as to halt the offensive had it not been for adequate preparation for just such a contingency. Prior to the attack dumps of Class III supplies had been built up in forward areas, and gasoline units were alerted for fast and frequent moves. In order to assure that adequate stocks be available at all times, one army gasoline supply platoon was attached to the 1st Armored Division to maintain a dump of 40,000 gallons of gasoline, and a mobile reserve was created to keep up this dump. As the demands for Class III supplies increased with the advances, 10 truckheads

were opened in forward areas. On the other hand, the need of artillery ammunition declined tremendously once the pursuit got under way and the enemy no longer had to be blasted out of fixed positions.

Although the whirlwind Po Valley campaign with its constant shifting of units and enormous extension of supply lines had taxed Army supply facilities to a degree never before experienced in Italy, the advance never suffered a major delay because of shortages. Indeed, according to captured enemy officers, German plans of retirement had been based on the assumption that even in the event of a major breakthrough, Fifth Army would have to stop at the Po to await supplies before resuming the offensive. Such was not the case; the offensive continued without pause, and the disorganized Germans consequently never had time to reorganize. Much of the credit for the speed and the nonstop character of the drive belongs to the supply services.

Air activity during the pursuit across the Po Valley was incessant, but it was practically all Allied. Although the once-dreaded Luftwaffe was more active than it had been for many months as the Germans made their last desperate efforts to slow the chase, enemy plane attacks were scattered and almost pitifully weak, and they had little real influence upon the outcome of the campaign. On 27 April only 100 enemy planes of all types were estimated to be left in Italy. Allied planes ranged up and down the Po Valley, strafing columns, smashing roads and bridges, increasing the disorganization of an already confused enemy, and acting as the eyes of the ground forces. The Germans furnished targets such as seldom appear; in their hurry to get to the Alps they threw caution and discipline to the winds and took to the roads in daylight; their columns crowded the roads bumper to bumper as they converged upon stream crossings and main highways. One day of partial overcast (21 April) gave them some respite; only 31 missions of 105 sorties were flown before Fifth Army on that day, but the next 5 days the Germans received no rest as our air forces flew 634 missions of 2,122 sorties against them—an average of 127 missions of 424 sorties per day. Weather greatly curtailed activities on the 27th, and the beginnings of mass surrenders thereafter made the use of the planes steadily less necessary; only 26 missions of 87 sorties were flown on 27 April, and during the last 5 days of the campaign the daily average was 36 missions of 127 sorties per day.

On 2 May, as a culmination of negotiations begun on 29 April, hostilities in Italy ceased when representatives of Lt. Gen. Heinrich von Vietinghoff, Commander in Chief of Army Group Southwest, signed terms of unconditional surrender in Caserta. The formal surrender in Italy was the beginning of the end for the Third Reich; 1 week later the war in Europe was concluded with complete victory for the United Nations. The grinding Italian campaign had been climaxed after 20 dreary months with a final smashing offensive which in 19 days reduced two formidable

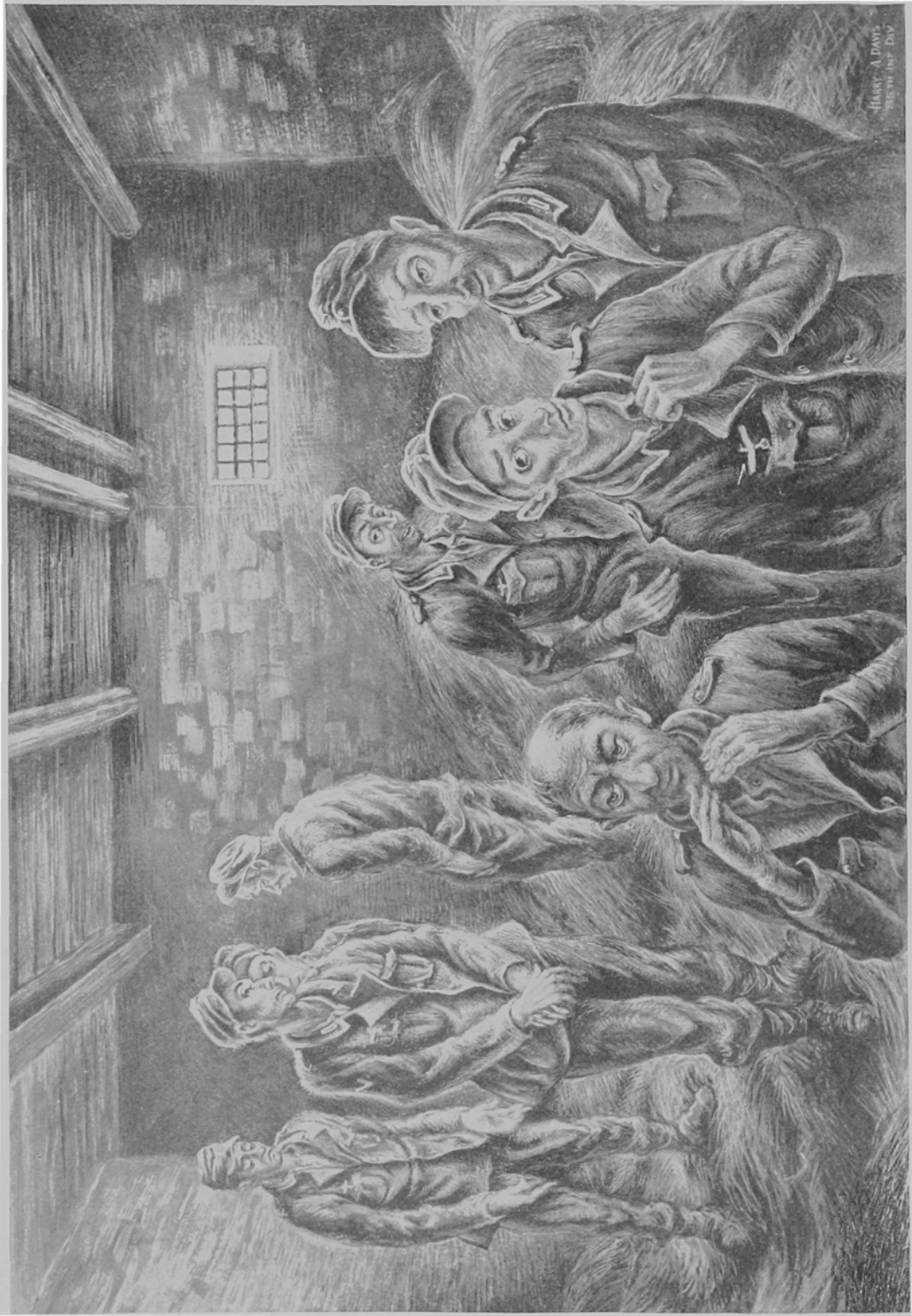
armies firmly entrenched in a mountain line into a fleeing rabble with neither defenses, organization, nor equipment. Once the mountain defense line south of the Po was broken the Germans never again stabilized their front. An already substantial number of prisoners taken in the mountains (some 7,000 by 21 April) was increased tremendously as our forces raced to the Po; the 349th Infantry (88th Division) alone took 8,000 prisoners. The drive to the Po also brought the capture of the commanding general of the 305th Grenadier Division, the first of a long series of captured generals who had lost control of their forces and found themselves surrounded by the enemy.

The prisoner toll continued to mount as the advance to Verona split the enemy forces and then locked them in Italy. The 1st and 4th Parachute, 26th Panzer, and 278th Grenadier Divisions after their escape across the Po offered sporadic although at times violent resistance east from the Adige. Nevertheless, attempts to hold open the escape routes to the mountains proved abortive as a result of the disorganization and lack of communication between higher echelons, and hard-driving II Corps units east of the Adige picked up several thousand prisoners a day from a wide variety of units. On the west the 1st Armored Division went even faster against weaker opposition. On 2 May, when hostilities ended, scattered forces were still fleeing in disorder to the foothills of the Alps. The extent of the enemy confusion is evident from captured division and corps march plans mapping crossing routes of retreat.

Although by the 25th, IV Corps could reasonably estimate that four divisions, the 65th Grenadier, 305th Grenadier, 94th Grenadier, and 8th Mountain, had been virtually destroyed before Fifth Army, no mass surrenders of any major units had yet occurred. Not until the 29th, as the routes out of Italy were blocked by our forces driving along the top of the Po Valley, did the avalanche begin with the surrender of the 148th Grenadier and the Italia Bersaglieri Divisions caught south of the Po between the 370th Infantry and partisans to their rear and the BEF and 34th Division to their front. That same day Lt. Gen. Max Pemsel, Chief of Staff of the Italian-German Ligurian Army of northwest Italy, signed surrender terms in the absence of the Army Commander, Marshal Graziani, who had been captured by partisans. Pemsel himself had been out of communication with his army for 48 hours. Graziani, who was released to IV Corps that night, confirmed the action of his chief of Staff and ordered his two corps commanders to lay down their arms. Maj. Gen. Curt Jahn of Corps Lombardy complied on the 30th, but the commander of LXXV Corps, Maj. Gen. Ernst Schlemmer, demurred because of a personal oath to Hitler. By the 30th, when General Meinhold surrendered Genoa to the partisans, General Schlemmer's corps, 40,000 strong, was the last of the German forces in northwest Italy. Schlemmer gathered his troops in a small area northeast of Turin, not for any offensive purposes, but to await the announcement of Hitler's death, which he might



Graves registration personnel with our dead . . . painted by Technical Sergeant Savo Radulovic



Prisoners, beaten and worn, realize their defeat . . . painted by Sergeant Harry A. Davis

have been expecting; the announcement came on the 1st and the general, also influenced by IV Corps preparations to smash him, took that as his cue to enter negotiations. That was the end of resistance in western Italy, and surrender throughout the peninsula was complete the next day.

In addition to great losses in equipment and prisoners, the Germans had suffered heavily in killed and wounded, first in their attempt to hold the mountain defenses, and particularly in the final debacle when enemy casualties were disproportionately high as a result of organizational collapse and the accompanying isolation of separate units still attempting either to delay our forces or make good their escape. Fifth Army had not, however, come off unscathed, especially in the grinding battle to dislodge the Germans from the mountains; in that period (14-20 April) casualties of all types totalled 4,198. In the pursuit phase (21 April-2 May) total Fifth Army casualties came to 2,219.

