

Spring of 1945, Britain's illustrious Eighth Army was pitted against elite German defenders in a climactic operation to secure the Po Valley.

The Final Offensive

Richard Doherty details the last big push to bring an end to the war in Italy.

The morning of April 9, 1945, was a warm, bright day in the historic Romagna region of northern Italy, but the quiet was soon to be shattered. The Allied soldiers occupying their frontline positions quietly withdrew some 500 yards into sheltered trenches, while overhead the squadrons of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces sortied aircraft, as per usual.

Everything was being done to assure the Germans that this was just another routine morning. That had all changed by the afternoon. Between 1.45 and 2.20pm, in an overwhelming display of power, 825 B-17 Fortress and B-24 Liberator heavy bombers, accompanied by 234 B-25 Mitchell light bombers, flew over the front to drop more than 1,500 tons of bombs, mostly 20lb fragmentation devices with 100lb weapons mixed in. Plastered all over German positions, the bombers' purpose was to disrupt, which they did effectively by destroying communication lines.

However, there was more for the airmen to do, with both American XXII Tactical

Air Command and the British Desert Air Force playing their part, launching a series of strikes on headquarters facilities, communication centres and defensive positions. Between those strikes, artillery pounded the Germans with huge barrages from almost 1,200 guns. Then, at 7.20pm, the fighter-bombers swooped again, but pulled up without firing. As they did so, spurts of flame streaked towards the German lines. The 'funnies' of 25th Armoured Engineer Brigade, Royal Engineers, had approached unnoticed.

Fire and Flame

The flame came from Churchill Crocodiles, tasked with targeting defensive positions on the forward slope of the Senio River's near floodbank, some of which remained in German hands. Wasps (flame projectors mounted to Universal Carriers) also took part, but had less success. Then the guns opened up once more, this time firing a protective barrage beyond the Senio. Eighth Army's infantry now advanced – having withdrawn in anticipation of the bombing, the infantry now had to cross the broken ground before reaching the floodbanks. ►

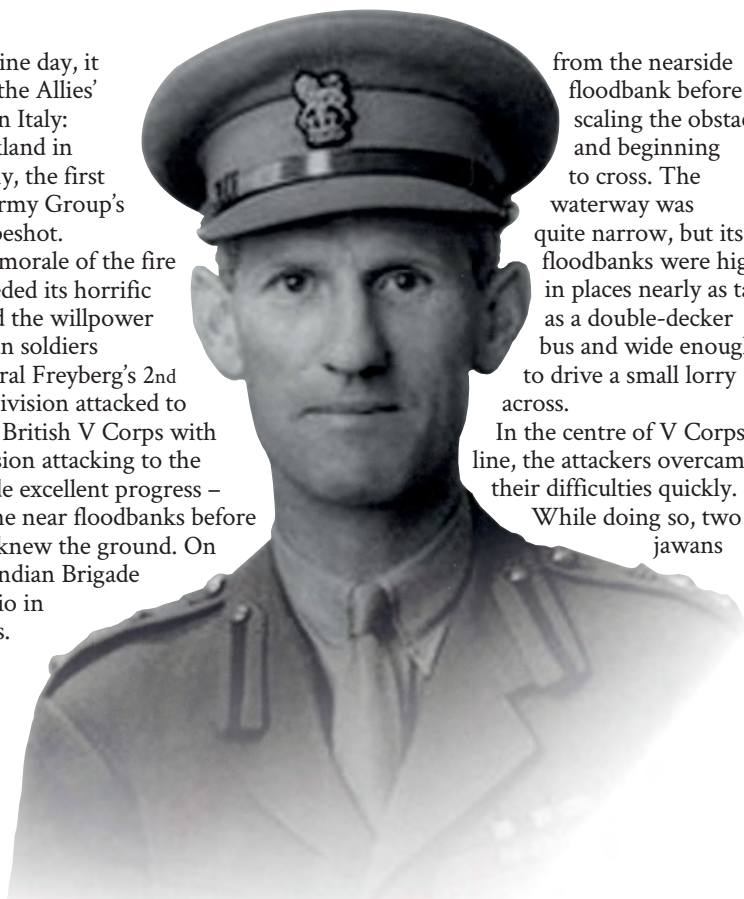
RIGHT: A SHERMAN IIAY (M4A1(76)W) PUSHES NORTH OF THE SANTERNO. ITALY WAS THE ONLY THEATRE IN WHICH THE BRITISH USED 76MM-ARMED SHERMANS. (GETTY)





Far from a routine day, it was D-Day for the Allies' final offensive in Italy: Operation Buckland in the Eighth Army, the first phase of 15th Army Group's Operation Grapeshot.

The effect on morale of the fire and flame exceeded its horrific physical toll and the willpower of many German soldiers collapsed. General Freyberg's 2nd New Zealand Division attacked to the left flank of British V Corps with 8th Indian Division attacking to the right. Both made excellent progress – they had held the near floodbanks before the assault and knew the ground. On the right, 19th Indian Brigade crossed the Senio in only 15 minutes. Elsewhere, the attackers encountered difficulties as they had to evict stubbornly entrenched Germans



from the nearside floodbank before scaling the obstacle and beginning to cross. The waterway was quite narrow, but its floodbanks were high, in places nearly as tall as a double-decker bus and wide enough to drive a small lorry across.

In the centre of V Corps' line, the attackers overcame their difficulties quickly.

While doing so, two jawans

(soldiers) of 21st Indian Brigade, Sepoy Namdeo Jadhav of 1st/5th Mahrattas and Sepoy Haidar Ali of 6th/13th Frontier Force Rifles, earned the Victoria Cross. Both showed outstanding courage and example in the face of stout opposition and enemy fire that felled many of their comrades. By dawn, 8th Indian Division had advanced a mile-and-a-half from the Senio. At some points along the river, the fighting had lasted all night.

Pre-Prepared Defences

By this point, divisional sappers had bridged the waterway, enabling the Churchill tanks of the North Irish Horse to cross in support, and two tank-carrying Bailey bridges were in place on 19th Brigade's front. With tanks and fighter-bombers providing close support, both 19th and 21st Brigades closed up on the next water obstacle, the Santerno, about four miles from the Senio. They reached this by dawn on April 11. The town of Lugo, around which the Senio flows, was liberated by the 1st Jaipur Infantry, and 17th Indian Brigade came forward to cross the Santerno.

Eighth Army's 'Funnies'

Included in preparations for Operation Grapeshot was the formation of an assault engineer brigade to provide support similar to that of 79th Armoured Division in northwest Europe. It was the brainchild of Eighth Army's Chief Engineer, Brigadier B T Godfrey-Fausset. Anticipating an "almost endless series of water obstacles," he decided that the army's sole assault engineer regiment wasn't enough and, accordingly, 25th Tank Brigade became 25th Armoured Engineer Brigade, Royal Engineers.

Commanded by Brigadier E W H Clarke, it included the 51st (Leeds Rifles) Royal Tank Regiment, 1st and 2nd Armoured Engineer Regiments and 631 Armoured Engineer Park Squadron. The Brigade received specialised training and included two 16-tank squadrons of Crocodile flamethrowers and a 15-tank squadron of mine-clearing flail tanks. Each armoured engineer regiment had three squadrons and deployed troops with bridge-laying and dozer tanks. One squadron was equipped with mobile Bailey bridges. The brigade's equipment was designed and built in Italy by local units.

Since the armour would be operating over the soft fields of Romagna, widened 'Platypus' tracks were fitted, while 9th Armoured Brigade was equipped with Kangaroo personnel carriers and LVT IVs – known as Buffalos but codenamed 'Fantail' in Italy. The Kangaroos were converted from redundant Shermans and Priests. DD tanks were also included in 9th Armoured's inventory, equipping 7th Queen's Own Hussars.





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German planners anticipated a withdrawal to the Santerno and further defensive positions had been pre-prepared. However, what German command hadn't been prepared for was the speed of the advance. No rest had been given to the Germans, who had been forced to retreat hurriedly and had scarcely taken over their new positions before the Indians and New Zealanders were upon them. The watercourse was an excellent point to mount effective resistance, but there weren't enough defenders. Those who had made it back had little time to ensure a cohesive defence.

The furious British advance was faster than expected. Although the New Zealanders had to cover five miles, they were on the Santerno as darkness fell on the 10th. Along the way they had picked

apart three battalions of the German 98. Infanterie-Division and inflicted serious casualties on three more. The Kiwi's captured more than 700 men and suffered fewer than 200 casualties. The Indians made similarly rapid progress, 17th Brigade having been called forward to the Santerno while Gruppo Cremona – a large force of Italians fighting alongside the Allies – was advancing from the Senio through Fusignano and on toward Alfonsine.

Allied commanders intended to afford the enemy no respite and hoped to harry and hustle them from each of their planned fallback lines. Along the Santerno, that intention quickly turned into reality. Two New Zealand formations, the 24th and 25th Battalions of 6th Brigade, secured a ▶

OPPOSITE: LT-GEN SIR RICHARD MCCREERY, EIGHTH ARMY'S LAST COMMANDER AND ARGUABLY THE FINEST BRITISH FIELD COMMANDER OF THE CAMPAIGN. A CAVALRYMAN, MCCREERY BELIEVED IN SPEED AND PREPARED CAREFULLY FOR THE FINAL OFFENSIVE ALONGSIDE HIS COUNTERPART, LUCIAN TRUSCOTT, ALSO A CAVALRYMAN. (COURTESY MCCREERY FAMILY)

TOP: CHURCHILLS WERE ADAPTED TO CARRY FASCINES, SUCH AS THESE AT GRANAROLO ON APRIL 9. OTHER CHURCHILLS OF 25TH ARMoured ENGINEER BRIGADE UNDERTOOK A NUMBER OF ASSAULT ENGINEER ROLES, SOME FITTED WITH THE 290MM PETARD OF THE AVRE.

LEFT: A CROCODILE FLAMETHROWER MOVES FORWARD. MOST CROCODILES AVAILABLE WERE OF 2 SQUADRON, 51ST (LEEDS RIFLES) TANK REGIMENT, 25TH ARMoured ENGINEER BRIGADE. THIS CROCODILE IS SUPPORTING INFANTRY OF 2ND NEW ZEALAND DIVISION IN THEIR INITIAL ASSAULT ON THE SENIO. (ALL IMAGES VIA AUTHOR UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED)



bridgehead that was extended rapidly by 5th Brigade's 28th (Maori) Battalion.

Enterprising Engineer

The work of the divisional engineers had been crucial to the New Zealanders' success. Freyberg's engineer commander, Colonel Frederick Hanson, who had played a major role at Cassino, pre-prepared bridging equipment and had it brought as far forward as possible so the structures could be built on site and rafted across the Senio. Others were partially assembled, launched on rafts and pushed across as sappers continued to build them. Hanson's men had five tank bridges stretching across the Senio by 6.30am on April 10, less than 12 hours after the operation began. The Indians had completed just one, the Poles none. The Enzedder repeated this effort on the Santerno.

When 17th Indian Brigade made contact with more resolute opposition, they met a doughty response. Both 1st/12th Frontier Force and 1st/5th Gurkhas faced difficulties

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and suffered many losses as they established their lodgements late on April 11. The two positions were linked together by the crossing of 1st Royal Fusiliers but, next morning, a German counter-attack with panzers and infantry looked as if it might oust the Fusiliers. Fortunately, the situation was stabilised later that morning when a Churchill Ark bridge was deployed, enabling 21st Tank Brigade to move

Churchill tanks over the river. The Fusiliers advanced on to secure what remained of the village of Mondaniga.

By nightfall on April 12, the New Zealanders were on the outskirts of Massa Lombarda, having fought hard all day. Poised just 14 miles south of Argenta, their advance also threatened Bologna. Such was the success achieved by Freyberg's men that it opened up wider possibilities for Eighth Army. However, they stuck to the original plan: a combined-arms attack through what was known as the Argenta Gap. The narrow piece of unflooded ground was identified by Lieutenant-General Sir Richard McCreery, Eighth Army's commander, as he flew over the terrain.

Meanwhile, on Polish II Corps' front, the 3rd Carpathian Division had crossed the Senio, striking at the boundary between German LXXXVI Corps' veteran 98. Infanterie-Division and the 26. Panzer-Division of I Fallschirmjäger Corps. LXXXVI Corps pulled back in the face of the attack, but 26. Panzer put up such stout resistance that the Poles had to fight for every yard and didn't reach the Santerno until late on

April 11, a full day behind Freyberg. The price was heavy – before even assaulting the Senio, the Poles had sustained casualties, including 160 men in one battalion caused by the bombing on the 9th. More resulted from mines and steadfast opposition as the Poles raced to the Senio.

Taken by Surprise

As Indians, New Zealanders and Poles advanced, soldiers of 56th (London) Division, the Black Cats, launched 80 LVTs carrying two battalions of the 169th (Queen's) Brigade. Crewed by men of 27th Lancers and the US 755th Tank Battalion, the amphibious craft took the 2/5th and 2/6th Queen's across the mosquito-infested Lake Comacchio toward the villages of Menate and Longastrino. The settlements were on the edge of a large area that the Germans deliberately flooded to prevent Allied incursions. As a result, the defenders were taken by surprise as the craft appeared out of a smokescreen and emerged from the mud, a platoon debussing from each. Some 300 light infantrymen of 42. Jäger-Division were taken prisoner.

What the Queensmen had done was then exploited by 40th (RM) Commando as they advanced towards Menate and a key bridge north of the village. Wading along a ditch, the marines achieved their objective, but with considerable losses as the Germans were recovering their equilibrium. The Black Cats were to co-ordinate their next move with elements of the 78th (Battleaxe) Division. This force was striking north



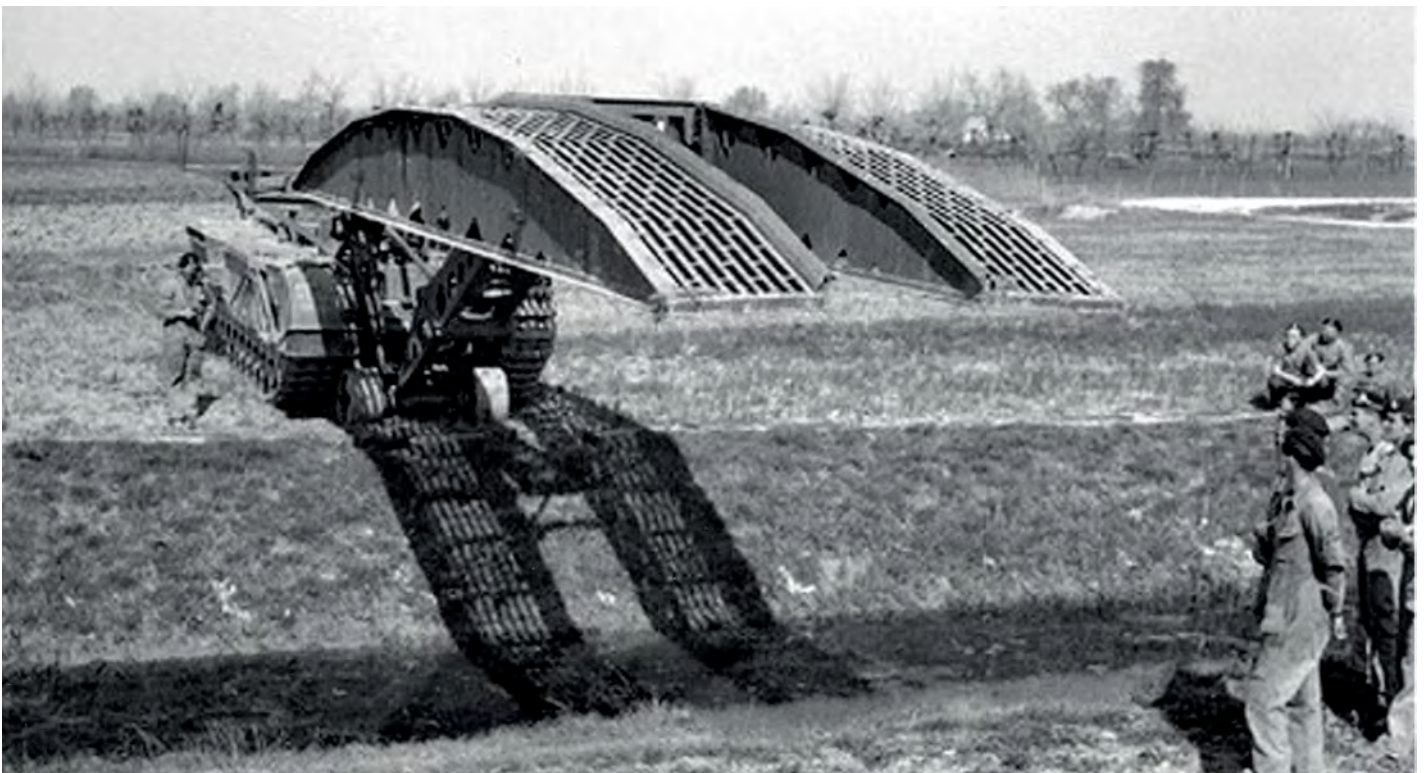
ABOVE: BRITISH SHERMANS, INFANTRY, AND STRETCHER BEARERS DURING A BRIEF PAUSE IN THE BIG PUSH NORTH. (KEYSTONE/TOPFOTO)

towards Bastia to seize the bridge over the Reno, while the 56th would attack west. Using the 'line of fewest water obstacles', 78th Division's objectives were to seize important canal crossings, as each captured bridge meant serious time savings.

While 11th Brigade held a firm line, 36th and 38th (Irish) Brigades married with their supporting armour in ►

OPPOSITE: M10C 'ACHILLIES' TANK DESTROYERS AND INFANTRY MOVE THROUGH FERRARA TO THE PO RIVER, JUST A COUPLE OF MILES NORTH. (TOPFOTO)

BELOW: DURING THE PREPARATORY PHASE OF OPERATION GRAPESHOT, AN ARK BRIDGE-LAYER GIVES A DEMONSTRATION OF ITS CAPABILITIES AT MEZZANO.



Planning Grapeshot

The 'great final victory' resulted from outstanding co-operation between two armies, strategic and tactical air forces and naval forces. The commanders, Sir Richard McCreery of Eighth Army and Lucian K Truscott Jr of Fifth Army, worked in harmony to plan the offensive and build up the forces and resources.

General Mark Clark, who had succeeded Field Marshal Alexander as 15th Army Group commander, had no desire to see Eighth Army play a major role. However, McCreery and Truscott sidelined Clark, presenting him with a *fait accompli*. They finessed their plans to smash through German lines and destroy both enemy armies on the Lombardy Plain. Eighth Army's campaign was to begin on April 9 with Operation Buckland, followed by Fifth Army's Operation Craftsman a few days later. Shaping operations began on April 1 – Easter Sunday – when the spit between the inland Lake Comáchio and the coast were seized in Operations Roast and Fry.

Posthumous VCs were earned by Cpl Thomas Hunter, 43 (RM) Commando, and Major Anders Lassen, 'M' Squadron, SBS. On the left flank, American troops undertook similar operations in which three Medals of Honor were earned, two posthumously. In the meantime, trench warfare continued along the Senio, a narrow waterway flanked by floodbanks. In places, just yards separated opposing forces. German troops held positions on both sides of the river, and the height of the floodbanks led to some British soldiers using their PIATs as improvised mortars.



ABOVE: A CHURCHILL OF THE NORTH IRISH HORSE CARRYING INFANTRYMEN FROM THE PALESTINE REGIMENT OF THE JEWISH BRIGADE, NEAR ALFONSINE.

BELOW: AN EXAMPLE OF THE WORK UNDERTAKEN BY THE ENGINEERS TO KEEP EIGHTH ARMY MOVING, THIS TIME AT THE RENO.

OPPOSITE: INFANTRY OF 5TH NORTHAMPTONSHIRE REGIMENT, 78TH DIVISION, IN THE RUINS OF ARGENTA. THE TOWN HAD BEEN ALMOST COMPLETELY DESTROYED DUE TO ITS CRITICAL LOCATION DURING EIGHTH ARMY'S FINAL OFFENSIVE.



'wedding' areas before stepping off. The Irish Brigade, under Brigadier Pat Scott, was assigned the critical role of breaking out and exploiting. To achieve this, they were heavily reinforced. The composition of the force was not far off that of a full armoured division. Units that were Scott's to command included a breakout force of two complete battlegroups, a mobile force – dubbed the Kangaroo Army – which would exploit gains, and a reserve.

Scott's breakout force included the 2nd Royal Inniskilling and 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers, both with a squadron of Shermans from the 2nd Dragoon Guards (Queen's Bays), a machine gun platoon of 1st Kensingtons Battalion, and sapper and recce parties. The Inniskilling battlegroup also included a Crocodile squadron from 51st Royal Tank Regiment, while the Irish Fusilier group deployed a scissors bridge. Both fusilier battalions were battle-hardened, having been fighting since France in 1940. Although H-Hour was delayed by traffic congestion, they were able to move off at 6.30am on April 13. In support were Royal Artillery field regiments. By then, 36th Brigade had struck towards San Patrizio and Conselice on the left to create the room to manoeuvre and keep the Germans off-balance.

Slow And Stubborn Fighting

Although 36th Brigade's attacks disturbed the equilibrium, there was still 'slow and stubborn' fighting as 78th Division moved out through 8th Indian. For the German commanders, the situation was nightmarish. They had planned a series of organised withdrawals through a network

of defensive lines – including the grandly named Dschingis (Genghis) Khan Line – to the River Po, which they considered too formidable an obstacle to be breached. However, pressure on the ground from hard-fighting and fast-moving Allied units, coupled with continual harassment from the air, made such withdrawals harder to execute. As the two fusilier battlegroups opened the way to Argenta, ready for the Kangaroo Army, 56th Division thrust toward Argenta from the Menate/Longastrino area, pushing on the edges of the inundated land.

That bold stroke was not the only additional pressure on German forces. Gruppo Cremona was advancing along Highway 16 against tough opposition, while 8th Indian Division had destroyed two battalions of the 362. Infanterie-Division's 1059. Infanterie-Regiment. The New Zealanders continued to set the pace and were advancing to the Sillaro river – the Paula Line. Elsewhere, the Jewish Brigade's

3rd Palestine Regiment liberated Cuffiano before linking with another Italian force, Gruppo Friuli, to advance on Monte Ghebbio, but only light opposition was met. Gruppo Folgore was also in action, liberating Tossignano.

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The force included 2nd Armoured Brigade's HQ contingent, the tanks of 9th Lancers, Kangaroo armoured personnel carriers manned by 4th Hussars, 'Z' Self-Propelled Troop, 209th Anti-Tank Battery, a sapper detachment and the 2nd Battalion, London Irish Rifles, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel 'Bala' Bredin. Also available were mine-clearing Sherman Crabs, Sherman dozers, Ark bridge-layers and Crocodiles. The force's first encounter with the enemy was against the Nashorns of Schwere Panzerjäger-Abteilung 525. At full strength, this battalion would have had 45 of the formidable tank destroyers that, while lightly armoured, had powerful 8.8cm guns. However, they could not prevent the Kangaroo Army from capturing two bridges over the Canale dei Molini before moving onto Conselice.

The Germans were under increasing pressure. The New Zealanders had pushed 278. Volksgrenadier Division to the Paula Line and prepared to hustle them out ▶





its element of the overall plan. On that day, Eighth Army liberated Bastia. The next stage was to break through the Argenta Gap, but speed was vital. The Germans had deployed a regiment of 29. Panzergrenadier Division between Bando and Argenta to block the British, so the pressure for 56th and 78th Divisions to close the pincer was on.

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while the Jewish Brigade and the Italian Gruppi continued their advances. Although Polish II Corps had been delayed by numerous spirited counter-attacks launched by Fallschirmjäger, they nevertheless liberated Castel Bolognese and Castelnuovo. From Germany, high command ordered that no ground should be given up unless penetrated by the enemy but, in the field, 10. Armee commander General Traugott Herr thought otherwise and desperately tried to reposition his forces and straighten out his line to better repel the advancing Allies.

Doomed by the Führer

Although German resistance led to setbacks, by April 13 the British Eighth Army had taken all the objectives set by General McCreery. The Kangaroo Army pushed ahead, its infantry and tanks working in close harmony with airpower to unsettle the enemy at every opportunity. With 56th Division eating into Argenta's defences, 78th Division's Kangaroo Army moving towards the town from the south, the Poles pushing hard on their front and the New Zealanders still advancing inexorably forward, the German commander in Italy, General Heinrich von Vietinghoff, appealed to Hitler to withdraw his forces. His request was rejected.

Army Group C was doomed by the intransigence of its supreme commander, the Führer, as both its 10. and 14. Armees suffered assault after assault. On the 14th, the American general Lucian Truscott's Fifth Army launched Operation Craftsman,



Continued German resistance impeded the Kangaroo Army, holding it at the Reno river, but the situation was eased when Lieutenant-General Keightley, commander of V Corps, deployed 11th Brigade across the river to link up with Gruppo Cremona. Both Whitfield and Arbuthnott, GOCs of 56th and 78th Divisions, adapted their plans so that, after some sharp fighting, the advance resumed. Scott's two fusilier battalions moved ahead, 2nd Inniskillings seizing objectives beyond Argenta and the Irish advancing almost to the Scolo Catenacci.

Adding to the impetus, 2nd Commando Brigade cleared the ground northwest of Argenta while the 5th Northhamptons of 11th Brigade fought their way into the town itself, supported by Churchill tanks and Crocodiles. German counter-attacks were beaten back and 36th Brigade passed through friendly positions to continue the advance. The Kangaroo Army once again surged forward, seizing two bridges and capturing four panzers, 20 large artillery pieces and taking 455 prisoners. Veteran



soldier Gregory Blaxland, a historian of the campaign, considered this "a great achievement, far from lightly won, gained under the command of two officers who had fought the Germans back in 1940 and had suffered wounds and earned decorations at regular intervals ever since – Price of the 9th Lancers and 'Bala' Bredin of the London Irish Rifles."

Determined Opposition

Meanwhile, US Fifth Army was pushing forward, the pace being set by 10th Mountain Division. On Eighth Army's front, the Poles liberated Imola and finally drew level with the indefatigable New Zealanders, who then passed to the command of Lieutenant-General Sir John Harding's XIII Corps. Their odyssey was not yet over.

It was time to unleash Eighth Army's reserve: 6th Armoured Division, placed under V Corps on April 18. Major-General 'Nap' Murray's battlegroups passed 78th Division the next day, finding the 'Argenta Gap' to be little wider than a Sherman. With 8th Indian Division providing protection and the 56th and 78th advancing north towards Ferrara and the River Po, 6th Armoured was presented with a rare opportunity for armoured formations in the Italian campaign and performed with vigour.

In the days that followed, its three battlegroups (16th/5th Lancers/1st King's Royal Rifle Corps, 17th/21st Lancers/7th Rifle Brigade and 2nd Lothians and Border Horse/2nd Rifle Brigade) overcame

determined opposition in difficult terrain. Close air support came from fighter-bombers, held in cab ranks, standing by until directed either an observation aircraft or ground teams. It was a tricky assault. The ground strongly favoured the Germans, awaiting the tanks in concealed positions with Panzerfausts, panzers and heavy anti-tank guns. Lieutenant-Colonel Val French Blake, commander of the 17th/21st Lancers, recalled: "The Air OP plane was ahead of us and spotted a tank which was destroyed by the cab rank of a specially trained Mustang squadron." Murray's division benefitted from the support of an additional infantry brigade, 24th Guards. This had become standard practice within armoured divisions operating in Italy.

It was at the aptly named village of Finale Nell'Emilia in Modena that the British Eighth and US Fifth Armies made their junction. The leading Fifth Army formation met by 6th Armoured Division was 6th (South African) Armoured Division. But there was tragedy in those final hours. Lieutenant-Colonel John Hope, DSO MC & Bar, the gallant CO of 1st King's ►

ABOVE: LVTS, CODENAMED 'FANTAILS' IN ITALY, WERE USED TO SURPRISE THE GERMANS. ELEMENTS OF 56TH DIVISION CROSSED LAKE COMACCHIO IN US-MANNED LVTS, THE ONLY US TROOPS TO OPERATE UNDER EIGHTH ARMY. THIS LVT CARRIES US INFANTRY ACROSS THE PO.

MAIN: AN M10 OF THE 701ST TANK DESTROYER BATTALION ADVANCES IN SUPPORT OF 10TH MOUNTAIN DIVISION, AS IT PUSHES NORTH FROM PORETTA TOWARD THE PO. (TOPFOTO)

OPPOSITE TOP: GENERAL DER PANZERTRUPPE FRIDOLIN VON SENGER UND ETTERLIN SURRENDERS GERMAN FORCES IN ITALY AND WEST AUSTRIA TO GENERAL CLARK AND LT-GENS TRUSCOTT AND MCCREERY. (TOPFOTO)



BELOW RIGHT: INFANTRY, LIKELY OF THE 2ND LANCASHIRE FUSILIERS, 78TH DIVISION, RIDE FORWARD FROM ARGENTA ON A 6TH ARMoured DIVISION SHERMAN. IN THE WORDS OF THE DIVISIONAL COMMANDER, THE 'ARGENTA GAP' HAD BEEN NO WIDER THAN A SHERMAN.

BELOW: CHURCHILL TANKS, THE LEAD VEHICLE WITH A PETARD, ADVANCE TOWARD THE SANTERNO RIVER. THEY PASS A GROUP OF GERMAN PRISONERS MARCHING TO THE ALLIED REAR. (MONDADORI/GETTY)

Royal Rifles, was shot dead as he conferred with the CO of 16th/5th Lancers, while Cpl Stanley Waring, a tank commander who went to Hope's aid, was also killed. Hope was one of the few veterans of the original Eighth Army to have survived to that point.

Coveted Goal

The Germans were being harried towards the Po, where they had promised a bloody defeat for the Allies. Instead, it was their armies that were destroyed. German equipment littered the ground in fields of debris close to the great river. That once formidable obstacle was crossed by Sherman DD tanks, but even nature appeared to be on the side of the British, as during the last outing for the swimming Shermans, there was little water in the river. Bologna, which US general Mark Clark had long coveted, fell to Italian

partisans who evicted the German garrison. Clark, 15th Army Group's commander, allowed the Poles to enter the city first. He even held a victory parade.

What of the New Zealanders? They were racing into northeast Italy towards Trieste. Their task was to prevent the Yugoslavs taking the city, in which they succeeded. It was a fitting end to a very long war for 2nd New Zealand Division. The formation had arrived in North Africa in 1940 and first saw action in Greece in 1941. Since then, it had fought in Crete and throughout North Africa and Italy, becoming the most experienced Allied formation in the Mediterranean.

All German forces in Italy capitulated on May 2, two days before the final surrender of Germany. The official surrender took place at Caserta Palace, at the headquarters of Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander, the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean. Of 15th Army Group's victory, Winston Churchill wrote: "This great final victory in Italy will long stand in history as one of the most famous episodes of the Second World War."

Eighth Army's final offensive proved to be the finest example of manoeuvre warfare conducted by the Western Allies in the conflict. It deserved to be remembered and yet, contrary to Churchill's comment, it has been all but forgotten. ●

Who Served?

Neither British Eighth nor US Fifth Armies were homogenous formations. The former included personnel from across the Commonwealth and Empire, as well as from other Allied nations. In addition to British units, there were soldiers from India, Italy, Nepal, New Zealand, Palestine, Poland, Cyprus and Mauritius. Fifth Army included American, Brazilian, British, Italian, Rhodesian and South African personnel. The air forces increased the polyglot nature of Allied forces in Italy with Australians, Canadians and French crew in their ranks.

