**The North Irish Horse Battle Reports**

**The Attack on Incontro**

8th August 1944

 B Squadron laagured for the night, 7th-8th August, except for No. 1 Troop which was separated from the remainder of the Squadron by an impassible cliff. At 0500 hours on the 8th, Nos. 4 and 5 Troops, two tanks of H.Q. Fighting Troop, a F.O.O. tank and the Reconnaissance Troop Shermans moved out of harbour in that order. The Troops were in position by 0545 hours, No. 4 Troop on a ridge 150 yards north of Point 516 ; No. 5 Troop, the F.O.O. tank and close support tank on Point 516, the Shermans on Point 508 and No. 1 Troop on their left.

Twelve enemy dead were found subsequently in the area where the tank fire had been directed. Heavy firing was heard from the direction of the objective as soon as the Troops were in position and when it was confirmed that our infantry were only as far as the western wall of the monastery, No. 5 Troop quickly engaged likely enemy positions with 75 mm. H.E. and the close support tank with the 3-in. Howitzer. The F.O.O. and other tank commanders spotted what they thought was a flash of a self-propelled gun from the north east and high velocity shells landed in the area. All tanks then moved on to the western slopes of the ridge, but spas­modic shelling by medium guns was experienced throughout the day. The infantry re-formed and put in a second attack along the southern wall. When they had covered about half the distance the forward tank Troops observed the enemy forming up for a counter-attack along the south eastern wall. As soon as it was confirmed that these were not our own troops, devastating fire was opened by No. 5 Troop with 75 mm. H.E. and by Nos. I and 4 Troops with machine-gun and 6-pounder H.E. The counter-attack dispersed. The enemy counter-attack force numbered about thirty. The fire brought down by the tanks was at one place only fifty yards ahead of our own infantry. This was possible due to the excellent infantry communications and the tank liaison officer at the infantry battalion Headquarters, being able to transmit these positions to all tanks on the tank wireless net

An enemy machine-gun nest was reported in the monastery tower and this was rapidly demolished by armoured piercing fire from all the forward tank Troops. A fresh infantry plan was then made for the third Company to attack at 1050 hours and, for five minutes before this attack was launched, further concentra­tions of H.E. and machine-gun fire from the tanks were put down along the south eastern wall. The Commanding Officer of the D.C.L.I, then asked that once the Company attack was launched, a Troop should try and get forward to Incontro. Major Mackean ordered Lieut. Foott to make a reconnaissance on foot for a route down the hill. Lieut. Foott reported that he had found a way but that the going was bad and that his Troop would be very exposed to the right. Major Mackean then went down person­ally on foot. These route reconnaissances were by no means easy as all had to be done on a forward slope which was under continuous shell fire and in full view of the enemy. Major Mackean discovered a way which gave defilade from the right. Lieut. Foott was then ordered to make the descent and then the ascent to Incontro. Lieut. Foott manoeuvred his Troop down an appalling slope and then, covered by No. 5 Troop on the forward ridge of Point 516 and No. 2 Troop from the ridge behind, he worked his way up the slopes of the objective to the walls of the monastery. About this time the F.O.O., Captain Sedgwick, was wounded in the face by a mortar shell while out of his tank.
No. 2 Troop then passed through No. 5 Troop and, following No. 4 Troop tracks, joined them on the objective. Almost as soon as they had arrived, Lieut. Behr and Tpr. Fuller were wounded by shell fire whilst out of their tanks. It was decided to evacuate Tpr. Fuller back in the tank the way they had come but in spite of the guiding by Sjt. Verso of No. 5 Troop, they went off their course and ran into a party of Germans armed with a Bazooka. Sjt. Verso, who was on the outside of the tank at the time and Cpl. Reynolds who was commanding it, were wounded by the projectile which passed between their heads. Sjt. Verso jumped off the tank and took cover. Cpl. Reynolds fell into the turret and L. Cpl. Gault, the driver, closed down, and with the aid of Troopers Johnson and Fuller, fired the 75 mm., traversed the turret and got the front Besa into action. He then got the tank going and took it up the hill and rejoined his Troop. Shortly after this Tpr. Martin, J., was wounded by shell fragments while outside his tank.

As a result of this attack three enemy officers and sixty-nine other ranks were taken prisoner and twenty dead counted in the monastery area. The capture of this feature forced the enemy to leave all their positions south of the river Arno.

At 1800 hours Major Mackean and Capt. Sidebottom were ordered to return to Regimental Headquarters and then, with the Commanding Officer, went to the Headquarters of the 2nd Surreys to plan for an attack on Point 437.

9th August 1944

The 2nd Surreys put in their attack with B Squadron ready to support, but the enemy had gone with few exceptions, and the tanks had only one target of twelve fleeing Germans.

The 4th British Infantry Division was now drawn into army reserve and the Regiment was left to concentrate south of Florence. Many of us had looked down upon this city from the southern hills but none of us had an opportunity of a closer inspection for many weeks to come. After three days of rest we were on the road again, this time southward-bound for Perugia. It soon became apparent that very little time would elapse before we must be ready for further operations. Everyone buckled to and work on the tanks went on at high speed during the few days that were allowed us. The Battle Report for the period 19th August to 4th September reads as follows:

15th August 1944

Orders were received that the 25th Army Tank Brigade would come under command of the 46th British Infantry Division with N.I.H. affiliated to the 128th Infantry Brigade. The Commanding Officer contacted Brigadier D. A. Kendrew, D.S.O., on the 16th August.

17th August - The tanks and wheeled vehicles left Perugia, the former on transporters, and by the 18th the Regiment had concentrated in the area of Serra Di Conti.

The period 19th to 25th August was spent in making recon­naissances of tank tracks and awaiting for the area south of the river Metauro to be cleared up.

25th August - The tanks were concentrated in the area of Fratte Rosa the 128th Infantry Brigade concentrated on the forward slope going down to the river Metauro. The plan was for the 2nd Hamps. to cross the river at 2300 hours and that A Squadron should move from Fratte Rosa at the same hour and cross the river at 0400 hours, 26th August.

26th August 1944

 A Squadron reached the river without incident but found that the approach the river would not bear the weight of Churchill tanks and a fresh crossing had to be found. A Squadron was across by 0620 hours and joined the 2nd Hamps. at Montefelcino. The problem now for the tanks was to find a crossing of the wadi just ahead. Foot reconnaissance was immediately got under way but it was 1730 hours before a crossing was found. It was too late for the infantry to reach this flank to attack with tanks so it was arranged that the 1st-4th Hamps. should attack Monte San Bartolo.

27th August 1944

The 1st-4th Hamps. captured the feature during the night. B Squadron crossed the wadi at dawn and supported 1st-4th Hamps. from the lower slopes of Monte San Bartolo. Several houses in the area were still giving the 1st-4th Hamps. trouble and these were successfully shot up by B Squadron.

A Squadron now passed through to support the 2nd Hamps. on to a road junction. It was hoped to keep A Squadron on the high ground, but, as the going was slow, No. 1 Troop was detached to move along the road with the infantry. This Troop, No.3, successfully got round two road craters but was eventually held up by a big blow. As progress in the hills was slow the Commanding Officer ordered the remainder of the Squadron down to the road. A bulldozer was rushed up and three more blows filled in before the Squadron could reach the road junction. The 2nd Hamps were held up by enemy holding the foothills of Monte Albullo. A quick plan was made. A Squadron shot up the whole area, and the 2nd Hamps captured the feature by 2100 hours.

28th August 1944

B Squadron passed through to support the 1st-4th Hamps to Montegaudio. Further bulldozing was required to get the tanks along the road. The village was found to be occupied by the enemy and street fighting ensued. About thirty prisoners were taken. By 1800 hours the village was clear but the enemy still held Point 414. The infantry found they were unable to advance owing to mortaring, so Nos.1 and 4 Troops advanced supported by Nos.2 and 5 Troops. Two machine-gun posts were knocked out on the way but as the infantry were still unable to come up the tanks withdrew at last light.

29th August 1944

The 5th Hampshires advanced to Monte Buseto during the night of 28th-29th August. C Squadron were to attempt to cross the watershed to this hill at first light. The going proved very bad but two tanks made the trip. The Commanding Officer suggested that the remainder of the Squadron move round by Ripe, via the road junction to Serra Di Enga. Brigadier Kendrew agreed and the Squadron were in the process of moving when orders were received that N.I.H. were to return and come under command of 25th Army Tank Brigade.

30th August 1944

At 0500 hours the Brigadier, 128th Infantry Brigade, asked the Commanding Officer to accompany him to Colbordolo to make a reconnaissance. It was clear that the Monte Gridolfo feature would have to be taken before tanks or infantry could move across the lower slopes. The Commanding Officer returned to Monte Grosso where the whole Regiment had concentrated the prevoius evening, with a promise of twenty-four hours' rest and maintenance.
At 1130 hours the Commanding Officer was ordered to an opera­tion group at Colbordolo. Here he was informed that the 2nd Hamps. were to cross the river Foglia at 1400 hours on this day and Brigadier Kendrew asked for tank support.

The Commanding Officer explained that the tanks were stripped for maintenance but that he would do his utmost to get up tanks. The Recon­naissance Troop was ordered to move in one hour's time. Traffic on the road was considerable and the tanks were much delayed. In view of the late hour Brigadier Kendrew decided that he would not use the tanks till the following morning. At 1700 hours orders were received for the Regiment to concentrate in the Ripe area and to revert to command of 25th Army Tank Brigade again. A plan was now made for Brigadier Kendrew tcommand a column of the Divisional Reconnaissance Regiment, the 5th Hamps. and the 142nd Regiment R.A.C. to attempt to burst round the lower slopes of Monte Gridolfo. The Commanding Officer offered the use of the Reconnaissance Troop and the armoured “Gin Box."

31st August 1944

At 0500 hours orders were received that N.I.H. were to come under command of the 128th Infantry Brigade again. The Commanding Officer went forward to Colbordolo and agreed that A Squadron should be passed across the river, followed by B Squadron. A Sherman-dozer was required to make good a crossing. A Squadron crossed and in attempting to make the direct ascent to Monte Le Vecchie encountered a minefield. The Commanding Officer then ordered that the Squadron advance by road. The road up to Monte Le Vecchie proved to be mined and sappers were rushed up to deal with this. A Squadron reported a self-propelled gun firing. It was im­possible to leave the road and as it was a steep uphill climb no advance was possible. The Commanding Officer was now ordered to concentrate two Squadrons in the area.

1st September 1944

A Squadron was ordered to support the advance of the 5th Hamps. to Point 331 and also to help the 1st-4th Hamps. mop up in the area of Monte Gridolfo. These two tasks were successfully fulfilled. At about 1200 hours self-propelled guns were seen approaching Monte Gridolfo from the east and moving south on Meleto. Five self-propelled guns were seen to enter this area. One was engaged at long range by Major R. J. Griffith, M.C. Artillery concentrations were brought down on the area and no movement was seen till late that evening when one self-propelled gun came out on the road and was shot up and knocked out by Lieut. D. Hunt's Troop. At about 1400 hours the 5th Hamps. reported an S.P. in Meleto. This gun was engaged by A Squadron and driven off. A Squadron remained in observation for the remainder of the day in the area of Points 374 and 331.

2nd September 1944

Orders were received that N.I.H. was to come under command of the 138th Infantry Brigade. The Regiment concentrated and refuelled in the area of Monte Busco. Brigadier Harding gave out his orders at 2100 hours and the plan was laid on for the 2nd-4th King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry to form a bridgehead over the river Ventena and the 6th Yorkshire and Lancashires, supported by C Squadron, were to advance through them and form a bridgehead over the river Conca, taking the high ground beyond Morciano. One Troop was to follow the infantry during moonlight and to be in a position to support them forward on to Morciano, San Andrea and the right. No. 2 Troop was detailed for this duty and the remainder of the Squadron were to follow at first light. A section of the R.Es. was attached to No. 2 Troop, who made their way down the road through the 2nd-4th K.O.Y.L.I. and opened up on enemy in the area of Morciano at 0600 hours the next morning.

3rd September 1944

About 0500 hours the remainder of C Squadron moved forward and at 0800 hours No. 3 Troop was ordered to cross the Conca, supported by Nos. 2 and 4 Troops on the right and left respectively. The tanks reached the crossing which was overlooked by the high ground beyond and were shot at by a self-propelled gun from the area of a cemetery. The infantry nearby were heavily "Stonked” and quite unable to advance.

Meantime No. 3 Troop, consisting of two tanks plus one from No. 1 Troop, had lost two tanks and artillery fire was called for from the forward observation officer to be brought down on the cemetery. No. 4 Troop was now moved up to the left of No. 2 Troop into a support position but in the process the self- propelled gun knocked out one tank and pinned the other two down.

Fresh plans had now to be made and it was decided to bring a heavy artillery concentration down on the cemetery and to smoke the right flank. Two companies were to advance on to the high ground across the river Conca followed by the remaining tanks, now numbering only five. All went well and the infantry, closely followed by the tanks, reached the objective.
On the right, B Squadron advanced across the river Conca at 1200 hours in support of the 2nd Hamps. The advance continued to Point 167 and enemy positions on the ridges to the north-east and north-west were engaged. Some enemy on Point 143 were next shot up and the Squadrons remained in forward defence lines in a counter-attack role for the night.
Meanwhile, on the left, A Squadron took over from C Squadron and supported the 6th York and Lanes into San Clemente and the ridge to the north-west. As the sun got low, self-propelled gunfire was opened on A Squadron from Cevelobatte. A Squadron suffered no damage.

4th September 1944

On the right B Squadron supported the 1st-4th Hamps on to a road junction. Enemy self-propelled guns opened fire from the Coriano ridge. Capt. W. R. Hern's tank was hit, and all members of the crew, bar him, were wounded. On the left A Squadron were ordered to support a Squadron of the Reconnaissance Regiment in an attack on Coriano. This was later changed to an attack on San Savino. As this attack was about to take place the Commanding Officer was asked to form a Churchill firm base through which the 1st British Armoured Division would pass. A Squadron was ordered to form the base on the ridge from Point 151 to Point 174. As the 10th Hussars passed through an enemy tank was observed on the Coriano ridge and knocked out by No. 3 Troop. Three more tanks were engaged. One more was knocked out and the other two got away, though one was hit.

B and A Squadrons rallied close behind the San Clemente feature for the night. The "Intention" paragraph of the 46th British Infantry Division's Operation Order of the 25th August, 1944, read as follows:

” 46th DIVISION WILL BREAK THE GOTHIC LINE”.

In the period between the 25th August and the 4th September this intention was achieved. When we reached Colbordolo and looked down on, and across, the river Foglia to Monte Gridolfo, it must be confessed the situation looked anything but pleasant. All houses had been razed to the ground, trees and vines felled and avenues prepared between extensive minefields for a hail of machine-gun fire. Panther turrets were suspected and were later found to be there, though not completely ready for action. The assault across the river Foglia and up the bare slopes beyond appeared suicidal, but the speed of our advance had been such that the enemy had not been able to man this line in sufficient strength and so we passed through. The 128th Infantry Brigade, with which we were co-operating, captured first of all Monte Bardolo, the highest ground on our front between the rivers Metauro and Foglia and then Monte Gridolfo, the most eastern strongpoint of the Gothic Line.

At the end of this period Major-General J. L. I. Hawkesworth, C.B., C.B.E , D.S.O., issued the following special order:

*“In one week's fighting we have advanced 25 miles and have broken the Gothic Line.*

*We have defeated the greater part of two German divisions, capturing prisoners and inflicting upon the enemy casualties which cannot be less than 3,000. This is a remarkable achievement and a notable victory. The Army Commander and the Corps Commander have both asked me to tell you they consider the performance of the Division is marvellous. They have asked me to congratulate and thank you.*

*For security reasons it is inadvisable for me to tell you here the exact total of casualties incurred. The total is, however, smaller than we have incurred in any comparable battle. The fatigue you have borne so patiently and cheerfully has not been in vain: your sweat has saved much blood.*

*This victory has been won by your gallantry and selfless and untiring devotion to duty. A well-nigh intolerable strain has, at times, been imposed upon all fighting Troops and services. I know of no operation in which such a strain has been imposed upon the services of the Division, and they have met it nobly. The infantry, so ably supported by the artillery, tanks and Royal Engineers, have shown a gallantry, skill and endurance greater than ever before.*

*You have all shown that not only have you the tools to finish the job, you have, what is infinitely more important, the skill and the courage to use them. We will finish the job soon.”*

(Signed) J. L. I. Hawkesworth, Maj.-Gen.

A paragraph of the 128th Infantry Brigade's account of the assault on the
Gothic Line reads as follows:

*“A special tribute must be paid to Squadrons of the N.I.H. Day after day their Churchills forced positions and supported our infantry over appalling tank country. Undaunted, Squadron leaders on foot led their tanks up seemingly impossible slopes. One tank actually slipped over and crashed two hundred feet down into a ravine, having turned over six times in its descent.”*

Once more we had a short spell out of the line, but there was much work to do on the tanks. It was not long before we had news that we should be at it again and we were all delighted to hear that we were to return to our old friends, the 28th Infantry Brigade of the 4th British Infantry Division and the following battle report was submitted, covering the period 19th September to 25th Sep­tember, 1944:

After making a firm base on the Coriano and San Savino ridges the 1st British Armoured Division was passed through. Unfortunately Coriano proved a tougher proposition than expected and 1st British Armoured Division was held up. N.I.H. was concentrated just east of San G10vani and much needed maintenance carried out.

12th September 1944

The 25th Army Tank Brigade was put under command of 4th British Infantry Division, under 1st Canadian Corps, with N.I.H. under command of the 28th Infantry Brigade. The 5th Canadian Armoured Division was to take Coriano. The 51st Battalion R. Tanks were to take Poggio and A and C Squadrons N.I.H. were to go through and take Bagli-Patrignano features.

13th September 1944

The attack started and went well but the Regiment did not move on this day. On the 14th September the Regiment moved to the area of Misano.

15th September 1944

At 0001 hours A Squadron followed by C Squadron moved forward to cross the river Marano and support the infantry on to the Bagli feature. The plan was for A Squadron and the 2nd Kings to move first and make the bridgehead, then take the right of the feature and pass C Squadron and the 2nd-4th Hamps through on the left. No. 3 Troop A Squadron, followed by Nos.1 and 2 Troops, were across by 0630 hours. C Squadron quickly followed A Squadron across. The 2nd-4th Hamps, working quicker than the 2nd Kings, were on their objective by 0700 hours with C Squadron in support. A Squadron and the 2nd Kings did not consolidate their objectives till mid­day. Throughout the day there was very heavy shelling which made all movement difficult. At last light C Squadron left Nos. 3 and 4 Troops with the 2nd-4th Hamps and B Squadron sent Nos. 4 and 5 Troops to relieve A Squadron, who returned to the Poggio area.

16th September 1944

B Squadron moved Nos. 4 and 5 Troops to cover Point 137 but the enemy had already made a counter­attack and the tanks remained in a counter-attack position. Very heavy shelling was experienced. Lieut. G. Mahon's tank got a direct hit with a large calibre shell and had to be abandoned but was later recovered. Trooper Mitchell died of wounds. C Squadron moved to Patrignano at 2200 hours in preparation for an attack on Cerasola.

17th September 1944

The plan was for B Squadron to support the 2nd Kings in their attack on Point 137 and for C Squadron and the 2nd-4th Hamps to clear Cerasola which was holding up the whole divisional front. At 0430 hours Lieut. B. E. S. King and No. 1 Troop of B Squadron moved along the road to clear the area of Point 126.

Three machine-gun posts were cleared up by the 2nd Kings and Lieut King, although wounded, took his Troop up to Point 137 by first light. He was being covered by No. 2 Troop. Just after first light two of Lieut. King's tanks were knocked out by a German Mark IV tank from Point 126. This Mark IV was, in turn, quickly knocked out by No. 2 Troop from their covering position. For the rest of the day, in very heavy shelling, Lieut. King made repeated trips to an observation post to direct artillery fire. Sjt. J. Maxwell and L. Cpl. Gifford were wounded and Tpr. D. James was killed.
Meanwhile, on the left, C Squadron started at 0530 hours and, guided by Lieut. Bexon, crossed the wadi in front of Cerasola and were on their objectives with the 2nd-4th Hamps by first light. Nos. i and 4 Troops covered the left and No. 2 Troop the right. All Troops were heavily shelled and there was sniping from the houses at La Pastoro which the infantry could not get at to clear.
Lieut. A. N. MacCJeary on the extreme left acted as observation post for the Royal Devon Yeomanry battery on several good shoots. At last light C Squadron remained with the 2nd-4th Hamps until relieved by the Yorkshire Dragoons at 0200 hours.

18th September 1944

During the previous afternoon A Squadron had moved to Ospedaletto in preparation for the crossing of the river Aussa. They were to support the 1st Royal West Kents in this operation and were under command of the 12th Infantry Brigade.

The night of 17th-18th September was very confused, as the 1st Royal West Kents did not find the Cerasola ridge clear. Another attack by the Black Watch was also in progress on the right to clear the high ground overlooking the Aussa for an attack by the 51st Battalion Royal Tank Regiment.

At 0500 hours Major R. J. Griffiths, M.C., was still standing by as there was no firm bridgehead but he decided he must go before first light. Capt. A. K. E. Finch Noyes put out guides on the forward slope and No. 2 Troop went down to look for a crossing. This proved easier than expected and Nos. 2 and 4 Troops were quickly across, married up and supported their respective infantry companies on to their objectives, taking in all about 60 prisoners.
This operation was remarkably successful considering no re­connaissance had been made and a lot of it was done in the dark under heavy shelling. Both Lieut. F. A. Norris and Lieut. W. A. L. Reid deserve full credit. Again the tanks remained with the infantry throughout a very trying day.

19th September 1944

The Regiment remained in the Poggio area whilst Nos.2 and 3 Troops of A Squadron relieved Nos.1 and 4 Troops, who were still with the 1st Royal West Kents bridge­head.

20th September 1944

The A Squadron Troops were again relieved whilst B Squadron moved to an area south of San Aquilina and C Squadron married up with the Royal Fusiliers of the 12th Infantry Brigade, but the operation was subsequently cancelled.

21st September 1944

Heavy rain fell during the day and all Squadrons were bogged down. The infantry made the high ground round Vergiano which they found unoccupied.

22nd September 1944

B Squadron moved to Vergiano in the after­noon. Under cover of a smoke screen Nos. 2 and 4 Troops under Capt. R. S. H. Sidebottom crossed the river Marecchia just before last light and made a strong point in San Giustina with the Somerset Light Infantry. They were subjected to heavy shelling. No. 2 Troop of C Squadron with Capt. C. M. Thomas, M.C., and Lieut. H E. Irwin's reconnaissance Troop Shermans supported B Squadron's crossing. They also had several good shoots into the valley round Sant' Arcangelo

23rd September 1944

B Squadron had to send Nos. 1 and 5 Troops to support the 2nd-4th Hamps in the Bornacino area at first light. This area, and San Giustina, was very heavily shelled all morning. At the same time the 5th Canadian Armoured Division was passing through but were having trouble from Sant' Arcangelo. A Squadron relieved Nos. 2 and 4 Troops of B Squadron at last light.

24th September 1944

Nos.1 and 3 Troops of B Squadron were relieved at last light by Lieut. H. E. Irwin, M.C., and No. 1 Troop of A Squadron and this force was eventually relieved at 1930 hours the following day.

26th September 1944

The Regiment concentrated in the area of San Aquilina for re-fitting and resting, ready to move C Squadron on the 30th September under command of the 25th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 10th Infantry Division. Our hopes for rest and maintenance were denied us. We did, however, manage to get all the fighting Troops away for forty-eight hours' leave and managed to get a certain amount of repair work carried out on the tanks.