

187. On 13 Dec Ir R.C., strengthened by a company of C.B. Highrs, made a fresh effort to secure the area forward of the Vecchio between Lan & Ren Scot R. and the 1 Cdn Inf Div bridgehead. During the morning the Irish seized Generale (415407), a group of buildings lying midway between the Vecchio and Naviglio and about 1,500 yards north of the 1 Cdn Inf Div crossing. These they held despite repeated enemy attempts to drive them out. On the right C.B. Highrs in the face of stiff opposition reached Casa Salvadori (417416), a building on the Naviglio about 1000 yards south of Lan & Ren Scot R. There, under constant pressure, they remained until last light, when they withdrew leaving behind a standing patrol. Although subsequently surrounded by the enemy this patrol held out until its relief 24 hours later by its own unit. (W.D., Ir R.C., 13 Dec 44; 11 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 13 Dec 44)

188. By midnight on 13 Dec the 1 Cdn Inf Div bridgehead over the Naviglio, after facing near extinction during the hard fighting of that day, was firmly established (para 161). Use was now to be made of this break in the enemy's Naviglio defences to weaken the grip of his forces still holding the line of the canal opposite Lan & Ren Scot R. The plan was for Westmr R. to advance north through 1 Cdn Inf Div and roll back the enemy right flank. When this advance neared Lan & Ren Scot R. the latter unit would attack over the canal, and linking up with Westmr R. form a firm bridgehead. On the same day, 14 Dec, 11 Cdn Inf Bde, using Ir R.C. and C.B. Highrs for the purpose, would mop-up the enemy remaining east of the Naviglio on the left flank of 12 Cdn Inf Bde (12 Cdn Inf Bde Report; W.D., Lan & Ren Scot R., 14 Dec 44; 12 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 14 Dec 44)

189. During the morning of 14 Dec Westmr R. moved south into the 1 Cdn Inf Div bridgehead. By 1245 hours the 12 Cdn Inf Bde unit, advancing north along the road which follows the west bank of the canal to Route 16, was nearly 1000 yards beyond the bridge. For a time they were without their supporting armour, Ld S.H. being still east of the canal, held up by one of its tanks, which, knocked out by a direct hit with a heavy calibre shell, was blocking the road. Once this obstacle was cleared, however, the tanks quickly joined the infantry, and the combined force continued the advance clearing the enemy from houses along the axial road and taking a number of prisoners in the process. At 1430 hours light elements heading the column halted under fire from enemy holding the junction of the Via Pozzarda and the Naviglio road (413413). Preceded by a medium artillery concentration Westminsters attacked and cleared this junction by 1700 hours. By 2130 hours Westmr R. sub-units had secured the junction of the Via Chiara and Naviglio road, and were nearing the Via Chiara bridge over the Munio. In addition they had established a covering position on the Via Pozzarda about 400 yards west of the canal. Already sufficient progress had been made to permit 12 Cdn Inf Bde to launch its attack, and within a short time Lan & Ren Scot R. began crossing the Naviglio. Casualties suffered by Westmr R. in this action were light, while the enemy, apart from his

killed and wounded, lost 106 as prisoners of war.* (W.D., Westmr R., 14 Dec 44; 12 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 14 Dec 44). This was a most successful operation and the unit was highly commended by both its Brigade and Divisional Commanders:

Brig J.S.H. Lind phoned to commend the Westminsters for the good job done on the previous day. The advance had relieved the pressure on the L & Rs who were on the east bank of the NAVIGLIO. Maj-Gen B.M. Hoffmeister told the CO that the whole army plan had been aided by this success.

(W.D., Westmr R., 15 Dec 44)

190. Meanwhile Ir R.C. and C.B. Highrs had finally secured the east bank of the Naviglio on 11 Cdn Inf Bde front. Between 1335 hours and 1640 hours (14 Dec) Ir R.C. driving north between the Vecchio and the Naviglio had cleared the sector as far as Casa Liverani (414411) a house on the canal 2000 yards downstream from the 1 Cdn Inf Div bridge. Once the Irish had consolidated at Casa Liverani, C.B. Highrs, accompanied by tanks, passed through them and continued the advance. At 1900 hours the Highlanders reached Casa Salvadori where in one of the houses they discovered a corporal and nine men of the unit who, although surrounded by the enemy and under heavy fire, had held the place since the previous night (see para 187). This brought to an end the enemy resistance east of the Naviglio in this sector. In the course of the day's operations the 11 Cdn Inf Bde units killed a number of the enemy and took 35 prisoners. On the following day both battalions came out of the line for a few days rest, Ir R.C. going to Mezzano, C.B. Highrs joining Perth R. in the Borgo di Villanova area. (W.D., C.B. Highrs, 14-15 Dec 44; W.D. Ir R.C., 14-15 Dec 44; 11 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 14 Dec 44)

191. During the morning and early afternoon the D.A.F. heavily bombed and strafed enemy positions along both banks of the Naviglio on 5 Cdn Armd Div front. This no doubt partially accounted for the lightness of the opposition encountered by Westmr R. and the 11 Cdn Inf Bde units. Ir R.C. expressed their appreciation of the air support in the following message to Headquarters 11 Cdn Inf Bde:

Air attack quite successful and very helpful. Next time will be more than glad to play.

(11 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 14 Dec 44)

* Taken from war diary of Westmr R. The 5 Cdn Armd Div Intelligence Summaries show that between 1900 hours 13 Dec and 1800 hours 15 Dec 133 enemy passed through the divisional PW cage ((H.S.) 24905. (D49)): 5 Cdn Armd Div Int Summaries Nos. 86-7, 15-16 Dec 44). Since the divisional figure included those taken by C.B. Highrs and Ir R.C. on the 14th and at least some of those captured on the 15th, the Westmr R. figure is probably too high.

192. As a result of these operations the situation of Lan & Ren Scot R., after an uncomfortable night (13/14 Dec) spent within grenade-throwing distance of enemy troops dug in on the reverse slope of the canal bank, eased somewhat during the following day. Harassing fire from the tanks, a considerable artillery programme, combined with the extensive air effort, greatly restricted the activity of the enemy in this sector. In addition he had now to look to the south-west where the operations of Westmnr R. were gradually uncovering his right flank. The Lanarks took advantage of their improved position to replenish their supplies, and that night received a number of reinforcements which brought the depleted companies nearer to full strength. At 2000 hours the Westminsters reached the Naviglio end of the Via Chiara, and at 2005 hours Headquarters 12 Cdn Inf Bde sent out a warning order to Lan & Ren Scot R. The current plan called for the battalion to cross the Naviglio at Osteria and establish a bridgehead extending forward to the ditch lying midway between that place and the Fosso Munio. Following this P.L.D.G. would pass through them, and exploit forward to and, if possible, cross the Munio. On the heels of the Lanarks assault, the Divisional Engineers would move up and commence the construction of a crossing over the canal at Osteria. To assure the early presence of armour in the bridgehead, an additional squadron of Ld S.H. moved into harbour in rear of the Westminsters shortly after last light (14 Dec). (W.Ds., H.Q. R.C.E. 5 Cdn Armd Div, Lan & Ren Scot R., 2 Cdn Armd Regt (Ld S.H.), P.L.D.G., 14 Dec 44; 12 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 14 Dec 44)

193. At 2145 hours on 14 Dec Lan & Ren Scot R. began its final assault on the Naviglio line. Within ten minutes of the start of the attack the left forward company reached the lateral road on the far side of the canal. In the centre, and on the right, the attacking troops, meeting with stiffer resistance did not reach the opposite bank until 2220 hours. At this time the battalion was holding a shallow lodgment 500 yards in width, centred on Osteria, and extending only slightly forward of the lateral road. To thicken up the bridgehead, battalion headquarters, at 0245 hours, ordered the reserve company to move over the canal. All the while the S.P's., machine guns and mortars of the enemy pounded the Lanark positions. To the north and north-east, small parties of the enemy remained in close contact until shortly before first light, and in the early hours of the morning enemy troops attempted to infiltrate into the centre of the bridgehead but withdrew after an exchange of fire. By 0830 hours Lanarks had extended their bridgehead to the line of the ditch and consolidated. At 1000 hours a Ld S.H. squadron, after a successful dash up the Naviglio from Westmnr R. area, linked up with the 12 Cdn Inf Bde unit. In the course of this drive the armoured troops flushed several enemy posts, killing a number of Germans manning them, and taking 13 prisoners. Shortly after, the Engineers, who had been unable to operate during most of the night due to enemy small arms and mortar fire, completed an assault crossing over the Naviglio at Osteria. By this time the second phase of the operation, the exploitation of the bridgehead by P.L.D.G. to the line of the Fosso Munio had commenced. (W.D., Lan & Ren Scot R., 14-15 Dec 44; 12 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 14-15 Dec 44; (H.S.) 24405.013(D4): 2 Cdn Armd Regt (Ld S.H.) Account of Operations, 27 Nov 44 - 16 Jan 45)

194. By 0930 hours P.L.D.G. had crossed the Naviglio and was advancing through Lan & Ren Scot R. towards its objectives on the Munio. Although enemy fire coming from east of the bridgehead restricted movement on the right flank for a time, the battalion reached the ditch on the perimeter of the bridgehead shortly after 1000 hours. Within the next 30 minutes leading elements on the right reached the near bank of the river. On the left, however, the P.L.D.G. company had gone to ground under heavy enemy fire when 100 yards from its final objective. Not until 1445 hours did the situation improve sufficiently for this company to resume its advance. By 1520 hours, however, P.L.D.G. had a firm grip on the east bank of the Munio from exclusive the Via Chiara bridge to opposite the southern end of Via San Antonio (415426 to 419435). The unit then had two companies forward and two in reserve to the right and left rear. On the left the battalion was in contact with the Westminsters. (12 Cdn Inf Bde Report; W.D., P.L.D.G., 15 Dec 44; 12 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 15 Dec 44)

195. Although the Westminsters reached the Munio bridge at first light that morning (15 Dec) due to small arms fire of the enemy on the opposite bank they were unable to directly observe the bridge, which lay below the level of the river bank. As a result it was not until 1320 hours that they were able to confirm its destruction. During the day the Westmnr R. company on the Via Pozzarda continued to probe slowly forward and by last light was in the vicinity of a road and track junction (406414) nearly 1000 yards from the Naviglio. Earlier in the day, Headquarters 12 Cdn Inf Bde received a report from intelligence sources stating that the enemy was withdrawing from the Munio and that the fields between that river and the Sonio were full of retreating Germans. At the time General Hoffmeister was visiting Brigadier Lind's Headquarters and he at once ordered a pursuit force, consisting of Ld S.H. and two companies of Perth R. mounted on carriers, to be formed. The continued determined resistance of the enemy on the Munio line, however, soon revealed this report to be without foundation and the force accordingly stood down. (12 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 15 Dec 44; 12 Cdn Inf Bde Report; 2 Cdn Armd Regt Account op cit)

196. During the morning (15 Dec) Maj-Gen Hoffmeister ordered G.G.H.G. to push north from Osteria along the Naviglio to its junction with the Fosso Munio. Shortly after midday the Horse Guards, after an uneventful move from east of the Naviglio, passed through the bridgehead:

...and advanced along the road, shooting up enemy houses until the advance was halted, two miles north east of the bridgehead, by an 88 S.P., which was firing from north of the Munio and knocked out the Sherman commanded by Cpl Chalmers. The S.P. was engaged and destroyed by the artillery and the advance was resumed along the narrowing pocket. The canal junction was reached with great speed, but the bridge was blown and further progress was therefore impossible. The whole operation was very successful, having caught the enemy by surprise, and as our tanks advanced, with their guns blazing, they could observe the Germans taking to their heels in all directions. They rounded up eleven prisoners and killed at least thirty.

Since the squadron was now some distance from its base, with no room to manoeuvre, the commanding officer of G.G.H.G., at 1530 hours, ordered it to withdraw to the junction of the Naviglio road and the Viazza Nuova (4344). There, by last light the squadron, supported by a company of Lan & Ren Scot R., established a firm defensive position covering the divisional right flank against possible enemy counter-attacks from the north-east. The only activity on the brigade front during the evening, apart from sporadic artillery and mortar fire, and occasional exchanges of small arms fire, was opposite P.L.D.G. There an attempted enemy counter-attack over the Munio was quickly broken up by defensive artillery and 3" mortar fire. (W.D., 3 Cdn Armd Recce Regt (G.G.H.G.), 15 Dec 44; W.D., P.L.D.G., 15 Dec 44; 12 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 15 Dec 44; 12 Cdn Inf Bde Report)

197. Meanwhile 5 Cdn Armd Bde continued to hold the extensive but fortunately quiet sector between the Viazza Nuova and the coast. On the 15th, 9 Brit Armd Bde took over that portion of the brigade front lying east of Route 16. At the same time three units ceased to be under command 5 Cdn Armd Bde, 2721 Sqn R.A.F. Regt and 27 L. going to 9 Brit Armd Bde, and G.G.H.G., less one squadron, to Headquarters 5 Cdn Armd Div. On the Lamone (4846), north of Mezzano a unit of 9 Brit Armd Bde relieved one squadron of 8 N.B.H., while the squadron of G.G.H.G. still under 5 Cdn Armd Bde command took over the Hussars positions on Route 16, and the latter unit then withdrew to Mezzano. On the following day the G.G.H.G. squadron reverted to under command its parent headquarters, and H.Q. 5 Cdn Armd Bde thereupon passed into reserve. (W.D., H.Q. 5 Cdn Armd Bde, 15-16 Dec 44)

THE SWITCH LINE, 12-18 DEC 44

198. Although north of Bagnacavallo the enemy more or less voluntarily withdrew to the line of the Naviglio, no such withdrawal developed to the south of that town. Instead he established a switch line extending from the eastern suburbs of Bagnacavallo south to the inter-corps boundary on the Lamone. During the same period 98 Inf Div came in to replace the weakened 356 Inf Div from inclusive Bagnacavallo to the Lamone. Thus although 5 Cdn Armd Div, and the right wing of 1 Cdn Inf Div, successfully established bridgeheads over the Canale Naviglio, the efforts of 3 Cdn Inf Bde, and later 1 Cdn Inf Bde, during the same period to break through the enemy defences south of Bagnacavallo met with little success. ((H.S.)234C1.013(D5): Summary of Ops by Div Hist Offr, 1-15 Dec 44; W.D., G.S. Branch, H.Q. 1 Cdn Corps, December 1944: Appx 63, Intelligence Summary No.180)

199. While 1 Cdn Inf Bde carried the main attack over the Naviglio, 3 Cdn Inf Bde maintained steady pressure on the enemy still east of the canal in front of Bagnacavallo and along the "Switch Line" between that town and the Lamone. By the morning of the 12th the brigade was disposed with R. 22e R. along the Vecchio from the Via Albergoni to the road bridge 300 yards south-west of the railway, West N.S.R. from left of R. 22e R. to road junction on Via Boncellino 1200 yards south-west of the railway; 48 Highrs along the same road between West N.S.R. and the Lamone River. Enemy mortar and shell fire was heavy throughout the day, particularly in R. 22e R. sector, where he was directing his fire from the towers of Bagnacavallo. (W.D., R.C.D., December 1944: Appx Map 8b, W.D., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Bde, 12 Dec 44;

(H.S.) 234C1.013(D10): 3 Cdn Inf Bde Operations in Italy, 2 Dec 44 to 6 Jan 45, Part II; West N.S.R. Report on Operations in Italy 1944-1945, Part II)

200. During the afternoon of 12 Dec R. 22e R. elements effected a crossing of the Vecchio and advanced about halfway towards the next unit objective, a brickworks (399378) on the Via Albergoni about 800 yards west of the stream. There the advance was halted for the night, for the brickworks was found to be strongly held by the enemy. At 2300 hours a second R. 22e R. company crossed the Vecchio, and meeting with only light resistance, reached a position at a track junction (402381) 400 yards north of the brickworks three hours later. (W.D., R. 22e R., 12-13 Dec 44)

201. Meanwhile West N.S.R. had made an unsuccessful attempt to establish itself west of the Vecchio in its area. During the night (12/13 Dec) the unit relieved the left flank company of R. 22e R. at Casa Peli (398368) opposite the demolished road bridge on the left of the railway. Only light opposition, mainly S.A. fire from the far bank, opposed them in this position. At midnight "West Novas" prepared to cross the Vecchio but found the canal 20 ft wide and too deep to ford.* As they had no bridging material on hand with which to bridge the gap the West N.S.R. company withdrew and moved to the right to explore the possibility of crossing near the railway bridge (399370). There one platoon managed to cross on the rubble of the bridge. Despite heavy enemy fire it pushed south along the far bank towards the enemy-held houses opposite Casa Peli. As the "West Novas" neared the houses, however, they came under fire from enemy tanks concealed in the area, and only by swimming the canal were they able to effect their escape. (W.D., West N.S.R., 12 - 13 Dec 44; Raddal op cit, pp 255-6; (H.S.) 234C1.013(D10): West N.S.R. Report on Operations in Italy, 1944-1945)

202. Although it continued to maintain pressure on the enemy south-east of Bagnacavallo, 3 Cdn Inf Bde made no further gains until late on 14 Dec. During the night 13/14 Dec R. 22e R. attempted to capture the brickworks on the Via Albergoni but met with no success. About the same time West N.S.R. attacked, for a second time, the enemy positions on the west bank of the Vecchio opposite Casa Peli. Again, however, the presence of enemy armour in the area proved decisive, and the Nova Scotians were driven back over the Vecchio. Although by 14 Dec the situation in the Naviglio bridgehead had greatly improved, it continued to be most important for 3 Cdn Inf Bde to close up as near as possible to the canal on the 2 Cdn Inf Bde left flank. Accordingly, during the day, 3 Cdn Inf Bde laid plans for an attack by R. 22e R. to capture the brickworks and exploit to the canal. Tanks from 12 R.T.R. would now be available to support R. 22e R., for, during the previous night the engineers had constructed a 90 ft D.S. Bailey over the Vecchio at the Via Albergoni crossing. The artillery programme called for the medium artillery to

* West N.S.R. diarist states:

This came as somewhat of a surprise as no bridging arrangements had been made due to the fact that information received stated that it would not prove a serious obstacle.

(W.D., West N.S.R., 13 Dec 44)

block the roads leading to the brickworks, while the field artillery brought heavy concentrations down on the objective. One hour before the attack the armour crossed the Vecchio under cover of a smoke screen laid by the artillery and the noise of low-flying aircraft strafing the town approaches. Just before "H" hour the tanks saturated the objectives with Besa and 95 mm fire, and at 1530 hours the attack went in. By 1700 hours R. 22e R. had cleared the brickworks, captured 30 prisoners and a quantity of arms and equipment, and exploited south-west about halfway to the bend in the railway. At the same time an R. 22e R. sub-unit at a track junction to the north of the brickworks moved several hundred yards forward along the track towards the Naviglio, capturing several more prisoners. (W.D., R. 22e R., 13-15 Dec 44; W.D., West N.S.R., 13-14 Dec 44; 12 R.T.R. Account op cit; (H.S.) 234C1.013(D10); Royal 22e Regiment Report on Operations, 31 Nov 44 - 10 Jan 45)

203. The enemy quickly reacted to the R. 22e R. attack and early in the evening began moving tanks and S.P. guns down the road from Bagnacavallo. At 2100 hours, while his armour contained R. 22e R. elements to the south of the brickworks with fire, his infantry made a strong but unsuccessful attempt to drive in the battalion right flanking company. An hour later the enemy infantry came in a second time on this sub-unit but again failed to dislodge it. For several hours longer, however, there was fighting in this area, and a company of West N.S.R. was put in readiness to move forward in the event of a breakthrough. But from midnight onwards the situation of R. 22e R. improved steadily. The Pioneer platoon mined the junction on Via Albergoni west of the brickworks, while the tanks moved into position for more effective support of the infantry. Anti-tank guns and M.M.G's. were also brought forward and by daylight the battalion was in a position to repulse any further counter-attacks that might develop. (Ibid)

204. On 14 Dec General Foster issued orders designed to bring 1 Cdn Inf Bde into the line to the south of Bagnacavallo. 1 Cdn Inf Bde was to take over the centre and left battalion sectors of 3 Cdn Inf Bde but the latter formation would retain control of the area east of Bagnacavallo between the railway and the Naviglio bridgehead. R.C.R. was to relieve West N.S.R. upon which the last-named unit would take up new positions in the area, previously held by R.C.R., on the right of R. 22e R. 48 Highrs was to revert to under command its parent brigade but continue in its present positions. Carlt & York R., then resting at Traversara (4338), would return to under command 3 Cdn Inf Bde. Thus disposed the division would be in a position should the opportunity occur to exploit either right or left of Bagnacavallo. Regrouping took place that night (14/15 Dec). At 1200 hours the following day R.C.D. came under command 1 Cdn Inf Bde, and on the 16th handed over one of its two remaining squadron sectors on the east bank of the Lamone to a squadron of 145 Regt R.A.C. (W.D., 1 Cdn Armd C. Regt, 15 Dec 44; Summary of Ops by 1 Cdn Inf Div Hist Offr, 1 to 15 Dec 44, p. 4; (H.S.) 234C1.013(D10); 1 Cdn Inf Bde Report on Ops; 3 Cdn Inf Bde Report Part III)

205. There was little activity on either R. 22e R. or West N.S.R. front on 15 Dec. Proof of this is provided by an incident which occurred in the R. 22e R. area around midday, when one of the unit lorries drove through the F.D.Ls.

on the Via Albergoni and into the enemy's lines, where the driver was at once taken prisoner. Fortunately the vehicle was destroyed by our anti-tank guns before the enemy had time to seize it. Both battalions patrolled forward during the day and found the enemy alert and holding their positions in strength. (W.D., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Bde, 15 Dec 44; W.D., R. 22e R., 15 Dec 44; W.D., West N.S.R., 15 Dec 44)

206. The intentions of 3 Cdn Inf Bde for the night 15/16 Dec were for R. 22e R. to establish a platoon post near the bend in the railway (which was the inter-bde boundary between 1 and 3 Bdes) and send a standing patrol to the road junction (395380) west of the brickworks.* At the same time West N.S.R. was to place a platoon (at 394385) on the Naviglio opposite P.P.C.L.I., and send its left flanking company as far forward as possible. In the event, however, the strength of the enemy on its front prevented West N.S.R. from making any gains at all, while the efforts of R. 22e R. came to a similar but more costly end. For the enemy allowed R. 22e R. platoon to reach its objective on the railway and then opened on it with S.A. and S.P. fire at close range from the embankment. Severe casualties were inflicted on the platoon which was forced to retire. Daylight, therefore, found the positions of both battalions unchanged. (Ibid)

207. Meanwhile 1 Cdn Inf Bde, which had taken over the "Switch Line" from the railway to the Lamone, continued to probe the enemy positions in preparation for a proposed advance to the Naviglio on that flank of the Division. Should 1 Cdn Inf Bde succeed in reaching the Naviglio, the Divisional Commander, in addition to the advantage of being closer to the Senio, would also have the choice of attacking simultaneously on both flanks or of making a single thrust on either flank. Moreover an advance by 1 Cdn Inf Bde to the Naviglio might force the enemy to evacuate Bagnacavallo, where the buildings would provide observation posts for our artillery, just as they were at present providing those facilities for the enemy.

208. Activity on 1 Cdn Inf Bde front on 15 Dec was limited to patrols and artillery fire on enemy positions. Both R.C.R. and 48 Highrs were ordered to begin vigorous patrolling during the night 15/16 Dec and to take advantage of any weakness in the enemy defences by moving forward where possible. Very limited gains were made, however, as the enemy apparently were determined to hold the so called "Switch Line". On the 16th 1 Cdn Inf Div main effort shifted to 1 Cdn Inf Bde front, as that Brigade opened a full scale "nibbling" attack with the object of advancing toward the Vecchio as carefully as possible so as not to alarm the enemy who had not as yet destroyed the Vecchio bridges (at 386358 and 383347) to the west of Via Boncellino. (W.D., H.Q. 1 Cdn Inf Bde, 15, 16 Dec 44; 1 Cdn Inf Div Report on Operations 28 Nov 44 to 6 Jan 45, p. 5) (See Map 3)

* During the same night (15/16 Dec) H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Bde passed two partisans through the enemy lines to gather information. They returned through 1 Cdn Inf Bde the following night and reported that (a) there were 300 enemy troops in Bagnacavallo (b) these had little or no transport (c) all road junctions were mined (d) a number of light guns were continually moving near the town (e) the bulk of the enemy artillery had already withdrawn behind the R. Senio. (W.D., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Bde, 16-17 Dec 44)

209. The 1 Cdn Inf Bde objective was the line of the Naviglio south of Bagnacavallo, and Brigadier Smith at this time had a strong force with which to begin the attack. Although R.C.R. and Hast & P.E.R. had suffered heavy losses in the fighting at the Lamone and Naviglio, the latter regiment had received a goodly number of reinforcements while at its rest area in Traversara. (W.D., Hast & P.E.R., 15-16 Dec 44). The third unit of the brigade, 48 Highrs, although it had been in close contact with the enemy from the night of the 10th on, had had little hard fighting. With a substantial number of tanks, 12 R.T.R. (less one squadron with 3 Cdn Inf Bde) and two squadrons of R.C.D., to support his attack, Brigadier Smith had good reason to be hopeful of success. As part of a Corps plan, the Divisional Commander intended, if the 1 Cdn Inf Bde attack was successful, to pass 2 Cdn Inf Bde through the former brigade and push on towards the Senio, linking up with 5 Cdn Armd Div west of Bagnacavallo. In preparation for this eventuality, he ordered 3 Cdn Inf Bde to take over the bridgehead north of Bagnacavallo on the night 16-17 Dec. (W.D., H.Q. 1 Cdn Inf Bde, 15, 16 Dec 44; W.D., 1 Cdn Armd C. Regt (R.C.D.), 15 Dec 44). At this time the attack by 5 (Brit) Corps on the Faenza front was threatening the Senio crossing on Route 9. 43 Indian Lorried Infantry Brigade had cleared Faenza and, south of Route 9, both 10 Ind Div and 2 N.Z. Div were up to the Senio. From the outskirts of Faenza north to the inter-corps boundary the enemy still held the line of the Lamone. British and Canadian pressure on both flanks of the enemy salient would, it was hoped, bring about its abandonment. (Eighth Army, etc. pp 91-2).

210. On the morning of 16 Dec R.C.R. and 48 Highrs commenced their attacks. Although R.C.R. at this time had its right forward coy just short of the Vecchio at Casa Peli, where it had relieved West N.S.R., the Bde F.D.L's from this point extended south at an increasing angle with this water obstacle to where they reached the Lamone in 48 Highrs sector at Boncellino. Therefore, as a preliminary, the greater part of the brigade front would have to advance approximately 1500 yards to reach the Vecchio. (W.D., R.C.R., 14-16 Dec 44; W.D., 48 Highrs, 12-16 Dec 44). No set piece attack for either battalion was arranged. They were ordered to advance toward the Vecchio bridges from which positions, if they were successful, a full scale assault would be made to the Naviglio. During the day the artillery kept both bridges under bombardment in the hope of preventing their destruction by the enemy. Preparations were made by R.C.E., however, to bridge the Vecchio if it should prove necessary. As the action progressed, the determined stand of the enemy proved how groundless were the hopes entertained of encountering only lightly-held defences or of inducing the Germans to withdraw. For the latter, as the patrols had indicated, held strong positions covering the vital points all across the front. Moreover they were well supported by tanks and S.P. guns, as well as by accurate artillery and mortar fire. Added to this the enemy had blown tank traps on both the roads leading forward to the bridges. (W.D., H.Q. 1 Cdn Inf Bde, 16 Dec 44; 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Reports on Ops December 1944: pp 15 and 16)

211. At first light on 16 Dec R.C.R. opened its attack with an assault supported by an S.P. gun against an enemy position (at 395362), on a track leading to the Vecchio about 700 yards south of Casa Peli, which it cleared, taking eight prisoners. There the battalion was within 200 yards of the Vecchio at a point 1000 yards downstream from the nearer of the two bridges. This marked the limit of R.C.R. advance for the day, however, all further attempts to get forward proving fruitless. On R.C.R. left, 48 Highrs launched its attack on a two-company front with one company on each of the two roads leading directly to the Vecchio bridges, from the junction on Via Boncellino and from near the hamlet of Boncellino respectively. On these routes a surprise advance might well have placed the bridges in the hands of the Canadians before the German had an opportunity to effect their destruction. The latter reacted very quickly, however, and counter-attacked the right-hand company (at 397357) with infantry supported by two tanks only a few hundred yards from its starting place. Fortunately for the Highlanders a Churchill arrived and kept the enemy armour at a distance, later putting one out of action. Enemy S.P's also appeared in the area, and battered the house occupied by the Canadian Company Commander, while heavy artillery and mortar fire prevented our infantry from continuing the advance. Meanwhile the left sub-unit, after great difficulty in getting its supporting armour around a crater in the road, had suffered a like repulse shortly after it commenced advancing on the southern unit axis, and as a result had withdrawn slightly to reorganize. At 1600 hours this company again moved forward supported by two tanks against stiff resistance. At 1800 hours the tanks, accompanied by only six infantrymen, reached some buildings about 800 yards from Boncellino (at 394345). This concluded the day's action, of which the chief gain was 42 enemy captured, including three officers. (W.D., H.Q. 1 Cdn Inf Bde, 16 Dec 44; W.D., R.C.R., 16 Dec 44; W.D., 48 Highrs, 16 Dec 44)

212. That night (16/17 Dec) 48 Highrs, preceded by patrols to feel out the enemy, resumed its advance. Both the leading companies made substantial gains before contacting the enemy; the right moving to within 400 yards, and the left to within 1000 yards, of the Vecchio. On the right, by first light, the Highlanders were within a few hundred yards of the Vecchio, and the Brigade Commander ordered them to make a strong attempt to cross and form a bridgehead. Strengthened by the Scouts and Snipers platoon, and with two tanks and two S.P's in support, the right-hand Company attacked at 1600 hours. But in half an hour, during which time it reached the Vecchio and attempted to pass the "Scouts" over, it had given up the attempt. The whole company area was under almost continuous shell and mortar fire, and the road leading to the canal so heavily mined that it was impossible for the tanks and S.P's to get forward. On several occasions during the afternoon and early evening the enemy counter-attacked on 48 Highrs left flank, but the latter supported by fire from the supporting artillery and M.M.G's held its ground. Meanwhile Hast & P.E.R. had moved into position in rear of 48 Highrs right flank in readiness to launch an attack through the latter unit should it succeed in crossing the Vecchio. (W.D., 48 Highrs, 16-17 Dec 44; W.D., R.C.R., 16-17 Dec 44; W.D., Hast & P.E.R., 17 Dec 44)

213. Meanwhile, on the night 16/17 Dec, 2 Cdn Inf Bde and 3 Cdn Inf Bde had exchanged sectors. Since five of the six battalions concerned were in close contact with the enemy, great care had to be taken so as not to reveal that the division was regrouping. The reliefs commenced at 1900 hours, when Carlt & York R. moved into the P.P.C.L.I. positions. The latter battalion then relieved R. 22e R., which in turn relieved L. Edmn R., the latter moving into reserve (area 4338). At the same time West N.S.R. and Seaforth of C. exchanged areas, and shortly after midnight the two brigades assumed command of their new sectors. There was no change, however, in the dispositions of the support weapons. The move was designed to make 2 Cdn Inf Bde, which would now have one battalion in rest and two less actively engaged, available to pass through 1 Cdn Inf Bde, if expedient, or to take part in any fresh thrust on the right flank of the Division. (3 Canadian Infantry Brigade Operations in Italy, 2 Dec 44 - 6 Jan 45, Part III, pp 5 and 6; W.D., H.Q. 2 Cdn Inf Bde, 16 and 17 Dec 44)

214. Late in the afternoon of the 17th, when it was realized that 48 Highrs could not establish its bridgehead unassisted, the G.O.C., 1 Cdn Inf Div ordered 1 Cdn Inf Bde to prepare a set piece attack, using R.C.R. and Hast & P.E.R. A heavy artillery plan was prepared, and "H" hour set for 0400 hours 18 Dec. On the right, R.C.R. was to assault over the Vecchio on its front, and continue, if the initial attack met with success, to the Naviglio. Hast & P.E.R. was to pass through 48 Highrs right forward sub-unit, cross the Vecchio, secure the crossroads (384359) 200 yards beyond the bridge, and, using its two reserve companies, exploit to the Naviglio. Tank support for the attack was to be provided by 12 R.T.R. R.C.D. would continue to operate in a covering role on the brigade left flank. During the night 17/18 Dec the enemy was very active both in the area of the bridge opposite 48 Highrs and along R.C.R. front. Later in the night R.C.R. patrols to the Vecchio located a knee deep fording place. (1 Cdn Inf Bde Report on Operations; W.D., H.Q. 1 Cdn Inf Bde, 17 Dec 44)

215. The attack went in as planned at 0400 hours 18 Dec and for a time appeared to be succeeding well, particularly in the R.C.R. area. The right assault coy ("A") of R.C.R. crossed on the rubble of the bridge opposite Casa Peli and quickly rounded up over 30 prisoners including part of a battalion headquarters* (1 Bn 289 GR). On the left, however, R.C.R. ran into enemy D.F. at its crossing point and became disorganized. Although the unit succeeded in passing a second company into its bridgehead at Casa Peli during the night, it was unable to get anti-tank guns forward to them. At daybreak the enemy counter-attacked with tanks, and by 0900 hours all R.C.R. companies were back in their original positions east of the Vecchio with only their prisoners and a score of one enemy tracked vehicle destroyed to show as gain. (W.D., R.C.R., 18 Dec 44; W.D., G.S., H.Q. 1 Cdn Corps, December 1944: Appx 82, 1 Cdn Corps Int Summary No. 184)

* The reason for a bn HQ remaining in such an exposed position is revealed by a Regimental Order "Die For The Fisher" dated 14 Dec 44 (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 1 Cdn Corps, December 1944: Appx 82, 1 Cdn Corps Int Summary No. 184).

216. Meanwhile on the left flank of the Bde, Hast & P.E.R. and 48 Highrs had met with a like repulse. Here again intense enemy D.F. on the forming up place disorganized one company of Hast & P.E.R., and it reached its crossing place with only 18 men. The remaining assault company also got into difficulties (the Coy Comd described it as low morale), and failed to get forward. In the intervening period elements of 48 Highrs reached the north bridge and at 0715 hours reported it in their hands and intact. Brigade Headquarters at once ordered Hast & P.E.R. and the tanks to go to the assistance of the Highlanders with all possible speed. Unfortunately the two leading tanks got into difficulties on the narrow rain-soaked road and completely blocked the way forward. Elements of both infantry units succeeded in crossing the bridge but, in the face of a strong enemy infantry and tank counter-attack, withdrew shortly to the near side of the stream. There, as the enemy tanks made no attempt to cross the bridge in pursuit, they were able to consolidate. By 0900 hours the situation was stabilized with both sides continuing the fight from opposite sides of the canal. Shortly after the enemy demolished the bridge and no further attempt was made to continue the advance. (W.D., Hast & P.E.R., 19 Dec 44; W.D., 48 Highrs, 18 Dec 44)

217. Thus early on the 18th the full scale attack by 1 Cdn Inf Bde had come to an end with the Vecchio and Naviglio still firmly held by the enemy. In less than six hours the latter had demonstrated in a convincing manner his determination to hold on this flank. That morning General Foulkes in conference with his divisional commanders laid plans for a co-ordinated thrust by 1 Cdn Inf Div and 5 Cdn Armd Div at the junction of the inter-divisional boundary. There on the 19th both divisions applied their weight in a hard hitting attack which eventually carried them through the stubbornly-held enemy defences to the Senio. (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 1 Cdn Inf Div, 19 Dec 44; W.D., H.Q. 2 Cdn Inf Bde, 18 Dec 44)

OPERATIONS OF 5 CORPS, 14 - 17 DEC 44

218. As the advance of the Canadian Corps came to a halt on the general line of the Canale Naviglio, the British 5 Corps and Polish 2 Corps commenced a fresh attack south of Route 9. On 5 Corps front the main task, assigned to 2 N.Z. Div and 10 Ind Div, was to clear the Pergola - Pideura ridge and the slopes between that ridge and Route 9. Although Faenza was expected to fall easily once the chief objectives were gained, a special task force was formed out of 43 Ind Lorried Inf Bde to clear the town. As final objectives 5 Corps intended to gain bridgeheads over the Senio. On the British Corps' left flank the Poles were to cross the River Sintria and close up to the Senio. Supported by the fire of more than 400 guns, the New Zealanders and Indians launched their attack on the night 14/15 Dec. In the early stages of the advance, 10 Ind Div, on the left flank, encountered minefields covering Pergola and daylight on 15 Dec found it pinned to the ground by heavy defensive fire. The New Zealand division was then in the area of Celle (2724) where for some time it was involved in bitter close-quarters fighting. All the while the enemy heavily and repeatedly counter-attacked the flanks of the advance. The struggle went on throughout the day, and by the end of it the 90 Pz Gr Div, now alone since the withdrawal of 305 Div following the disastrous affair of 9 Dec, had lost 200 killed and 300

prisoners to the New Zealanders. On the enemy right 715 Division had suffered similarly heavy losses in opposing the Polish Corps. At this point 2 N.Z. Div was in firm possession of Celle and the surrounding area, while 10 Ind Div, although it had failed to capture Pergola, had pushed forward, on the left, north-west of Pideura and seized the next ridge beyond. Thus the enemy, by-passed and seriously weakened by his losses, could no longer hope to defend his position and accordingly withdrew that night (15/16 Dec). (Eighth Army etc, pp 91-2)

219. On the following day, 16 Dec, the Indian Division secured Pergola, and the New Zealanders closed up to the line of the Senio. Throughout the day the Poles on the left continued to experience hard fighting west of the Sintria as they drew level with 5 Corps. North of Route 9, the enemy still remained firm on the Lamone, with a switch-line running past the north-eastern outskirts of Faenza along the Scolo Cerchia canal and thence along the Rimini-Bologna railway to the point where it crosses the Senio. 43 Ind Lorried Inf Bde had entered and cleared Faenza on 16 Dec, but when on the 17th it attempted to seize a crossing over the Scolo Cerchia it met with a strong enemy counter-attack that threw it back to the south bank. To the south on the 17th 10 Ind Div managed to establish two small bridgeheads over the Senio on either side of Tebano (2324). No attempt was made to exploit these, however, for 5 Corps was obliged, for administrative reasons, to halt its offensive at this point. (Ibid, p. 92)

ARMY GROUP AND ARMY INTENTIONS

220. Once again, Eighth Army was temporarily halted before another of the numerous water obstacles of the Romagna. Although 13 Corps on the right flank of Fifth Army, whose operations were intended to facilitate the crossing of this obstacle, the Senio, was stalemated in front of the Vena del Gesso feature, the prospects of launching a successful combined drive by both armies seemed promising.* For finally the long continued pressure on the enemy's Adriatic flank was beginning to show results. As previously noted (para 131) on the 9th he brought 90 Pz Gr Div from reserve and threw it into the battle against 5 Corps with great haste. Again, shortly after the successful Canadian attack over the Lamone, the enemy had had to take 98 Inf Div from the Fifth Army front, and rush it across to bolster the crumbling 356 Inf Div. By the 19th 29 Pz Gr Div had arrived on the Eighth

* While 5 Corps was advancing towards the Senio, 13 Corps had undertaken a limited operation astride the Santerno directed toward Route 9 at Imola. Initially the Corps had some success, but by 15 Dec had come to a halt after attacks on the village of Tossignano (0823) and against Monte Maggiore (0525) had failed. East of Tossignano the Corps was up against the Vena del Gesso, a large and steep escarpment. This position the Corps Commander felt could only be overcome by the Polish Corps attacking on his right, and turning the enemy defences. This suggestion was not acceptable to Eighth Army, however, as it required the Polish attack to precede that of 13 Corps whereas the Army plan called for simultaneous attacks by the two corps. In the event these operations did not take place until the following spring. (Eighth Army etc, p. 92). (See Map Florence - Rimini - Bologna Sector)

Army front where it replaced 26 Pz Div on Route 9. Thus the battles of the first 18 days of December had compelled the enemy to relieve two of the divisions opposing Eighth Army and bring in one additional division all at the expense of the front south of Bologna. (Ibid, pp 92-3)

221. In the meantime an important change had occurred at Headquarters 15 Army Group. On 12 Dec Field Marshal Alexander replaced Field Marshal Sir Henry Maitland Wilson as Supreme Allied Commander, Central Mediterranean. Lt-Gen Mark Clark, formerly commanding Fifth Army, replaced Field Marshal Alexander as Commander Allied Armies in Italy.

Headquarters Allied Armies in Italy, now became a strictly operational headquarters once more, the British administrative staff which had joined Army Group Headquarters early in 1944 shortly after its move to Caserta being removed to rejoin Allied Force Headquarters at Caserta. Beyond this change, an alteration in the designation of the Headquarters to "Headquarters 15 Army Group", and the fact that the Army Group staff was now reorganized on the American model with a British element...the change in command involved no fundamental change either in the organization of the Army Group as a whole or in strategy.

(Ibid, p. 93)

222. During a conference with his Army Commanders on 19 Dec, General Clark made plain his intention to proceed on the general lines of the existing plan:

The time is rapidly approaching when I shall give the signal for a combined all-out attack of Fifth and Eighth Armies. The primary mission of the attack is to bring to battle and destroy German forces in Italy and thereby prevent the withdrawal of major enemy elements to other theatres. It is evident that the mission can be accomplished only by an all-out offensive by both armies. The specific military objective of our coming battle is the city of Bologna.

The factors which fix the date on which my decision to launch the attack is made are three: favourable weather, the disposition of the enemy forces, and the location of the main forces of Eighth Army. Eighth Army...has drawn to it from the Fifth Army front and from reserve positions in the Bologna area sufficient enemy forces to permit Fifth Army reasonable chances of success in its attack.

It is my desire that Eighth Army clear up the area between the Lamone river and Senio river and be prepared to launch its attack across the Senio river at the time Fifth Army launches its attack.

(Ibid: Appx "I"-2)

Accordingly the Army Group Commander directed General McCreery to:

proceed with current operations with the object of launching an attack to force a crossing of the Senio river in conjunction with Fifth Army's attack.

(Ibid)

Lt-Gen Lucian K. Truscott Jr., now commanding Fifth Army, would be prepared to launch his attack on 48 hours notice after 22 Dec but immediately, using 13 Corps, would make subsidiary thrusts down the Santerno and Sillaro valleys, that is on either side of the Vena del Gesso, to assist the progress of Eighth Army. An all-important factor in the selection of the date for the combined offensive would be a reasonable likelihood of good flying weather. (Ibid, p. 92)

223. These orders involved no change of plan for Eighth Army since General McCreery had already completed his preparations to close up to the Senio. The Canadian Corps was to extend its Naviglio bridgehead to the Senio by a two division attack, and clear the ground on either flank subsequently. This was a straightforward problem, and rather less complicated than that confronting 5 Corps. For the enemy switch-line north of Route 9 was fairly extensive and divided into two distinct sectors by the Canale Naviglio and would require two divisions to clear it. Before both these formations could be deployed, however, it would be necessary to clear the outskirts of Faenza. The 5 Corps plan, therefore, was for the 2 N.Z. Div with 43 Ind Lor Inf Bde to carry out this first task, and then work north to the west of the Naviglio as fast as its limited resources would permit, for this division already had responsibility for a long front which included a portion of the Senio south of Faenza. Once the New Zealanders had made room for its deployment, 56 Inf Div would come in and clear the enemy from east of the canal. These operations opened on both Corps fronts on the night 19/20 Dec. (Ibid, pp 93-4)

OPERATIONS OF 5 CORPS NORTH OF FAENZA,
19 - 31 DEC 44

224. At the beginning the 5 Corps attack met with only scattered opposition for the enemy had apparently decided to give ground. An area extending two miles north of Faenza was quickly cleared and room provided for 56 Inf Div to deploy. On the second day that Division, which had crossed the Lamone east of Faenza, commenced its drive to the north-east. At that stage, however, the enemy began to contest bitterly each step of the advance, fighting for every ditch and house. In addition the weather deteriorated, and on 23 Dec snow fell in the plains. By the end of the month the division had cleared all the ground between the Naviglio and the Lamone south of the inter-corps boundary at Granarolo, except at Granarolo itself, and advanced its left wing across the Naviglio to relieve 2 N.Z. Div of part of its increasing frontage along the Senio. The northward advance of the latter formation had stopped just short of a strong enemy position covering the road bridge at Felisio (3031).* Meanwhile on the left flank of 5 Corps, 2 Pol Corps had completed mopping-up to the Senio and on 22 Dec had

* See Map Florence - Rimini - Bologna Sector

extended its left boundary westwards to reduce the commitments of the tired and weak 13 Corps*. (Ibid, pp 93-4)

THE ADVANCE OF 1 CDN INF DIV TO THE SENIO RIVER,
19 to 21 Dec 44

225. The plan for the Canadian Corps attack was presented and orders issued at a Corps Commander's Orders Group held at H.Q. 5 Cdn Armd Div on the morning of 18 Dec. It called for a two brigade attack by 2 Cdn Inf Bde and 11 Cdn Inf Bde on the night 19/20 Dec. 11 Cdn Inf Bde was ordered to attack across the Fosso Munio just north of the Via Chiara bridge, where Westmnr R. was holding a small bridge-head. 2 Cdn Inf Bde at the same time would launch an attack through Westmnr R. positions between the bend in the Munio and the right flank of 3 Cdn Inf Bde. When both brigades had achieved an advance of several hundred yards, 2 Cdn Inf Bde would turn south across 3 Cdn Inf Bde's front and endeavour to cut off Bagnacavallo, while 11 Cdn Inf Bde would continue west to the Senio. This new plan, now that 1 Cdn Inf Bde had failed to get forward on the left flank, was well received, and Brigadier Bogert and his battalion commanders were confident of its success. (W.D., H.Q. 2 Cdn Inf Bde, 18 Dec 44). For the purpose of the operation the Fosso Munio from just east of the Via Chiara to the Via Casalino (410424 - 388145), and the line of that road between the Munio and the Senio would constitute the inter-divisional boundary. (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 1 Cdn Corps, December 1944: Appx 79, Message G.O. 79) (see Map 3)

226. Brigadier Bogert intended to carry out his advance to the Senio in three stages. In Phase I, L. Edmn R., right, and P.P.C.L.I., left, would seize the crossings over the Fosso Munio on Via Casalino (at 388415) and Via Bigarano (at 387408). Then would follow Phase II, when Seaforth of C. would push through P.P.C.L.I., and secure the crossroads on Via Bigarano (380410) about 700 yards west of the Munio. In the final phase Seaforth of C. and P.P.C.L.I. would move south from their respective positions to cut the road (at 375393 and 382391) leading west from Bagnacavallo to the bridge over the Senio at S. Polito (3540). The artillery plan was for a series of concentrations on call, with the initial attack going in silence. Armoured support was to be supplied by two squadrons of B.C.D. To detract the enemy's attention from the main front, both 3 Cdn Inf Bde and 1 Cdn Inf Bde would stage fire demonstrations, while in the latter brigade's sector during the first stages of the attack a psychological warfare detachment would broadcast battle noises of tanks etc to simulate an impending assault. "H" Hour was set for 2000 hours, 19 Dec. (W.D., H.Q. 2 Cdn Inf Bde, 18- 19 Dec 44). During the night 18/19 Dec two squadrons of R.C.D. came forward and relieved Seaforth of C. and P.P.C.L.I. in their positions in front of Bagnacavallo. Both infantry battalions then moved to the rear for a brief rest in preparation for the coming attack. (Ibid)

* 13 Corps lost 8 Ind Div to under operational control 92 U.S. Inf Div when the German threat in the Serchio Valley began to develop (Fifth Army History, Part VIII: Annex No. 1-C).

227. The 19th was a quiet day across the 1 Cdn Inf Div front although very close contact was maintained with the enemy particularly in the right sector. At 2000 hours 3 Cdn Inf Bde Commander called an "O" Group and issued preliminary orders for the capture of Bagnacavallo by Carlt & York R. This attack would commence when 2 Cdn Inf Bde reached its final objective. R. 22e R., which would be by-passed by P.P.C.L.I. in the initial stage of the 2 Bde attack, would be available to assist if required. (W.D., H.Q. 1 Cdn Inf Bde, 19 Dec 44; W.D., 1 Cdn Armd C. Regt (R.C.D.), 19 Dec 44; W.D., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Bde, 19 Dec 44)

228. At nightfall L. Edmn R. and P.P.C.L.I. moved forward to their F.U.Ps. in rear of Westmr R., and at 2000 hours went into the attack. Almost at once they ran up against well placed enemy defences, and began a battle which lasted all that night and the next day. On their right the initial assault of 11 Cdn Inf Bde was repulsed and the attacking troops thrown back to the Munio. It was apparent that the enemy had woven a stout defence across the whole front of the Corps attack, and that until this system was penetrated or destroyed piecemeal there was little likelihood that he would retire behind the Senio.

229. On the brigade right L. Edmn R., advancing on a two company front, encountered their first opposition from two enemy-held houses, C. Tasselli (408420) right and C. Argelli (407417) left, lying on the lateral track between the Via Chiara and the Via Pozzarda. An artillery concentration on C. Tasselli, followed by an infantry assault, quickly brought about its capture and that of several prisoners. C. Argelli, however, proved to be more stoutly defended with four M.M.Gs. in position around it. As the Edmontonians moved in on the latter place across the open fields they came under heavy mortar and artillery defensive fire including S.P. gunfire from the vicinity of C. Peli (400417), a group of buildings at a crossroads 600 yards due west of C. Argelli. The sub-unit concerned continued, nevertheless, to press its attack until 0330 hours (20 Dec) when, with its effective strength down to 25 men, it withdrew slightly and consolidated. In the meantime at 0100 hours Lt-Col J.R. Stone, the Commanding Officer L. Edmn R., directed a fresh company to by-pass C. Argelli on the right, and clear the crossroads at C. Peli. Again, however, because of the weight of the enemy fire, the Edmontonians failed to make headway. In the interim an enemy counter-attack on C. Tasselli was driven off with the aid of the artillery and several more prisoners taken. By 0300 hours Lt-Col Stone had decided to make a fresh attempt to seize the C. Peli crossroads, this time with heavy artillery support. At 0600 hours after hard fighting the Edmontonians company reached the crossroads. By 0700 hours it had secured the C. Peli area, while a second sub-unit had taken up a firm position (404419) a few hundred yards to its right rear on the track leading back to C. Tasselli. The enemy, however, was still in close contact across the battalion front with his tanks and S.P. guns controlling both the forward and lateral roads. (W.D., L. Edmn R., 19-20 Dec 44)

230. Meanwhile P.P.C.L.I. was meeting with the same stubborn resistance on the left. As they approached their first objective, the road junction (402412) at the western end of the Via Pozzarda about 200 yards from R. 22e R. right flank, the Patricias came under intense machine gun fire - from the direction of C. Argelli. Nevertheless the company

continued to advance and, after overcoming several enemy machine gun posts barring the way forward, reached its objective. While it was in the process of consolidating an enemy S.P. gun fired eight rounds through the house occupied by Company Headquarters wounding the O.C. and destroying the wireless set. Heavy mortar fire on the area killed one platoon comd, then two counter-attacks developed one after the other, but the Patricias held their ground, and eventually drove the enemy off, killing and wounding many of them. Several prisoners were also taken. The position was finally secured at 0430 hours on the 20th when a second sub-unit moved up in support. At 0500 hours a P.P.C.L.I. sub-unit pushed west from the Via Pozzarda junction towards the crossroads on Lo Stradello (397412) 600 yards distant. For a time the company proceeded without opposition. When it was less than 100 yards from its objective, however, the enemy suddenly opened fire with machine guns and an S.P. Pinned to the ground by this fire, the Patricias had no alternative but to call for artillery cover under which they withdrew to the Via Pozzarda junction. (W.D., P.P.C.L.I., 19-20 Dec 44)

231. During the morning both battalions held firm under heavy fire while the sappers worked feverishly to clear the mine fields. At 1100 hours an enemy tank and S.P. gun began systematically shooting up the houses occupied by L. Edmn R. at C. Peli. As a result L. Edmn R. withdrew slightly while the artillery and mortars laid a defensive screen of fire across its front. Shortly after midday the enemy eased his fire, and the battalion, under cover of an artillery concentration, reoccupied the C. Peli positions. For several hours after this, however, fighting continued in this area. (W.D., L. Edmn R., 20 Dec 44). Although during this time P.P.C.L.I. suffered no counter attacks, the intensity of the enemy machine gun and S.P. fire indicated the continuing presence of strong enemy forces across its line of advance. (W.D., P.P.C.L.I., 20 Dec 44)

232. At 1430 hours, to relieve the pressure on his leading company, the Commanding Officer of P.P.C.L.I. despatched a company supported by a troop of B.C.D. through R. 22e R. under a smoke screen cover to seize the Lo Stradello - Via Bigarano crossroads (394407). But the enemy surprised the leading platoon and forced it to retire suffering several casualties. Nevertheless, the company managed to consolidate a position only a few hundred yards short of its objective. At 2100 hours the Patricias with strong artillery support again attacked the Lo Stradello crossroads, and this time after a brief fight cleared the position, capturing an undamaged S.P. gun in the process. Two tanks were then brought forward and the objective secured. (W.D., P.P.C.L.I., 20 Dec 44). Meanwhile L. Edmn R. had also improved its position. In mid-afternoon Lt-Col Stone went to Brigade Headquarters and there made arrangements to put in a flanking attack through P.P.C.L.I. against the enemy still holding out along the lateral road between the two battalions. This attack commenced at 1600 hours, when one platoon of L. Edmn R. and a troop of B.C.D. passed through the Patricias and under cover of a smoke screen moved along the road, the tanks firing as they advanced while behind them the infantry cleared the houses. Fifty minutes later they reached C. Peli with a bag of 25 prisoners. Others of the enemy, attempting to escape, came under mortar and artillery fire called down from the crossroads.

(W.D., L. Edmn R., 20 Dec 44). By nightfall, considerable progress had been made with the mine lifting, and the tanks and support weapons were moved forward. The day had seen hard fighting on both divisional fronts, and as a result the enemy had lost a number of important strong points and had suffered numerous casualties. The events of the coming night were to show that he had now had enough.

233. During the night 20/21 Dec both L. Edmn R. and P.P.C.L.I. made steady progress. By midnight it was apparent that the enemy was withdrawing on both 2 Cdn Inf Bde and 11 Cdn Inf Bde fronts. Contact was lost before midnight and not regained until 0300 hours. No determined opposition developed, however, and both 1 Cdn Inf Div units continued to push forward. At daylight they reached the objectives laid down for Phase I of the Bde attack, which lay along the upper limits of the Fosso Munio, L. Edmn R. consolidating at Pte Casalino, and P.P.C.L.I. at the Via Bigarano crossing. Everywhere much evidence of a hasty enemy withdrawal was found. (W.D., L. Edmn R., 20-21 Dec 44; W.D., P.P.C.L.I., 20-21 Dec 44)

234. At daybreak Seaforth of C. with "A" Sqn B.C.D. passed through P.P.C.L.I. towards the cross-roads on the next lateral road to the west (380410). Little resistance was anticipated for the enemy units were reported by deserters to have commenced withdrawing westwards at 0100 hours. Our tanks encountered difficulty with mines but the infantry pressed onwards without hindrance, and at 1030 hours occupied the battalion objective as well as the crossroads to the right of it (382416) at the inter-divisional boundary. At this latter place the battalion was only slightly more than 1000 yards from the Senio, and a recce patrol was sent forward to the river. (W.D., Seaforth of C., 21 Dec 44). P.P.C.L.I. meanwhile had moved south along the Munio, and taken up a position at the crossroads (382391) in the hamlet of Pieve near the north-west edge of Bagnacavallo. (W.D., P.P.C.L.I., 21 Dec 44). With all its objectives practically occupied, and the enemy apparently safe from further pursuit behind the high dykes of the Senio, H.Q. 2 Cdn Inf Bde ordered L. Edmn R. to remain in its present area for the balance of the day. (W.D., L. Edmn R., 21 Dec 44). The patrol sent forward by the "Seaforths" confirmed the enemy withdrawal and immediately General Foster ordered that battalion forward to the Senio. By 2200 hours 21 Dec Seaforth of C. was holding positions covering the line of the Senio from the 5 Cdn Armd Div boundary south to the former bridge at Pte della Chiusa (360385).¹¹ (W.D., Seaforth of C., 21 Dec 44)

235. At last, after ten days of very heavy and stubborn fighting, the enemy had given way and during the night 20/21 Dec between the 35 and 45 Northing had fallen back on his prepared defences along the Senio. On 1 Cdn Inf Div front, and particularly in the area north of Bagnacavallo, where he was not protected by any natural water barriers, his

¹¹ Seaforth of C. companies were at 364413, 363407, 362400 and 368385.

resistance was spectacular. The enemy formation, 98 Inf Div,^{*} which was brought into the line from the Fifth Army sector on 13 Dec to stem the tide of the Canadian advance on the Bagnacavallo front, lived up to its Crimean tradition of fighting to the last man, and regained for itself some of the prestige lost during the Rimini battle. Information received from many of the 140 prisoners taken during the 24 hours battle indicated that the order to withdraw came as a welcome surprise to the forward troops, who thought they would have to fight to the death or surrender. (W.D., G.S., H.Q., 1 Cdn Corps, Doc 44: Appx 93, 1 Cdn Corps Int Summary 187). All three regiments were committed across the front opposite 1 Cdn Inf Div with 289 G.R. along the "Switch Line", 290 G.R. in Bagnacavallo and north of the city, and 117 G.R. north of the latter covering the remaining 1 Cdn Inf Div area and overlapping into 5 Cdn Armd Div sector. (Ibid: Appx 63, 67 74, 77 and 82, 1 Cdn Corps Int Summaries)

236. In the activities preceding the advance to the Senio, 2 Cdn Inf Bde had played an important part. Since their entry into the narrow bridgehead so tenaciously held by Carlt & York R. on 13 Dec, all three battalions of the brigade had fought stubbornly against an equally determined foe (excepting only the brief interlude in front of Bagnacavallo), and it was fitting that they should have the credit of breaking the enemy position, and leading the 1 Cdn Inf Div advance to the Senio. The Brigade Commander in reviewing the action gives credit to the invaluable assistance provided by B.C.D. and all supporting arms, and particularly to the artillery for their timely assistance in breaking up the many counter attacks. Casualties to the enemy in both phases of the battle were "(a) prisoners four offrs, 314 ORs; (b) confirmed killed and wounded 330 (c) equipment seven tanks or S.P. guns K.O'd and six damaged." During the period 13-21 Dec 2 Cdn Inf Bde suffered 289 casualties of all types, of whom 60 were killed, 215 wounded and four taken prisoner. ((H.S.)234C1.013(D10): 2 Cdn Inf Bde Report on Operations, 1 Dec 44 - 8 Jan 45; Casualties - Italian Campaign op cit)

* The original Div was more or less destroyed on the Russian front. The remnants were evacuated from the CRIMEA to CONSTANZA in May 1944 and arrived in ZAGREB in Jun. During Jun and Jul the Div was reformed in CROATIA. At the beginning of Aug it moved down to the CESENA area and on 29 Aug the first units were committed in the Gothic Line. After a disastrous fortnight in which the Div lost 2,050 prisoners it was withdrawn and reformed again, most of the rfts being drawn from the B Regt of the draft div SELESIA. The Div was committed anew in the M BATTAGLIA sector on about 1 Oct and it has since fought on Fifth Army front tenaciously and well.

(W.D., G.S., H.Q. 1 Cdn Corps, December 1944: Appx 63, 1 Cdn Corps Int Summary 180)

237. As 2 Cdn Inf Bde neared the Senio west of Bagnacavallo, the enemy evacuated the town, although he continued to maintain a firm hold on his salient to the south of it between the Canadians and 5 Corps. His anxiety to retain ground in front of Cotignola probably arose from a fear of a Canadian drive across the Senio in that sector aimed at outflanking Lugo. (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 1 Cdn Corps, December 1944: Appx 93 and 96, 1 Cdn Corps Int Summaries Nos 187, 188)

238. During the initial stages of the 2 Cdn Inf Bde advance, both 1 Cdn Inf Bde and 3 Cdn Inf Bde remained in their holding and defensive role, but on the morning of the 21st, when word of the enemy withdrawal reached them, both brigades joined the advance. (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 1 Cdn Inf Div, 20 Dec 44). The rapid departure of the enemy on the 3 Cdn Inf Bde front eliminated the necessity of a formal attack by that brigade on Bagnacavallo, and spoiled any chance of cutting off and destroying its garrison. At 0115 hours on the 21st bren-gun fire from the Carlt & York R. forward coy on the northern outskirts of the town drew enemy fire, but similar activity at 0745 hours brought no response. Sounds of heavy demolitions heard from the enemy rear also pointed towards an evacuation. During the morning elements of Carlt & York R. went forward and found the town free of the enemy. Shortly after midday the whole battalion moved forward and took up position to the west of the town (3838). In the late afternoon, (21 Dec), as 2 Cdn Inf Bde took over the Senio front from the railway north to the 5 Cdn Armd Div boundary, divisional headquarters placed 3 Cdn Inf Bde in tactical reserve. All three units were ordered to secure billets in their present area and to bring forward their "F" Echelon. Hot meals and other luxuries of which this brigade had been deprived during their three weeks period in the line now became available. (W.D., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Bde, 21 Dec 44; W.D., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Bde, 21 Dec 44; W.D., Carlt & York R., 21 Dec 44)

239. On 1 Cdn Inf Bde front the main enemy body (289 G.R.) withdrew during the night 20/21 Dec leaving behind small rear guards and engineer parties to destroy the many bridges over the Vecchio and Naviglio. On the brigade right, R.C.R. began moving forward at daybreak, when patrols across the Vecchio on its front, confirmed that the enemy had withdrawn. The battalion advanced steadily throughout the day, crossing the Naviglio about one mile south of Bagnacavallo and consolidating before midnight 500 yards east of the Senio. There it found the enemy occupying dug in positions on both sides of the river. Hast & P.E.R. likewise moved forward, and by midnight had crossed the Naviglio and consolidated near the Senio about a mile to the north of Cotignola. The only resistance encountered by 1 Cdn Inf Bde during the day was in 48 Highrs sector. There an enemy rearguard holding the Vecchio bridge on the road running east from Boncellino kept the Highlanders east of the Vecchio until late afternoon. When it halted for the night 48 Highrs was still nearly 1000 yards from the Naviglio. (W.D., H.Q., 1 Cdn Inf Bde, 21 Dec 44; W.D., R.C.R., 21 Dec 44; W.D., Hast & P.E.R., 21 Dec 44; W.D., 48 Highrs, 21 Dec 44)

240. Throughout this period 1 Cdn Inf Bde seemed fated to participate chiefly in costly and unrewarding actions. In particular Hast & P.E.R. had had quite a bad time of it, for it failed twice at the Lamone (4 and 5 Dec), lost heavily again in the Naviglio bridgehead on 13 Dec, and

took part in the abortive "Switch Line" attack on 18 Dec. On at least two of these occasions Hast & P.E.R. had R.C.R. for a companion in misfortune. In these actions, these two units alone lost six officers and 116 other ranks as prisoners.* (W.D., H.Q. 1 Cdn Inf Bde, 21 Dec 44; C.M.H.Q. Records Office Casualty Card Index, Hast & P.E.R. and R.C.R. (now in possession of Historical Section, A.H.Q.))

THE FOSSO MUNIO FIGHTING AND THE PURSUIT TO THE SENIO,
5 CDN ARMD DIV, 16 - 21 DEC 44

241. Before considering the operations of 5 Cdn Armd Div during the three days 19-21 Dec., it is necessary to go back to the morning of 15 Dec, when Lt-Gen C. Foulkes, commanding 1 Cdn Corps, and Maj-Gen B.M. Hoffmeister, commanding 5 Cdn Armd Div, visited Headquarters 11 Cdn Inf Bde to discuss with Brigadier I.S. Johnston a plan to launch a new attack using his brigade, with the object, firstly of driving the enemy back to the Senio in the area north of Fusignano, and secondly of linking up with the troops of 1 Cdn Inf Div west of Bagnacavallo and cutting off its garrison. The second stage of the operation was to be dependent on the success of the attacks about to be launched by 1 Cdn Inf Bde against the enemy "Switch Line" south of Bagnacavallo (see para 209).

242. At a conference of his unit commanders held in the early morning of 18 Dec, Brigadier Johnston issued a detailed plan for the forthcoming attack. At 2000 hours that night 11 Cdn Inf Bde would cross the Fosso Munio on a two battalion front and advance along the Via Chiara and the Via S. Antonio to objectives on the lateral road lying east of the Senio. In the next stage, timed to commence early in the morning of 19 Dec, one battalion would move south and clear the lateral road as far as the road junction (3843) opposite Fusignano. Finally, in coordination with the progress of 1 Cdn Inf Div, the reserve battalion would swing left along the west bank of the Fosso Munio and link up west of Bagnacavallo with the troops of 1 Cdn Inf Div. The plan included an artillery fire programme and armoured support, while the engineers were to construct crossings over the Munio, and sweep the main axis of advance. (W.D., H.Q. 11 Cdn Inf Bde, 15 Dec 44 and Appx 7, 11 Cdn Inf Bde O.O. No. 11, 18 Dec 44)

* A rather high proportion of the casualties suffered by 1 Cdn Corps during this period of operations were "Missing", that is 22 officers and 420 other ranks out of a total of 2000 casualties (this was the picture as known at Corps Headquarters on 31 Dec 44). In an address given to the officers of the Corps of the rank of Lt-Col and above at Ravenna on 31 Dec, the Corps Commander laid the blame for this condition to faulty junior leadership and/or poor morale. General Foulkes stated that it was imperative that steps be taken during the coming weeks to improve morale and leadership. He suggested that if casualty figures were analysed, particularly the "Missing" and "Exhaustion" categories and compared with battle achievements, it would be found that the units achieving the most have the fewer casualties.

243. To provide 11 Cdn Inf Bde with a firm base from which to launch its attack, 12 Cdn Inf Bde took steps during 16 Dec to clear the west bank of the Fosso Munio.* At 1600 hours two rifle platoons of Westmnr R. supported by four Wasp flamethrowers crossed the stream in the vicinity of the demolished road bridge. Following a short artillery barrage, the Wasps, which had moved up to the near bank, began to flame the enemy positions on the far side. Immediately after the flame attack, the infantry assault went in. When they reached the enemy's positions, the Westminsters found the occupants:

...so surprised by the Flame-throwers that they either throw down their arms and ran or surrendered as prisoners.

(W.D., Westmnr R., 16 Dec 44)

In little more than a quarter of an hour, the company had seized its objective and was digging in around some houses (414424) a few yards beyond the river bank. (This was the first reported use in action of the flame throwers by troops of 1 Cdn Corps). Shortly before midnight, the enemy counter-attacked the tiny bridgehead, but the Westminsters, calling on the artillery and mortars for assistance, drove off the assault at a cost to themselves of only one killed and four wounded. (12 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 16 - 17 Dec 44; W.D., Westmnr R., 16 Dec 44; W.D., G.S., H.Q. 1 Cdn Corps, 17 and 25 Dec 44; (H.S.) 244C5.083(D2): H.Q. 5 Cdn Armd Div Memo "Use of Wasp", 25 Dec 44)

244. On the same day (16 Dec) elements of P.L.D.G. also established a foothold west of the Munio. Elements of one company reached the far bank in the first hours of darkness, and attempted, without success, to contact Westmnr R. Shortly after midnight a second company forced up to cross the river but at once came under heavy mortar fire which pinned it to the ground. Although P.L.D.G. continued throughout the night its efforts to strengthen its hold on the far bank, by 0755 hours it had only 65-70 men across the stream, holding a narrow position about 400 yards to the south-west of the Via S. Antonio (417432-416429). (W.D., P.L.D.G., 16-17 Dec 44; 5 Cdn Armd Div Operations Log; 12 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 16-17 Dec 44)

* Across the canal to the north and north-west is a wide flat, treeless expanse of plowed ground (and in Italy they plow deeply - a good 18" making a very soft soil bed). A line of trees crosses the front 500 yards to the north-west. Two houses on right of road (407432) and on far right at 416435 - all command the open field with fire. The tracks marked on 1/50,000 map crossing to S. Antonio in square 4143 are not apparent. Possibly plowed up.

(Italy - Topographical Notes, p. 32)

245. There was little change in the situation of either Westmr R. or P.L.D.G. during 17 Dec. Both units engaged in patrolling and complained of the "murderous shelling". On the night 17/18 Dec a company of Lan & Ren Scot R. came under command of P.L.D.G. and took over on the right of the tiny bridgehead. On the following morning P.L.D.G. patrolled the far bank of the Munio as far as Westmr R. area without difficulty. Late on 18 Dec the unit was relieved by Lan & Ren Scot R., and with the exception of one company which remained under Lanark command, withdrew into reserve at Villanova. That night the Lanarks increased their strength west of the Munio, using a foot bridge (417431) over the Munio which the engineers had now erected. On the 19th, on orders from Brigadier Lind, Lan & Ren Scot R. tried without success to place a platoon astride the ditch running into the Munio (at 419434) from near the end of the Via San Antonio. At last light the P.L.D.G. company on the near bank drove the enemy from the vicinity of the ditch with flame and small arms fire. At 1800 hours the German artillery, possibly in retaliation, began firing, and during the next half-hour heavily shelled the whole area to a depth of 700-800 yards. (W.D., P.L.D.G., 17-19 Dec 44; W.D., Lan & Ren Scot R., 18-19 Dec 44; 5 Cdn Armd Div Operations Log, 17-19 Dec 44; 12 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 17-19 Dec 44)

246. As will be remembered, it became apparent early on 18 Dec that 1 Cdn Inf Div was unlikely to achieve a breakthrough in the sector south of Bagnacavallo. At 1000 hours that morning the Corps Commander held a conference of his commanders at Headquarters 5 Cdn Armd Div to consider a new plan. From this meeting a plan emerged for a coordinated two brigade attack along the inter-divisional boundary. This called for 2 Cdn Inf Bde to attack between the bend in the Munio and the right flank of 3 Cdn Inf Bde, moving first west along the Munio, then south across the 3 Cdn Inf Bde front in an endeavour to cut off Bagnacavallo. At the same time, as in Phase I of its original plan, 11 Cdn Inf Bde would cross the Fosso Munio on a two battalion front, and advance west to the Senio. As noted earlier (para 225), the boundary between the two divisions was now moved north to roughly the line of the Fosso Munio. H hour for both brigades was set at 2000 hours 19 Dec. (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 1 Cdn Corps, December 1944: Appx 79, Message G.O. 79)

247. At 0900 hours, 19 Dec, Brigadier I.S. Johnston held a coordinating conference, at Headquarters 11 Cdn Inf Bde, of his unit commanders and representatives of supporting arms. The new plan called for an advance on a two battalion front followed by an expansion southward between that river and the Fosso Munio to the line of the inter-divisional boundary. The operation was to be carried out in three stages. In Phase I the brigade would attack, with Ir R.C. right and Perth R. left, from the line of the Fosso Munio along the twin axes Via S. Antonio and Via Chiara. Final objectives for both battalions lay at the junctions of their respective advance roads with the Via Rossetta, the lateral road running along the near bank of the Senio River. Intermediate objectives, were in the case of Perth R., the road junction, 1000 yards from the start line, of Via Chiara and the first lateral road running south over the Munio, and second the junction of Via Chiara and the transaxial Via Grattacoppa. Ir R.C. would secure the junction at the opposite end of the latter road. C.B. Highrs would follow

Perth R. as far as the first road junction then swing left to the Munio and along the lo Stradello which here runs west towards the Senio. During Phase II the brigade would extend its Senio front south, Perth R. covering the near approach to the former Fusignano bridge while C.B. Highrs came up on their left to the junction of lo Stradello and the lateral Via Masiera. Then in the final stage elements of Perth R. and G.G.H.G. would relieve Ir R.C. and the latter unit would then move south to the inter-divisional boundary and seize the crossroads on Via Casalino 600 yards east of the Senio. Should the situation be such that Ir R.C. was unable to disengage then C.B. Highrs would carry out Phase III. At the conclusion of the first phase, a squadron of G.G.H.G. would take over from Ir R.C. on the Via Rossetta and with infantry from Perth R. provide right flank protection. The attack would commence in silence, and there would be no artillery fire until surprise was lost. Upon receipt of the loss of surprise codeword, Headquarters R.C.A. 5 Cdn Armd Div would order a pre-arranged 30 minute counter battery programme to begin, and make the divisional artillery available to engage targets on call. Ld S.H. would provide armoured support for all three phases of the operation. The engineers would construct a crossing over the Munio for the tanks near the Via Chiara as well as foot bridges for the infantry. (W.D., H.Q. 11 Cdn Inf Bde, 19 Dec 44; 5 Cdn Armd Div Operations Log, 19 Dec; W.D., H.Q. R.C.A. 5 Cdn Armd Div, December 1944: Appx 10, Fire Plan "Turkey", 19 Dec 44; W.D., H.Q. R.C.E. 5 Cdn Armd Div, 19-20 Dec 44)

248. By 1900 hours, 19 Dec, both attacking battalions had moved into their forming-up places in rear of the Fosso Munio, and at 2000 hours, as planned, the leading companies began crossing the start line. During the first half hour because of the surprise gained by the silent attack all went well, but then both units ran into heavy machine gun fire and intense mortar and shell fire. Between the Munio and the Senio the enemy had set up a system of mutually supporting "nests of resistance", organized in depth to prevent a quick breakthrough. In an operation order issued on 18 Dec, Lt-Gen Reinhardt, the commander 98 Inf Div, had laid down the method of defence to be followed:

Def in our present posn means NOT holding to the last man in one Main LINE of resistance, but the prevention of a breakthrough through a deep Main SECTOR of resistance. Therefore every man must not be rammed into the foremost posns, rather must defence in the greatest possible depth be organized through the conversion of all hy weapon posns, HQs, etc., into nests of resistance.

Counter Attack Reserves are to be held close to the FDLs, in order to exploit soonest the enemy's weakest moment i.e. on canal and river crossings, and during the early stages of a breakthrough into the MLR.

In gen, no counter attacks must be made by bns in closed coy-fmns, with enemy air superiority such attacks cost too much blood. Several simultaneous attacks on fighting patrol lines are much more certain of success.

((H.S.)244C5.023(D1): 5 Cdn Armd Div Intelligence Summary No. 93, 22 Dec 44: Appx A, 98 Inf Div Order for Coming Ops as translated by Intelligence Staff H.Q. 5 Cdn Armd Div)

For 24 hours the enemy pinned 11 Cdn Inf Bde, apart from one company of Perth R. which managed to seize and retain a position 1000 yards forward of the river, to the line of the Munio. Then our efforts began to tell, the enemy's fire diminished and our line moved rapidly up to the Senio.

249. On the right Ir R.C., using the footbridge mentioned earlier in this report (para 245), made an uneventful crossing of the Munio at "H" hour, and immediately pushed off towards its initial objective. This was a small group of buildings (416435) situated near the lower end of the Via S. Antonio and about 500 yards north of the footbridge. Initially the Irish made good progress, then when the forward platoon was almost on the objective, the enemy opened up

...with many M.G's firing from well dug in positions cutting off the leading platoon on the objective and covering the open spaces with withering fire from enfiladed M.G's inflicting some casualties and stopping the company at M.R. 418433 89 III NW. A guide from the leading platoon returned and "D" Company attempted to send a second platoon onto the objective only to be stopped by the heavy fire. Heavy enemy mortaring blasted the area and Captain CHARETTE withdrew his company, regrouped and tried to assault from the right. The company was again stopped by heavy fire and after taking some casualties it became obvious that the position was strongly held.

((H.S.)244C5.013(D4): Report on Operations, the Irish Regiment of Canada, period 29 Nov 44 to 27 Dec 44)

Under cover of an artillery concentration, a second Irish sub-unit made a final attempt to get forward at 0515 hours (20 Dec). It also failed to make any headway, and by 0730 hours both companies were digging in on the start line (416428 - 418433). Under heavy mortar fire and constant sniping they hung onto these positions during the remaining hours of daylight. In fact it would appear that they had no alternative but to stay where they were. For at 1019 hours when Brigadier Johnston ordered them to cancel previous instructions and prepare to come into reserve, Ir R.C. replied that they were "unable to pull back into reserve till dark due to flat country and present situation" (11 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 20 Dec 44). Finally, as darkness fell, the companies effected their withdrawal, and by 1945 hours the unit had arrived in an assembly area behind the Naviglio (4241). There it was on one hour's notice to move forward over the more successful Perth R. crossing. According to the unit report on the operations, this was the first time in 12 months of fighting that Ir. R.C. "had failed to get onto its objective" (Ir R.C. Report op cit). ((W.D., H.Q. R.C.A. 5 Cdn Armd Div, 20 Dec 44; 11 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 19-20 Dec 44; W.D., Ir R.C., 19-20 Dec 44))

250. Meanwhile, Perth R., after an initial setback, had gained a precarious footing in the midst of the enemy defences. Crossing the Fosso Munio at 2000 hours, the leading company of Perths immediately moved off along the Via Chiara towards its first objective. When within about 200 yards of the junction it came under a deadly hail of fire from machine guns positioned to its front and on both flanks.

Lacking cover of any sort - the enemy automatics were even firing down the ditches on either side of the road - the company suffered heavy casualties and shortly after midnight returned to the area of the start line. To prepare the way for a fresh attempt the fire of two regiments of artillery, the M.M.G's of the support company, and the battalion's 3" mortars, was then directed on the enemy positions. At 0050 hours a second company of Perth R. took up the attack, this time moving across country several hundred yards to the right of, and parallel to, the Via Chiara. By 0215 hours it was at Casa Rasponi (413428), a building about 400 yards north of the Via Chiara bridge, which it occupied without opposition. From there the Perths pushed on towards the Casa della Congregazione (407431), a group of buildings lying 200 yards to the right of the original objective. During this stage of the advance they overran several enemy posts, taking two prisoners and inflicting an estimated 30 casualties on 98 Fus Bn.* By 0325 hours they had cleared Casa della Congregazione and consolidated. ((H.S.) 145.2P1011(D2): Report on Operations of the Perth R. for period 2 Dec to 27 Dec 44; W.D., Perth R., 19-20 Dec 44; 11 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 19-20 Dec 44)

251. By this time the enemy had concentrated the main weight of his fire power on the bridging site - one observer gave the rate of fall as 150 shells a minute. At 0140 hours Perth R. sent off a company to dispose of one particularly troublesome gun, an S.P. firing from Casa Taroni (405425), a farmhouse near the north bank of the Munio about 700 yards distant. Although leading elements reached the farmhouse, the reaction of the enemy was so strong that the company withdrew without accomplishing its task. All the while the engineers continued operations, and by 0600 hours they had placed an Ark bridge in position near the Via Chiara. Daylight, however, revealed it to be askew and unsuited for the passage of vehicles. At once, R.C.E. commenced work on a second crossing near the first, and this, a bulldozed fill, they had ready for use by 0945 hours (20 Dec). In spite of a continuous smoke screen maintained over the crossing site by the artillery and armour, the intensity of the enemy fire continued to make all activity hazardous and difficult; in the forenoon a Sherman and two M.10s, attempting to move up to the Munio were knocked out by direct hits. For this reason it was not until several hours after the completion of the crossing by the engineers that the first armour moved over the Munio. (W.D., H.Q. R.C.E. 5 Cdn Armd Div, 20 Dec 44; W.D., Perth R., 20 Dec 44; 2 Cdn Armd Regt Account op cit)

252. Although the enemy thus held the main forces of 5 Cdn Armd Div in check on the Munio, his strenuous efforts to smash the stoutly resisting Perths at Casa della Congregazione proved not so successful. For by 0827 hours (20 Dec) the latter had driven back two counter attacks and increased their prisoner total to 20. Nevertheless to the anxious observers on the Munio the eventual overwhelming of the position seemed certain:

* The reconnaissance battalion of 98 Inf Div.

Armed with nothing more powerful than Brens and PIATS, and greatly reduced in numbers after their heroic advance through the plague of machine gun lead during the night, the Perth company at "MEASURE" was surrounded by infantry and tanks. Their plight seemed hopeless. From his little Auster plane, a flying O.P. at one time reported five enemy tanks on our side of the Senio in this sector; two of them were in positions on the straight road that was our Centre Line and these fired continuously into the bridge site; an S.P. gun was firing from a farm near the bridge known as "PETROL"; machine guns dug in all over the open field, some of them nearer than the "lost" company, raked the dyke with streams of whining bullets. It seemed as though the enemy was intent, for the moment, on preventing reinforcements from coming forward. It seemed certain that, before long, they would set about the obviously simple task of overrunning that company.

(McAvity, Lt-Col J.M., D.S.O., Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians)
pp 174-5)

Shortly after midday, 25-30 men of 98 Fus Bn, led by their battalion commander, made their last desperate effort to drive the Canadians out. But the Perth commander was ready for them. As the Germans closed in, he gave a signal that brought down a prearranged "box barrage" around them cutting off their avenue of retreat. In the killing ground so formed, small arms fire of the Perths cut the enemy force to pieces. Seven of the Germans survived the action, as prisoners, the rest including the commanding officer were slain. The tide of the battle was now turning, for the armour had finally broken through the curtain of fire along the Munio. (Perth R. Report op cit; W.D., Perth R., 20 Dec 44; 11 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 20 Dec 44)

253. At 1400 hours two tanks of a troop of the Strathcona's successfully crossed the Munio via the bulldozed fill - a third tank bogged down and blocked the passage. Some 15 minutes later both tanks wheeled into the farmyard at Casa della Congregazione. At the same time close-support aircraft began strafing enemy transport and guns up to the Senio. Just before last light, in spite of continuing enemy fire, the engineers completed their third assault crossing, an Ark bridge, over which a second troop of Ld S.H. at once began to move forward. By 1800 hours the situation had eased considerably, and at 2000 hours a second company of Perth R. reached the Casa della Congregazione. (W.D., H.Q. R.C.E. 5 Cdn Armd Div, 20 Dec 44; W.D., Perth R., 20 Dec 44; 11 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 20 Dec 44; Perth R. Report; 2 Cdn Armd Regt Account)

254. Sometime during the night 20/21 Dec Headquarters 98 Inf Div ordered the units still opposing the advance of the Canadian divisions to fall back to the line of the Senio. Although this order, according to prisoner reports, came as a surprise, the enemy units wasted no time in carrying it out. Consequently, in contrast to the virtual stalemate of the previous day and night, the pace of the advance greatly quickened, and by early morning (21 Dec) the

Canadians were closing in on the Senio from north of Fusignano to south of Bagnacavallo. By midnight 11 Cdn Inf Bde was moving forward on a two-battalion front. On the left, by 2300 hours, C.B. Highrs was moving south from Via Chiara towards the first bridge (402125) over the Munio west of the brigade crossing-place. By 0515 hours they had secured this and the next bridge (399426) to the west intact, and gathered up a number of stray enemy personnel as prisoners. With the capture of the second bridge, the supporting tanks from Ld S.H., hitherto held up by the lack of a suitable forward route, were able by a detour into 1 Cdn Inf Div territory to rejoin the infantry. Shortly after 0600 hours the Highlanders reached the road junction (396427) on lo Stradello at the bend in the Munio, which they cleared, after a brief action, taking several more prisoners. Through this point C.B. Highrs now pushed three companies in quick succession, towards its final objectives on the lateral Via Masiera. By midday the battalion was firmly established along the latter road between the lo Stradello (384431) and the Via Casalino. On the left, one sub-unit continued beyond Via Masiera to a road junction on Via Casalino (375419) about 500 yards east of the Senio. There was some fighting on the unit right during the morning when C.B. Highrs elements attempted to clear some enemy posts in the built-up area near the Senio opposite Fusignano. During this advance C.B. Highrs took 32 prisoners. (11 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 20-21 Dec 44; (H.S.)145.2C5013 (D1): Report on Operations of C.B. Highrs for period 2 Dec to 27 Dec 44; 2 Cdn Armd Regt Account)

255. On the right Perth R. commenced moving forward on the Via Chiara shortly after C.B. Highrs passed through to the left flank. At 0048 hours (21 Dec) the battalion reached the junction of the Via Chiara and the Via Grattacoppa - a lateral road linking the Via Chiara and the Via San Antonio - where it halted its advance and consolidated. In mopping up this area Perths captured over 20 prisoners and a 28 cm Nebelwerfer battery. Brigade Headquarters, meanwhile, had brought Ir R.C. forward, and at 0225 hours the leading companies of the latter unit began to pass through Perth R. Two of the Irish sub-units advanced northeastwards along the Via Grattacoppa, and at 0625 hours these, after a light brush with a retreating party of enemy, reached the Via S. Antonio. Without pausing they continued their movement north along the latter road towards the Senio. They encountered no opposition, and at 0705 hours faced up to the river at the junction of the Via S. Antonio and the Via Rossetta. On the left the other companies of Ir R.C. reached the Senio slightly earlier, at 0645 hours, after an uneventful advance up Via Chiara. By midday the situation was that 11 Cdn Inf Bde had two infantry battalions supported by a squadron of tanks and anti-tank guns facing up to the Senio along a 4000 yard front. Still, however, the enemy from positions on the near bank dominated the approaches to the river at a number of places along this front. During the following few days the brigade was engaged in attempts to clear the east dyke, and to improve its open right flank between the Senio and Munio. (11 Cdn Inf Bde Operations Log, 20-21 Dec 44; W.D., Perth R., 20-21 Dec 44; Ir R.C. Report). On 21 Dec 12 Cdn Inf Bde, which had remained on the Munio as a firm base for the 11 Cdn Inf Bde operations, withdrew into reserve at Ravenna. (12 Cdn Inf Bde Report)

256. Of these operations between 10 and 21 Dec, the Report compiled by Headquarters 5 Cdn Armd Div has the following to say:

The whole of the action from the LAMONE to the SENIO had been characterized by particularly heavy mortar and shell fire. The country was very open, little cover other than canals and ditches being available. This made accurate fire on the part of the enemy comparatively simple. Enemy MGs enfiladed the ditches and other cover was accurately registered by his mortars and artillery. There were very few routes forward and all of these with their defiles were well known to the enemy who kept constant harrassing fire on them. Throughout most of the time he had good observation of the area, in many localities movement by day being almost impossible. Coupled to this was the fact that the forward troops had to remain in slit trenches in ground that would have been wet even without the rain that accompanied us throughout the operation.

The enemy had intended holding this particular piece of ground at all costs. This has been proved by enemy orders captured. He yielded only after having been thoroughly defeated by troops who fought for many days under every disadvantage of ground and weather against an enemy whose supporting weapons provided him with an amount of supporting fire almost equal to ours. Ground and weather combined to reduce the effectiveness of our superiority in armour and air to a small portion of its normal effect.

(5 Cdn Armd Div History of Operations)

During this 11 day period the division had advanced slightly more than four miles, crossed five separate water courses and taken 514 prisoners. ((H.S.)244C5.023(D1): 5 Cdn Armd Div Intelligence Summaries Nos 83, 12 Dec 44 and 93, 22 Dec 44).

There was, by this time, one accepted characteristic of these December battles - they always had a definite beginning and a definite end; they began at one water obstacle and ended on the near bank of the next. Never was a fresh brigade committed simply to exploit between rivers.

(McAvity, op cit, pp 176-7)

257. Thus by midnight 21 Dec, the situation on 1 Cdn Corps front had considerably changed since the start of the main operations on 10 Dec. Bagnacavallo had been occupied and the enemy severely handled in the 10 days fighting from the Lamone to the Senio. As a result of the efforts of both its divisions, 1 Cdn Corps could claim a score of three Tigers, nine Panthers, and seven enemy assault guns,