

Chapter 10: Yeoman Service: the End in Africa

I think he often asked himself if ... the break in attack there ... was quite wrong, that it couldn't have succeeded and yet he put his money on it. ... Was it possible? I think he kept on asking himself this question.

Ian Wards on Takrouna¹

After the capture of Gabes on 29 March 1943 the Axis forces withdrew twenty miles north to take up position along the Wadi Akarit. Also known as the Gabes Gap, this was a very strong defensive position that could not be outflanked from the south as it rested on the Chotts — the salt marshes less than twenty miles from the coast. Wadi Akarit was, in fact, the position to which Rommel had wanted to retire after the Alamein defeat. According to him, the position “did not lend itself to attack by motorised forces, and could only be broken by a tremendous concentration of material”.² Rommel’s theory was about to be tested.

On 30 March Kip and 5 Brigade probed the new enemy defences and planned to attack them that night with an infantry battalion. Their plan was cancelled by a still cautious Freyberg. At daylight on 31 March Kip was “still anxious to tackle the enemy positions temptingly forward of the wadi” and brought up two infantry battalions to do so.³ This time the planned attack was cancelled on Montgomery’s orders as it was evident that the enemy were in strength on the high ground beyond the wadi and could only be dislodged by a set-piece battle. That evening the New Zealanders moved back to Gabes and were placed in reserve where they remained for several days.

Montgomery planned to smash through the enemy defences at Wadi Akarit using another full-scale blitz assault — Operation SCIPPIO. With total air superiority, three experienced infantry divisions — 4 Indian, 50 and 51 Divisions — would punch a hole in the enemy defences through which New Zealand Division and 1 Armoured Division would exploit. Once more the New Zealand Division was to have under command its own armour in the form of 8

¹ Ian Wards interview, Wellington, 30 December 1992.

² Chapter XVII, “Consultation in Europe”, *Rommel Papers*, p.361.

³ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.294.

Armoured Brigade and the KDGs.

Operation SCIPPIO began on the night of 5 April when 4 Indian Division carried out a surprise attack on three southern peaks on the left flank of the enemy positions. The attack was a stunning success which set the tone for the rest of the battle. At 0400 hrs on 6 April the artillery of Eighth Army opened up, "a real Eighth Army Montgomery barrage",⁴ on the rest of the enemy defences, and the two remaining infantry divisions advanced.

Both 4 Indian and 51 (H) Divisions reached their objectives relatively easily and were able to beat off two enemy counterattacks. But in the centre, the less experienced 50 (N) Division had considerable difficulty and failed to reach its objectives. By the end of 6 April, although a clean break had not been made, the situation was promising with both flanks taken and a small gain made in the centre. Two counterattacks sapped the strength of the defenders and at 2200 that evening Rommel ordered a withdrawal from Wadi Akarit, back to Enfidaville 150 miles to the north. It had taken Montgomery only one day to subdue Rommel in his prime choice of location for a defensive battle after Alamein.

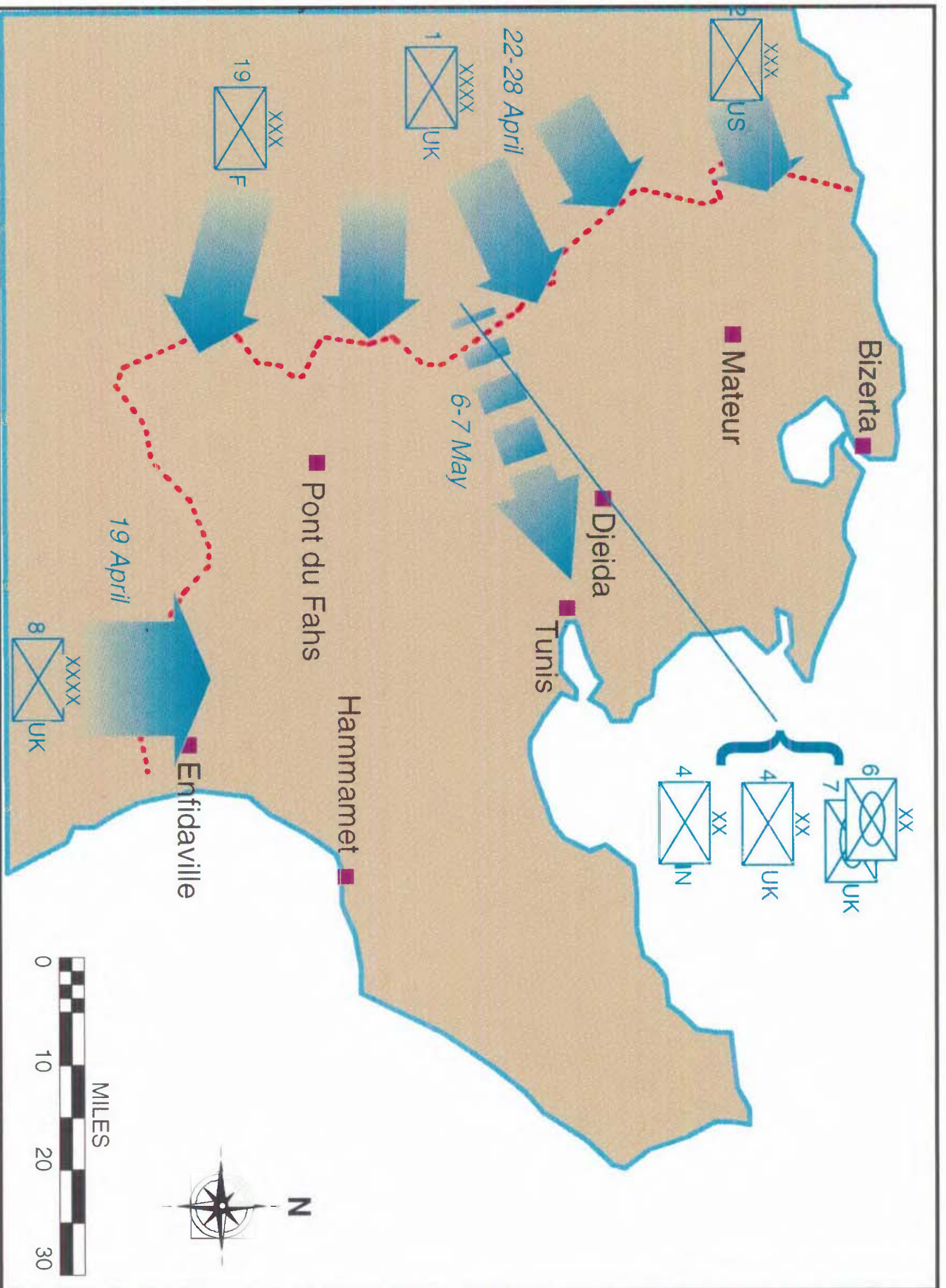
On the morning of 7 April 2 New Zealand Division advanced through the gap punched by 50 Division. Progress by the New Zealand Division was slow; made very difficult by the rough going and the very efficient German flank guards.

On 11 April an important symbolic event occurred: First and Eighth Army finally linked up and the Allied line became a continuous one. The Allied advance was now a constricting ring about the throat of the Axis and it became evident to Axis and Allies alike that the end in North Africa was rapidly approaching.

On 13 April the New Zealanders reached the end of the Tunisian plain just north of Sousse with Enfidaville some fifteen miles ahead. That afternoon, after watching 8 Armoured try to crash the defences at Enfidaville, Freyberg suddenly turned to Kip and ordered him to take the peak Djebel Garci and swing around on Enfidaville from the flank and rear. It was a "startling instruction" and Kip "did not think it was on",⁵ but he was prepared to give it a try "knowing that once he was out on the plain Freyberg would expect him to use his

⁴ *ibid*, p.296.

⁵ *ibid*, p.299.



The Final Offensive in Tunisia

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discretion which he did".⁶

As Kip neared Garci he realised that it was beyond the resources of a brigade to take such a huge peak. He looked around for something easier and settled on a conical hill between Garci and Enfidaville — Takrouna. Kip had made a correct decision. 4 Indian Division, the best mountain fighters in Eighth Army and possibly in the whole Allied forces, later tried to take Garci with the whole division and still found the task beyond them. The Axis forces on Garci held out until the end of the war in North Africa.

Kip tried a quick attack on Takrouna aware that it "might come off if the enemy were completely unready, or if there were Italians only".⁷ While the defenders of Takrouna were predominantly Italian they were ready for Kip's attack. His battalions had gone only a few hundred yards in their vehicles towards Takrouna when they came under heavy shell fire. They drove on and debussed a mile from the feature. Kip made a quick assessment:

The little wadi 500 yards ahead was an uncertain obstacle, it would probably be difficult for wheels. A self-propelled gun which had come down the road in front of Takrouna was blazing high velocity shells straight at us and I estimated that at least three troops of 105 mm. were active. We were completely overlooked and there was still a mile to go. I decided that the little gamble had not come off, that we could get no farther, and told Reg to get into position on the hill and get his trucks under cover.⁸

Kip had made a sound tactical decision, as events at Takrouna were soon to show. Freyberg made no comment when Kip reported to him, but his silence implied tacit agreement. Unfortunately, though, Kip did not show the same degree of judgement during the rest of his brigade's operations at Takrouna. Indeed, the attack on this feature, in many ways, represents his greatest tactical blunder of the war. Kip's treating of the dominant feature on the coastal plain as a minor obstacle was to cost his brigade dearly.

⁶ Kippenberger to Stevens, letter, 8 April 1957, Glue Papers.

⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.300.

⁸ *ibid.*, p.301.

The terrain at Enfidaville had the greatest impact on the forthcoming battle. The Tunisian plain had ended north of Sousse and a range of tall hills now faced Eighth Army, the most easterly peaks being Djebel Garci and Takrouna which dominated the coastal plain about Enfidaville. Enfidaville was on the narrow coastal plain about halfway between Takrouna and the coast. Beyond Enfidaville the ground became steeper and steeper so that the hills came closer and closer to the coast until at Hammamet, twenty miles to the north of Takrouna, the hills met the water's edge.⁹

This change of terrain from flat desert or plateau to peaks, and the corresponding change required in tactics, was not appreciated by any commanders of the Eighth Army. It should have been evident that the hilly nature of this part of Tunisia gave increased advantages to the defence. Not only did the Axis forces command the heights from which they could lay down heavy artillery on anything that moved across the plain during daylight, but the range of hills enabled defence in depth with only small forces. The advantages given to the defenders by this type of terrain nullified any advantage an attacker might have in air power, armour and artillery. Ian Wards, a former artillery flash spotter and for some time New Zealand's Chief Government historian, believes that the New Zealand Division's Italian campaign really began at Enfidaville:

because they attempted to carry on at Enfidaville as if it was open desert and of course it wasn't and we came to grief. We took the same tactics ... to Italy as we had used in North Africa. The crossing of the Sangro was laid on under a creeping barrage, at a start line and battalion boundaries just as if it was flat desert.¹⁰

Kip later admitted to the Official Historian: "When we lined up at Enfidaville I don't think we adjusted our thinking to the closer country there".¹¹

On 15 April 1943 10 Corps Operational Order No. 22 detailed the planned assault on the Enfidaville defences, code-named Operation ORATION. It

⁹ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.281.

¹⁰ Wards interview, 30 December 1992.

¹¹ Kippenberger to Stevens, quoted in Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.340.

envisaged an advance of some fifteen miles to the north of Enfidaville village. 4 Indian Division was to take the Garci massif with 7 Armoured Division operating on their left. They would then capture three more hill peaks and exploit north and east to the coast about eight miles to the north of Enfidaville. It was an exceptionally tall order and, in the event 4 Indian would not get beyond the first phase of the operation — the capture of Garci. The New Zealand Division was to operate in the centre of the line on the right flank of 4 Indian Division. Its task was break the Enfidaville line by capturing Takrouna and then exploiting north east over several more peaks and advance along the ridge line of Djebel Mengoub until it reached the coast road. The division was then expected to advance along the coast road until it could go no further. On the right of 2 New Zealand Division, 50 (N) Division was to take Enfidaville village and patrol up the coast road linking up with the New Zealanders. There was to be, once again, full air support by fighter-bombers and light bombers. It was an ambitious plan that ignored the marked difference in terrain and anticipated very little effective opposition from the enemy.

The New Zealand plan for the attack allocated the main role to Kip's 5 Brigade. 6 Brigade was to advance across the flat on Kip's right flank and, if possible, capture Enfidaville village, leaving 50 (N) Division free for the exploitation role. 5 Brigade was to take Takrouna and the Djebel Bir, a low ridge to the north of Takrouna. At the planning conference on 18 April several problems were revealed which should have warned the commanders of the difficulties ahead. The division's maps were "extremely bad and the amount of information" was "inadequate". The flat ground in front of Takrouna caused difficulties for the artillery, leaving them fully exposed to enemy observation and gun fire, "and even then they cannot shoot to any depth".¹² Only two voices urged caution at this conference — Kip's and Freyberg's. Freyberg's final comments were prescient:

We don't want to underestimate the difficulties of this operation. We may have considerable opposition. ... I don't think there is any doubt about it that the enemy in our front have stiffened up their defences. You have always got to remember, just as at Medenine and Mareth, that you have to

¹² NZ Div Unit Commanders Conference, Notes 18 April 1943, WA II 8/31 NZNA.

look after your vitals.¹³

Unfortunately Freyberg had “cried wolf” too often during the left hooks to be paid much attention to now.

Kip stressed at the meeting that the operation was the most difficult one since the attack on Miteiriya Ridge during the Alamein battle.¹⁴ After the war Horrocks recalled:

I have thought of this battle often, and there is still no doubt in my mind our plan was the only possible one to adopt under the circumstances. I think the comment of Major-General Kippenberger sums the battle up. He was an extremely experienced battle commander and when I asked him what he thought, he replied that “it was just on”.¹⁵

This evidence is contradicted by General Gentry’s recollection of events:

But Kip wasn’t worried at all. At least I don’t think he was, but he bore the appearance of not being worried. But I was quite worried. Enfidaville was to me a difficult problem and we succeeded, no real bother, and we captured Enfidaville. ... Kip was equally unworried attacking Takrouna but he suffered really a disaster.¹⁶

It is also contradicted by the subsequent planning which revealed a general feeling, as one of the battalion commanders explained to his officers, that the operation was going to be ‘a piece of cake’.¹⁷ This was in spite of the fact that an aerial photograph showed that Takrouna was “simply bristling with alleged gun sites and machine gun positions”.¹⁸

Certainly any sense of caution was missing from 5 Brigade’s plan of attack.

¹³ *ibid*, GOC’s final comment.

¹⁴ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.298.

¹⁵ Horrocks, comment on Tunisian narrative, p.1, WA II 3/48 Acc 2452 NZNA.

¹⁶ Gentry, transcript of interview with Chris Pugsley, 6 March 1991.

¹⁷ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.299.

¹⁸ Kippenberger to Wards, memo IA 181/32/1, 27 February 1950, Editor-in-Chief Tunisia, WA II 3/23 NZNA.

Kip planned to take his objectives in two phases. In the first phase 21 Battalion was to advance some 3 400 yards on the left of Takrouna to a road that ran parallel to the start line. On the right of Takrouna the Maori Battalion would advance a similar distance but was also given the responsibility of capturing the Takrouna feature. This it planned to do using one company attacking up the gentle rear slope. The Maori Battalion was also to capture another peak beyond Takrouna, the Djebel Bir, 1 000 yards east of Takrouna and some 300 feet high. Takrouna itself was 450-500 feet high, with steep slopes, except to the rear, with the last twenty feet precipitous. This first objective was to be taken in sixty-eight minutes.

Following a twenty-minute barrage the second phase of the operation would begin when 23 Battalion would advance through the Maori positions, and covered 800 yards in sixteen minutes to capture the two peaks which were the second objective — the Djebel Froukr and Djebel Cherachir. In support of the brigade were 168 guns, mostly field artillery, and a squadron of tanks from the Notts Yeomanry.

Although Kip argued after the war that the plan was “as good as we could devise”,¹⁹ there were serious flaws. The rate of advance for the artillery barrage and the infantry following it was set at 100 yards every two minutes. This rate was based on the experience at Alamein where the rate had been a hundred yards every three minutes, a rate that had proved too slow. Around the cactus hedges, olive groves and slopes of Enfidaville this rate was much too ambitious and “accordingly our whole programme was thrown out”.²⁰ Kip later recorded, “I still think lifts of 100 yards every four minutes would have been better, going partly on our experience in Italy”.²¹

A second flaw in the plan was that 21 Battalion on the left of Takrouna was supposed to assist the Maoris in the capture of the feature. 21 Battalion never made any plans to do so nor did they discuss with the Maoris how they proposed to assist in the assault on Takrouna.

Then there is the most serious flaw of all. The Takrouna feature clearly dominated any advance made at Enfidaville — “a veritable Rock of Gibraltar,

¹⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.303.

²⁰ *ibid*, p.304.

²¹ Kippenberger, comment on Tunisian narrative, p.431, Para 8, WA II 3/48 Acc 2452 NZNA.

rising steeply and suddenly out of the plain".²² This had been clearly recognised by the Axis forces; the War Diary of 90 Light Division stated that "Takrouna was the dominating point, flanking the enemy in both directions and must be held as long as possible to keep up our OPs".²³ The commander of Trieste Division, General La Ferla, who was responsible for the defence of Takrouna, reported to his superior that it "would be defended to the last man, according to your orders".²⁴ Takrouna completely dominated the whole area, and its capture was vital if 5 Brigade's attack was to have even the slimmest chance of success.

Yet, in Kip's plan, the capture of this feature almost seems an afterthought. Two battalions were to advance past this dominant peak from where they would be exposed to enfilading fire. Angus Ross has commented that "at Camberley we learned the term 'killing ground' and the Germans had obviously made various arrangements to kill in the valley leading up to Takrouna".²⁵ The area on either side of Takrouna had been marked out as "killing ground" and Takrouna could bring down heavy fire on anything that moved. Both sides of Takrouna had been strewn liberally with anti-personnel mines and booby traps. Into this lethal killing zone Kip planned to march his entire brigade.

To capture Takrouna, the key to the whole Enfidaville position, Kip had allocated only one company which could only assault the slopes once it had passed along the flank of that key position. Surely it would have been more prudent for Kip to concentrate on taking Takrouna first before advancing beyond it. This could have been done by subjecting Takrouna to an intense barrage with his 168 guns and then attacking the feature from two sides using at least a battalion to do so as he had done with Point 184 at Tebaga Gap, a lesser feature than that now confronting his brigade. Only then could his brigade operate in relative safety along the flanks of Takrouna and beyond.

Another flaw was evident in Kip's plan too — he planned to use all his infantry units. Doing so left him without a reserve if heavy opposition was struck. To complete his task at Enfidaville Kip would be forced to "borrow" the

²² Weir to Sandy, letter, 9 June 1943, in Kippenberger Notebook, New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs War History Branch, MS Papers 1555, ATL.

²³ 90 Light Division WD, quoted in Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.310.

²⁴ General La Ferla, to General Messe, commander 1 Army, letter, 18 April 1943, quoted in Ian McL Wards, *New Zealand in the Second World War Official History: Takrouna*, Wellington, 1951, p.29.

²⁵ Ross interview, *op. cit.*

reserve battalion of 6 Brigade.

There is another factor to consider. In his preface to a monograph on Takrouna Kip admitted that this battle:

came at the end of a severe ten months' campaign, when the Division was at the peak of its efficiency as a fighting machine but signs of strain were beginning to appear. None of the troops engaged had taken part in fewer than two battles, Medenine and Tebaga Gap, and the great majority in many more.²⁶

As Steve Weir commented shortly after Takrouna, "I think the Division can do with a short rest because towards the end we were undoubtedly getting a little fatigued" yet the Tunisian battles were "the most strenuous and the most exacting campaign".²⁷ After such long, hard campaigning it was inevitable that men and commanders alike were strained and tired and some of this pressure is reflected in the planning of the assault on Takrouna. It is little wonder that Kip, like Freyberg with Crete, would later become obsessed with this action and continually ask himself whether he had done all he could to prevent the forthcoming disaster.²⁸

The infantry attack went in at 2300 on 19 April in brilliant moonlight. On the right 6 Brigade's attack proceeded smoothly and 26 Battalion reached its final objective with only five wounded as casualties. On its left, 24 Battalion ran into heavy shelling and pulled up just short of the final objective with five dead and more than forty wounded. On the right of Takrouna the Maoris advanced late and without the support of the creeping barrage. Their attack quickly became disorganised as heavy fire poured into their flanks from Takrouna and the advancing infantry stumbled over concealed minefields. A Company reached the near slopes of Djebel Bir where, having lost over half its men, it was forced to ground. C Company, left with only one officer, went to ground in a small wadi near Takrouna. B Company on the left flank reached the east slope of Takrouna, paused, and then moved on to reach the road north of Takrouna, but it was in a

²⁶ Kippenberger, preface to Wards, *Takrouna*

²⁷ Weir to Sandy, letter, 9 June 1943, in Kippenberger Notebook, New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs War History Branch, MS Papers 1555, ATL.

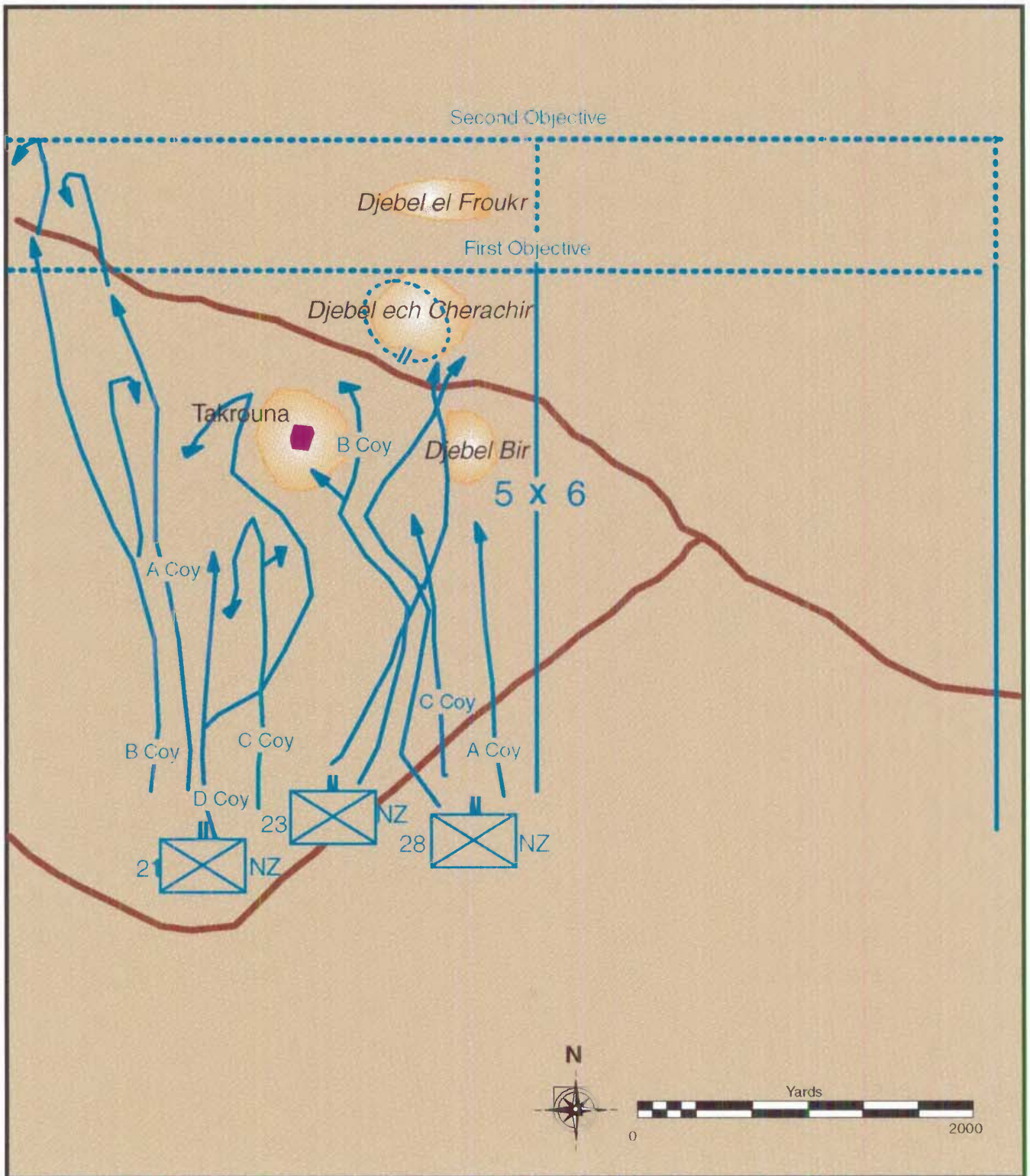
²⁸ Wards interview, 30 December 1992.

very weakened state with most of its officers killed or wounded. D Company, in reserve, followed B Company and joined them on the road. The battalion ended with its companies very weakened and widely scattered with the CO, three company commanders and several platoon commanders casualties.

On the left of Takrouna, 21 Battalion experienced even greater difficulties during its advance. C Company on the right flank had to cross very rough country and ran into intense fire including from the new six-barrelled rocket launcher known as the *nebelwerfer*. It was the New Zealand Division's first experience of this weapon. Machine gun fire from Takrouna took a very heavy toll on the open flank. The company was driven to ground in the middle of a minefield so that the company commander decided to withdraw to the start line. A and B Companies in the centre and left had more success because they were not delayed by the cactus hedges nor exposed as much to the fire from Takrouna. Both companies were able to reach the road relatively intact. D Company, in reserve, advanced behind them but ran into heavy mortar fire that claimed their OC and it was forced to take cover. While 21 Battalion had two companies on the road they were fighting for their lives on the enemy's main line of resistance. There was no contact with the Maoris on their right. Aware of how isolated the companies were on the road, Kip gave the order to withdraw, though the battalion commander had already decided this was the only sensible course of action left to him. The order was issued at 0430 hrs by LtCol Harding so that by 0530 all the companies of 21 Battalion were withdrawn to their start line. The west side of Takrouna had seen very heavy fighting and much gallantry but no objectives had been taken.

23 Battalion, Kip's most reliable and favourite unit, set off at 2200. It ran into very heavy fire on the way to its start line which wounded the CO, one company OC and all the platoon commanders in D Company. The battalion advanced under a junior officer, yelling at the tops of their voices and in short bounds of 200 yards. Captain "Sandy" Thomas, the officer in charge, had drawn on a previous experience for inspiration: "we prepared to move forward 'A la Galatos' with every man firing to the front and yelling to give confidence as well, I hoped, to terrify the odd Hun".²⁹ The battalion crossed the road where it suffered heavy casualties to machine gun fire and mines and was still some 200 yards from its start line. Thomas allocated B Company to take Cherachir and D

²⁹ W. B. Thomas, quoted in Ross, *23 Battalion*, p.270.



5 Brigade Company meanderings at Takrouna
19-20 April

Company Froukr. B Company did reach Cherachir but was forced to shelter on its southern slope just short of the crest. D Company, with all its officers hit, also halted on the southern slopes of Cherachir. The remains of the other companies joined D and B on its slopes. Why 23 Battalion succeeded against the odds was explained by Thomas after the war. According to him, on the eve of the battle Romans had spoken about the forthcoming attack:

one of the things he emphasised to me there was that in the event of the failure of the Maoris and 21 [Battalion] to take their objectives he said quite clearly that Kipp had ruled that we would have to fight for our startline and carry on regardless. I repeat this was vitally important, as a ruling from the Brigade commander and especially Kipp it was the reason why neither of us considered the advisability of pulling back even though we would have been more than justified at the time to do so.³⁰

23 Battalion was in a precarious position with Bir and Takrouna still in enemy hands. On the morning of 20 April it sited its position for all round defence as it was virtually surrounded and without support weapons. Its prospects for the day were not good.

But on that morning a near miracle occurred which allowed Kip to snatch victory from the jaws of disaster. A platoon of B Company of the Maori Battalion had remained on the southern slope of Takrouna where they had been tasked to make a feint attack to draw off the defenders while another company attacked the rear of the feature. That morning eight men of this platoon, reinforced by another man from D Company and a sergeant from 23 Battalion, and under command of Sergeant Rogers and Lance Sergeant Manahi, carried out a successful assault on Takrouna. The "force" was divided, Sergeant Rogers attacking from the south-east while Manahi with his party attacked from the south-west. Using fire and movement and advancing from rock to rock the two teams were half way up the slope by first light. The peculiar nature of Takrouna allowed the party to climb above the defensive positions and fire down into the weapon pits which were on the flat areas of the peak. One private doing so took

³⁰ W. B. Thomas to Wards, letter, 16 July, no year given, Letters to Mr Wards (Tunisian Campaign), WA II 3/24 NZNA.

sixty Italian POWs. The teams at last reached the ledge and had to climb the last twenty feet of a sheer rock face. They reached the pinnacle which was not defended. The German artillery OP on the pinnacle joined the POWs. The attackers fired down into Takrouna village on the south slope to deter a counter-attack and organised themselves into a defensive position as more stragglers from 5 Brigade joined them on the pinnacle. Only four of the original ten men who had carried out the assault remained. They were under the command of Manahi, as Sergeant Rogers had been killed during the attack.

Down on the flat a very concerned Kip was preparing a new plan to take Takrouna using 21 Battalion. He would normally have gone forward at first light to view the success of the night attack, but on this occasion "the situation was confused and uncertain that I thought I might be more useful at headquarters for a while". Then at 0800 he saw "to our surprise and delight, a stream of prisoners coming down from the pinnacle, about 150 of them".³¹

There was more good news to follow. 6 Brigade's attack on the right flank had been very successful and at first light a patrol of 26 Battalion entered Enfidaville and found it deserted. 8 Armoured Brigade followed the patrol of 26 Battalion and the village was occupied by 50 Division. With the help of the squadron of armour the Maoris were able to take Djebel Bir and reach 23 Battalion. This success secured the 5 Brigade's junction with 6 Brigade on its right flank.

During the day Kip visited the foot of Takrouna and decided to relieve the Maoris with a platoon from 21 Battalion. He rejected totally Horrocks' and Freyberg's suggestion to withdraw from Takrouna and pound it with artillery as he felt that such a key feature should now be held at all costs.³² He also arranged to relieve 23 Battalion that night with the reserve battalion from 6 Brigade.

Takrouna was far from secure, and a counter-attack at 1800 hrs was repulsed leaving nearly all the defending platoon casualties. They were replaced by another 21 Battalion platoon who were also counter-attacked at 2200, the attackers using an undiscovered tunnel linking the pinnacle with the village. Heavy losses were again inflicted on the attackers but the mosque and other buildings on the pinnacle were taken in this counterattack. A stalemate on Takrouna followed whereby neither side could remove the other. The Axis

³¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.308.

³² Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.333.

forces, however, now held the vital high ground.

On the morning of 21 April Kip took personal command of the action on Takrouna deciding that "the time had arrived to put an end to this affair". But as he organised an attack on the pinnacle and the village using 25 Battalion the enemy resistance "suddenly and unexpectedly collapsed".³³ Lance Sergeant Manahi had again entered the fray with a group of 14 men from B and D Company of the Maori Battalion. This small group attacked the pinnacle from two directions under cover of an artillery barrage, and aided by the accurate fire of a 17 pounder anti-tank gun used on the initiative of Kip's Brigade Major:

it suddenly occurred to me ... to use the 17 pounder anti-tank guns. We hadn't used them yet and we towed them all the way from Alamein. ... it shook the hell out of them.³⁴

The effect of the solid shot on the old buildings at Takrouna reduced the enemy to panic.³⁵

The Maoris retook the mosque, found it empty, and swept on down the slopes of Takrouna to attack the village. In the attack on the village another small group of 21 Battalion men under Lieutenant Hirst, on observing the action of the Maoris, attacked from the west slope to complete what became a pincer movement on the village. It was successful and the enemy, some 350 Italians and a few Germans, surrendered. Takrouna was now firmly held and, with the capture of Takrouna village, Operation ORATION came to an end.

The battle to take Takrouna impressed many who observed it. A Major with the Notts Yeomanry wrote to Freyberg of the action that "every position overcome was a little battle in itself and every yard forward of real gain in turning the enemy off this point which, I feel sure, he considered was impregnable".³⁶ General Horrocks, who witnessed the attack of the Maoris on 21 April, regarded it as "the most gallant feat of arms I witnessed in the course of

³³ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.312.

³⁴ Fairbrother interview, *op. cit.*

³⁵ Wards, *Takrouna*, p.27.

³⁶ Major M. Gold to Freyberg, letter, 27 April 1943, Miscellaneous, Personal, Private Correspondence, WA II 8/V NZNA.

the war".³⁷ In a message to NZ Division Horrocks stated that the battle for Takrouna:

was an epic. I should be most grateful if you would congratulate Brigadier Kippenberger on my behalf. ... Takrouna was a key position and until it was in our hands no further advance was possible. It was a magnificent effort which could only have been achieved by first class fighting troops.³⁸

Even some years after the war Horrocks could not "to this day, imagine how it was captured in the face of tenacious enemy resistance".³⁹ Freyberg, who had missed the Ruweisat and El Mreir disasters, believed Takrouna was "the hardest operation in the North African campaign".⁴⁰

Kip was also impressed with his troops' performance and labelled Takrouna "a real soldier's battle in which the initiative and determination of the fighting troops won the decision".⁴¹ Kip's actions throughout the battle had helped redeem the situation and he had refused to allow Horrocks and Freyberg to order a withdrawal from Takrouna. Wards stated that Kip:

had nursed the operation with all the means at his disposal and he had given a war correspondent the chance of referring to him as 'red eyed and unshaven'.⁴²

There were two great disappointments in this battle. The first, quite obviously, was the high casualty rate - 46 killed, 404 wounded and 86 missing.⁴³ Kip had lost nearly half his brigade in this one attack and it was a battle on which he would long ponder. According to Gentry, there was a reason for Kip appearing "red eyed" after the battle:

³⁷ LtGen Sir B. Horrocks, *A Full Life*, London, 1960. p.163.

³⁸ HQ 10 Corps to GOC NZ Div, Message G/93, 26 April 1943, WA II 8/31 NZNA.

³⁹ Horrocks, comment on Tunisian narrative, WA II 3/48 Acc 2452 NZNA.

⁴⁰ Wards, *Takrouna* p.28.

⁴¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.314.

⁴² Wards, *Takrouna* p.27. The correspondent was the *Argus* Richard Hughes and his account is held at WA II DA 406/99 NZNA.

⁴³ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.339.

He [Kip] suffered fairly heavy casualties and I wouldn't say it all went well, it went very badly. ... I found him in tears afterwards when he knew what had happened. I hadn't realised what [a] gentleman he was.⁴⁴

The second disappointment was that Lance Sergeant Manahi, the man who had done so much to capture this crucial feature, though recommended for a VC, a recommendation supported by Kippenberger, Freyberg and Horrocks, instead was awarded an immediate DCM. This lesser decoration rankled with many of the New Zealand commanders and the Maoris believe that a "gross injustice" was done to Manahi.⁴⁵ The only possible explanation for the denial of a VC to Manahi is that the award of a VC to Ngarimu for his action at Tebaga Gap may have unduly influenced the decision.

Wards has stated that the final capture of Takrouna allowed Kip a measure of "grim satisfaction".⁴⁶ This may have been true, but Kip's faulty plan combined with the underestimation of the enemy's intention and resolve by commanders at all levels in Eighth Army had made the battle much harder for the fighting soldiers to win and caused unnecessary casualties. For Kippenberger there was very little satisfaction in this knowledge. The effect of the battle on Kip was clearly seen when he addressed a 23 Battalion Church service. Lieutenant J.W. McArthur wrote to his wife of the occasion:

After the service he [Kip] went out in front and said, 'I have very little to say. I am proud and humble to be your commander'. He then walked off as I don't think he could trust himself to say any more. But it was all that was necessary. Kip is a great soldier with utter disregard of his own personal safety but ever solicitous of that of the men under him and he is loved and respected by all.⁴⁷

This love was reciprocal and it greatly pained Kip to see so many of his brigade killed and maimed through his mistakes.

⁴⁴ Gentry, transcript of interview with Chris Pugsley, 6 March 1991.

⁴⁵ W. Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p.125.

⁴⁶ Wards, *Takrouna* p.27.

⁴⁷ Lt J.W. McArthur to his wife, letter, quoted in Ross, *23 Battalion*, p.272.

The end in Africa was fast approaching and the attack at Enfidaville was the last major action of the New Zealand Division in North Africa. On 30 April Freyberg replaced Horrocks as GOC 10 Corps and Kip took over command of the New Zealand Division. The New Zealand Defence Minister reported this change of command to the Prime Minister and stated that Kippenberger "has given yeoman service and is held in exceptionally high esteem".⁴⁸ At the time it appeared as if Freyberg's departure would be permanent. As Kip remarked, "For me it was pleasing to get command of the Division but campaigning without the General was unthinkable".⁴⁹

Kippenberger's second spell as GOC 2 New Zealand Division was "short — fourteen days — and not particularly eventful".⁵⁰ The main focus of the enemy's encirclement had switched to the First Army's front and to maintain some pressure New Zealand Division carried out a series of small "bite and hold" operations in early May. Only on one occasion did the division strike heavy opposition. This was on the night of 8/9 May when 5 Brigade was counter-attacked and a company of the Maori Battalion was surrounded and forced to withdraw with twenty casualties. The following day the ground was retaken without loss and seventy-five POWs from 164 Light Division were captured. It was, according to Kippenberger, "a puzzling affair: the Germans had never before attacked at night in our experience, and it was hard to understand their reasons for now doing so".⁵¹

On 5 May 1943 the last big operation of the Allied forces in North Africa began. It lasted eight days. On 13 May 1943, the last official surrender of Axis troops occurred when Field Marshal Messe and General von Liebenstein surrendered in person to Freyberg at 10 Corps HQ. The march of Eighth Army from Alamein to Tunis covered some 2 000 miles, "the largest military progress in history", and averaged 10 miles a day for six months.⁵² At 1445 hrs that day Alexander sent the message to Churchill announcing that "All enemy resistance

⁴⁸ F. Jones to Prime Minister, letter, 6 May 1943, Document 225, *Docs II*, p.194.

⁴⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.316.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.319.

⁵² Stevens, *Bardia to Entfidaville*, p.372.

has ceased. We are masters of the North African shores".⁵³

For 2 New Zealand Division the end of the war in North Africa "just faded away" and was "something of an anti-climax".⁵⁴ After ten months of active campaigning the men of the division were dog-tired and in dire need of rest. The division needed to be built up to full strength too. There appeared to be no exhilaration nor excitement about the end of the war in North Africa just a numbness and a deep exhaustion. According to Weir:

I think the most important reason as to why the surrender fell a little tamely on us was the fact that we who had marched from El Alamein and done so much were not really in at the kill.⁵⁵

Others, however, were deeply affected by the loss of North Africa. Rommel recorded that the surrender in North Africa "was followed in the Fuehrer's HQ by an extraordinary collapse of morale". Rommel continued:

even more shattering was the realisation that our star was in decline and the knowledge of how little our command measured up to the trials which lay ahead. The moment the first Allied soldier set foot on Italian soil, Mussolini was finished and the dream of the rebirth of the Roman Empire was probably over for good.⁵⁶

Freyberg also recognised the significance of the Axis defeat in North Africa. For the Axis "it was a disaster of great magnitude ... second only to Stalingrad".⁵⁷ Freyberg echoed the line that Stalin was to push all through 1943:

the present initiative should be exploited and every opportunity taken to fight Germany quickly and fiercely on as broad front as possible ... the

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.368.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, pp.368, 369.

⁵⁵ Weir, comment on Tunisian narrative, p.634, para 1, WA II 3/48 Acc 2452 NZNA.

⁵⁶ *The Rommel Papers*, p.422.

⁵⁷ Freyberg to NZ PM, cipher message C529, 11 May 1943, WA II 8/31 NZNA.

summer campaigning months of 1943 may prove decisive.⁵⁸

What of Kippenberger's performance? Freyberg had already singled Kip out as a potential divisional commander during the long hard summer of 1942 and his performance during Alamein and after, only cemented this impression. Towards the end of the long advance Freyberg wrote to New Zealand that "Kippenberger and Gentry have commanded the two infantry brigades since the offensive started last October and both have been excellent".⁵⁹ With the departure of Gentry for New Zealand to take up the appointment of DCGS after 6 Brigade's successful attack at Enfidaville, Kippenberger was left as the most experienced and senior brigadier in the division and Freyberg's likely successor should Freyberg depart 2 NZEF. Kip's second term as GOC 2 NZ Division on 30 April, albeit for only fourteen days, and his later temporary promotion to Major General in Italy, confirmed Kip as Freyberg's successor. It was a measure of the esteem in which he was held that while campaigning in Tunisia, Kippenberger turned down an offer to command the British 56 Division.⁶⁰

The North African campaign had been the scene of much triumph and as many tragedies for Kippenberger. He had arrived back in North Africa after the two military disasters of Greece and Crete. Crete had established his reputation as a cool, collected battlefield commander with a thorough understanding of tactics. Then came further tragedy in the CRUSADER battles where Kip had the terrible experience of watching his whole battalion become isolated on Belhamed and overrun by German tanks — an experience from which he never fully recovered. Promotion to brigadier followed with further disaster at Ruweisat Ridge. Kip's prompt action at Ruweisat saved most of his brigade but at great cost. Alam Halfa and Alamein were turning points in his military career as they were for Eighth Army. At Alamein his brigade was the most successful of all the

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Freyberg to General Sir John Duigan, Army HQ Wellington, letter, 17 April 1943, WA II 8/V NZNA.

⁶⁰ Freyberg, 56 Div, note in Glue Papers.

infantry formations on the opening night and it had had one of the hardest objectives to capture.

The pursuit phase from Alamein to Enfidaville was one of frustration for Kip as he could see valuable opportunities wasted because of Freyberg's reluctance to get heavily involved with the enemy or take what seemed to Kip justifiable risks given the forces under command at the time. Freyberg's diary reflects Kip's efforts to spur him to decisive action and Kip, along with Gentry, did all he could to induce Freyberg to take advantage of the opportunities as they presented themselves. Operating under the constraints of a very cautious GOC and a very weakened infantry formation, Kip did all that could be expected of him during this phase of the North African campaign and did not set a foot wrong.

Enfidaville was an aberration. Kip's plan of attack on Takrouna and Djebel Bir clearly had not taken account of the change of terrain nor had they treated the enemy with the respect warranted at the time. In Kip's defence, no commander in Eighth Army had recognised that the change in terrain dictated a change in tactics. Only Freyberg seems to have recognised that the attack would not be the cake-walk everyone seemed to expect it would be. Takrouna was to be a costly victory for Kip's brigade and a victory that would always haunt his conscience. It was a sour note at the end of a campaign that since Alam Halfa had been otherwise perfectly played. Takrouna served as a preliminary for the assault at Cassino in central Italy but at Cassino the scale of the objective would be much larger and Kip would have command of the New Zealand Division.

Kip had learned his trade in this last year of war. He had learned some crucial lessons: such as where a brigadier was best placed to ensure the brigade's objectives were taken; such as the need to give clear, unambiguous orders to his subordinates and ensure these were clearly understood; and the crucial importance of accurate intelligence, of morale, of cooperation of all arms. Most importantly, he had learnt that in the moment of crisis in a battle the commander's place was at the front from where he could personally intervene.⁶¹ Kip later wrote: "Only four British Divisional Commanders were killed in France 1914-18 in battle, not nearly enough".⁶² This should not be seen as a

⁶¹ Kippenberger, covering letter with the Marshal critique, 11 June 1949, IA 77/35 NZNA.

⁶² *ibid.*

callous or flippant statement, but rather a reflection of Kip's hatred of "chateau" generalship. The only place for a commander, Kip believed, was with his troops in the front-line. Kip had learned from his reading before the war, and it had been confirmed by hard won experience in this war, that "the will of a commander might just tip the battle".⁶³ Italy would show whether Kip had learnt from his mistakes at Takrouna.

⁶³ Sir Leonard Thornton interview, *op. cit.*