

## Chapter 11: In the Belly of the Alligator. Italy November 1943 — February 1944

*Why stick your head in the alligator's mouth at Brest when you can go to the Mediterranean and rip his soft underbelly?*

W.S. Churchill, 1943<sup>1</sup>

*The mistake was ever to come 'o Italy.*

Freyberg December 1943<sup>2</sup>

Linked to the decision to retain 2 NZEF in the European theatre of war was the implementation of a furlough scheme for New Zealand's longest-serving soldiers. On 8 April 1943 Freyberg was informed by the military secretary that "it is right that you should know that Brig Kip would welcome the chance of getting back to New Zealand for three months — as long as he could be certain of getting back here again!"<sup>3</sup> When the first furlough draft sailed for New Zealand on 15 June 1943 it contained three-quarters of the survivors of the first three echelons to leave New Zealand, some 200 officers and 5800 ORs. As GOC troops of the first furlough draft was Brigadier Howard Kippenberger.

An incident occurred aboard the ship taking the men back to New Zealand which left a deep impression on the troops and further endeared Kip to them. A British sergeant-major presented Kip with a list of all the troops to whom he had allocated fatigue duties and other activities to keep the men "busy and out of mischief". Kip replied:

These men have come from the front line. They have had hard years.  
They are soldiers. Their leave began when they stepped on to this ship.

<sup>1</sup> quoted in M. W. Clark, *Calculated Risk* London, 1951, p.57.

<sup>2</sup> Freyberg Diary, 24 December 1943, GOC's Diary Part IV 3 September 1943 - 17 October 1944, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

<sup>3</sup> L. Rudd to Lieutenant General Freyberg, letter, 8 April 1943, Miscellaneous 1943, WA II 8/BB NZNA

The sergeant-major was stunned when Kip tore up his duty roster.<sup>4</sup>

While on board Kip wandered around the ship, stopping to talk with the men whenever he could, a pastime he clearly enjoyed. It puzzled the men that Kip never wore his red banded hat until of them plucked up the courage to ask, "Sir, why don't you wear your hat?". Kip replied, "Why, you'd all have to be saluting me. We don't want that".<sup>5</sup> For Kippenberger there was a time and place for saluting and it was not when men were being sent home on leave. Once again Kip's *mana* with the ordinary soldier shot up.

The furlough scheme was meant to provide soldiers and officers with three months of well-earned rest. Unfortunately this was not the case for the senior officers and for Kip in particular. The demands of official functions and of lecture tours told on Kip and near the end of his leave he collapsed. A memorandum in his army file recorded:

Dr. King of Rangiora phoned to say that Brig. Kippenberger is suffering from serious attack of gastric flu and is generally run down as result of strain from official functions. Dr. King said Brig. Kippenberger could not possibly travel inside of 2 weeks and in his opinion he should not leave N.Z. for at least a month. <sup>6</sup>

With characteristic thoughtfulness Freyberg sent Kip a personal message: "V ery sorry to hear you are ill. Looking forward to seeing you but you must not hurry on any account".<sup>7</sup> Freyberg's PA, Major John White, wrote in a letter to his commander that Kip had told him on his return that "they gave him no respite in New Zealand and both he and Colonel Burrows collapsed after three weeks of lecturing etc. This is a commentary on your own stamina!"<sup>8</sup> Freyberg later remarked that "Kipp does not seem to have had a real holiday in New Zealand. I gather his illness was a breakdown due to overdoing it with speeches".<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> J. Herbert, "Kip in action" *RSA Review*, 16 June 1976, p.5.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Brigadier A. E. Conway, Memo. for Brig. Kippenberger's File, 24 September 1943, D2/10021, Base Records Wellington.

<sup>7</sup> Freyberg to Kippenberger, personal message 27 September 1943, Misc. 1943, WA II 8 Part II BB NZNA.

<sup>8</sup> Major John White to Freyberg, letter, 9 November 1943, Misc - Personal 1943, WA II 8/Part II HH NZNA.

<sup>9</sup> Freyberg to Gentry, letter 20 December 1943, WA II 8/Part II HH NZNA.

The great demands placed on Kip and his subsequent illness are of significance. When combined with the long journey to rejoin the New Zealand Division in Italy, a twenty-eight hour flight in a Catalina flying boat followed by weeks in a ship, followed by two more days in a truck, it could hardly be said that it was a refreshed and rested brigadier who rejoined the division for the start of a new campaign. Kip was glad to be back, though, and experienced "a good feeling of being home again and a delightfully warm welcome".<sup>10</sup> Freyberg was "delighted" to have his most experienced and trusted brigadier back in the division.<sup>11</sup>

It was almost inevitable that the Allies should find themselves battling away on a new front in Italy before the second one had yet opened. Long-term British strategy and the suction effect of the North Africa campaign dictated it, as it was essential to maintain pressure on the Axis forces after their recent defeats in North Africa and Russia. Initially Sicily, and then the Italian mainland, were really the only places where this could be done in 1943. As Churchill maintained in his account of the war, North Africa was always meant to be "a springboard and not a sofa".<sup>12</sup> It was unthinkable in 1943 that the Allies would rest on this sofa and content themselves with the planning of OVERLORD while the Russians pushed the Germans out of the Soviet Union. All these factors combined to make an invasion of the Italian mainland irresistible. On 3 September, the day Italy signed an armistice ending hostilities with the Allies, the Eighth Army under Montgomery crossed the straits of Messina and landed unopposed on the toe of Italy. Six days later US Lieutenant General Mark Clark's Fifth Army landed at Salerno and was soon engaged by six German divisions. The Italian campaign had begun.

The purpose of the Italian campaign was to draw away from the vital fronts of Russia and Northern France as many men and as much materiel as possible. In August 1943 the Germans, aware that an invasion of the Italian mainland was extremely likely, had eighteen divisions committed in their defence of Italy. More were to follow by the end of the year. Because the main

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<sup>10</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.322.

<sup>11</sup> Freyberg Diary, 24 November 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

<sup>12</sup> Churchill, *op. cit.*, IV, p.583.

objective of the Italian campaign was to draw off troops from other theatres of war, it was always seen by the military planners in London as a subsidiary campaign which could not be allowed to stand in the way of success on the vital fronts. After 6 June 1944, it became, in the minds of its senior commanders and many of the soldiers, "a forgotten front"; and, in the minds of others at home, a haven for "D Day Dodgers".<sup>13</sup> The Italian campaign, owing to Italy's distinctive terrain, was to see some of the hardest fighting of the war, fighting in which the New Zealand Division and Kippenberger were heavily involved.

As no other war before it, the Second World War demanded a thorough understanding of the crucial impact of terrain on modern warfare. Nowhere was this crucial impact more obvious than on the battlefields of the Italian campaign. The peninsula of Italy is about 1 000 miles long and 100 miles wide. This narrowness — eighty-five miles at the narrowest point — when combined with the mountains, which in the centre of the peninsula form one continuous mass, and the flood-prone rivers which drain the mountains — all make the terrain of Italy a defender's paradise. Any attacking force is heavily penalised because attacks have to be confined to narrow and predictable areas, mobility is heavily restricted, and it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to deploy armoured forces in any number or depth. It is also very difficult to supply adequately modern armies, and communications are difficult to establish and easily disrupted. A defender, on the other hand, has a great number of natural obstacles available to make the attacker's task much more difficult. The terrain in Italy was the opposite of that in the Western Desert. Strategically, Italy may have seemed the soft underbelly of Europe, tactically it was a "tough old gut".<sup>14</sup>

The importance of the terrain was immediately recognised by General Freyberg although he would take some time to adjust to the realities of it. In a

<sup>13</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*, p.15, M. Page, *Kiss Me Goodnight, Sergeant Major: The Songs and Ballads of World War II*, London, 1975, p.193. As Page has stated, the term "D Day Dodger" is attributed to the first British female MP, Nancy, Lady Astor, who always denied that she ever made such a remark. John Ellis claims in *The Sharp End*, p.344, that the originator of the slur was Lady Docker.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Clark, quoted in "Tough Old Gut", *The World at War*, Programme 13, Italy November 1942—June 1944, Series Producer Jeremy Issacs, Thames Television 1980.

Special Order of the Day issued to the New Zealand troops on their way to Italy Freyberg had stated that "the country will favour defence and infantry will play a bigger part".<sup>15</sup> Five days later he wrote in his diary after visiting 2 Canadian Division on the Eighth Army front, the place was "a very hilly and difficult country giving much food for thought re future tactics".<sup>16</sup> Truer words were never written.

The New Zealand Division that sailed for Italy in two groups in the first weeks of October 1943 was a unique fighting formation. It consisted of two infantry brigades, each of three battalions, and an armoured brigade of three armoured regiments and one motorised infantry battalion. The divisional artillery consisted of three regiments of field artillery, 72 twenty-five pounders, and an anti-tank regiment of seventeen and six pounder anti-tank guns. The division also included a machine-gun battalion, the Divisional Cavalry, its own engineers and a General Hospital. All told the formation had some 4 600 vehicles, which included 164 Sherman tanks and sixty Staghound armoured cars, and 22 000 personnel.<sup>17</sup> The division was an exceptionally powerful one and a formidable fighting force. No other division was superior in firepower to 2 New Zealand Division. Freyberg could accurately state to the men of the division on the eve of the Italian campaign that "we will take the field as the most powerfully equipped Division in the world".<sup>18</sup>

Yet the division had two serious flaws in its make-up. The first was that it had been formed on the basis of its previous campaigning and as such was a highly-mobile, fast-moving and hard-hitting instrument of war. Outflanking movements and rapid exploitation were its specialities. It was now being sent into a new campaign that favoured the defence, that greatly restricted mobility and where outflanking movements were impossible. Secondly, the division had converted 4 Infantry Brigade to an armoured brigade in order to provide for its own armoured protection which had been vitally lacking in its earlier desert campaigns. Earlier Freyberg alluded to the importance that infantry would play

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<sup>15</sup> Freyberg, *Special Order of the Day* 4 October 1943, Historical Notes August—December 1943, WA II 8/32A NZNA.

<sup>16</sup> Freyberg Diary, 9 October 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

<sup>17</sup> Freyberg, Cipher Message to Mideast C1011, 27 September 1943, WA II 8/32A NZNA.

<sup>18</sup> Freyberg, *Special Order of the Day* 4 October 1943, Historical Notes August—December 1943, WA II 8/32A NZNA.

in the new campaign. N.C. Phillips, the New Zealand official historian, has written that the defensive terrain of Italy not only limited the use of the tank in the attack role but “sets a premium on hardy and skilled infantry trained in mountain warfare”.<sup>19</sup> But 2 New Zealand Division was now weakened in infantry compared to any standard division and its infantry were not trained in mountain warfare. This weakness in infantry was to be painfully revealed in the campaigning ahead, so much so, that in January 1945 the Divisional Cavalry, 22 Motorised Infantry Battalion and 27 Machine Gun Battalion were converted to infantry and formed 9 Infantry Brigade. This imbalance was not confined solely to the New Zealanders. Freyberg informed Puttick after Cassino that the Allies had “overproduced in Armoured formations” which meant that “Infantry Divisions are overworked owing to genuine shortage. Bulk of extravagantly equipped armoured formations have not seen shot fired for a full year”.<sup>20</sup>

When Kip rejoined the division in November 1943 it was on the left flank of Eighth Army which was preparing to cross the Sangro River. The steady advance of Eighth Army up the Adriatic coast, some 300 miles in seventy days, had forced the Germans to defensive positions on the north bank of the Sangro. Eighth Army had closed up to the river’s southern bank and was confident of pushing further northward. As Kip commented “There were high hopes of a quick success, a rapid advance as far as Pescara, and thence a move on Rome through the Apennines”.<sup>21</sup>

The Sangro Valley was about two miles wide and consisted of an alluvial plain running for about a mile, three to four hundred yards of riverbed, and marsh on both banks of the river. The river itself contained several channels of water and was only knee high in dry weather but could rise up to six feet in one day in time of rain. It also flowed very quickly. Five to six miles north of the river ran a 1200-foot ridge on which were located the main enemy defences in the New Zealand sector. These consisted of about 4 000 troops of the German 65 Division, a non-German formation consisting mostly of Poles and Lorrainers, poorly equipped and lacking battle experience.

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<sup>19</sup> N. C. Phillips, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45 Italy Volume I The Sangro to Cassino*, Wellington, 1957, p.21.

<sup>20</sup> Freyberg to Puttick, telegram D.135, 8 April 1944, PERS Puttick 5/2 NZNA.

<sup>21</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.322.

The New Zealand Division planned to cross the Sangro as early as the night of 20/21 November but heavy rain delayed the attack across the river until the night of 27/28. During this waiting period the New Zealand Division carried out forty-four reconnaissance patrols, all but two at night. Twenty-six of these patrols succeeded in crossing the Sangro and reported the water level ranging from knee-deep to neck-high.<sup>22</sup> By the 27/28 November the division was ready to launch its first attack in Italy. It planned to send both its infantry brigades across the river in a night crossing and establish them firmly on the right bank of the river. The brigades would then exploit north and west and force the enemy back to his prepared *Winterstellung* (winter positions). The two brigades were to have the artillery support of the three field regiments and a troop of medium guns. The tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment were to attempt to ford the river in the wake of the infantry while the division's engineers would begin bridging the Sangro as soon as it was possible to make the attempt.

Kip returned to the division after his tiring furlough on 24 November and assumed command of 5 Brigade next day. Driving up from Taranto after arriving in Italy Kip had a premonition of his fate in Italy saying to his driver "I'll either be killed on a mine or in a car accident".<sup>23</sup> He was kept exceptionally busy preparing his brigade's attack which was expected in twenty-four hours but was later postponed. He had gone forward to conduct a personal reconnaissance and had been instrumental in persuading Freyberg to use both infantry brigade's in the crossing rather than committing only the one.<sup>24</sup> In his own words, Kip's plan "was simple enough"<sup>25</sup> — cross the river with two battalions, keeping one in reserve. They would cross the river in single file holding on to ropes fastened to posts driven into both river banks. While crossing the men would be most exposed, so the move was timed to coincide with a heavy artillery concentration on the heights above the north bank. The battalions would then form up on a road on the flat, close up to the heights and assault them when the artillery barrage lifted. The infantry were to consolidate on the heights and await their supporting arms which was dependent on the engineers' success in bridging the river.

<sup>22</sup> Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.54.

<sup>23</sup> Kippenberger to Glue, record of conversation 2 March 1956, Glue Papers.

<sup>24</sup> "Kip as GOC 2 Div", Glue Papers.

<sup>25</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.322.

The attack went according to plan, summed up by a comment in the War Diary: "everything going well".<sup>26</sup> Only once did one of Kip's battalions strike difficulty. 21 Battalion had some trouble gaining the heights and the CO asked Kip for assistance from the other attacking battalion. Kip believed the request unwarranted and refused to send help. 21 Battalion had to battle on unassisted "and before long it was safely on its objective with only twenty-one casualties".<sup>27</sup> The War Diary recorded that while 21 Battalion had taken both objectives, it held them in platoon strength only "due to men getting lost in darkness".<sup>28</sup> The other battalion, the 23rd, had only ten casualties and both battalions had taken eighty POWs from 65 Division. Kip insisted they consolidate on their objectives and then send out battle patrols.<sup>29</sup> On the morning of 28 November the engineers succeeded in bridging the river with a Bailey Bridge of ninety feet which was soon taking traffic across the river. The effort to get tanks up to the infantry was "defeated by mud".<sup>30</sup> By nightfall only fifteen tanks had joined 6 Brigade on its objectives and none had reached 5 Brigade. Already the Italian campaign was demonstrating the difficulty of using armour with infantry in such terrain and climate.

That the crossing of the Sangro, Operation ARTERY, was "a satisfactory and surprisingly easy affair"<sup>31</sup> was the general conclusion of all concerned. Freyberg recorded in his diary, "our own attack started with the guns opening at 0245. Continued until dawn — all objectives taken with very few casualties".<sup>32</sup> Phillips stated that the crossing of the Sangro "held greater discomfort than danger" and his conclusion was that it a very good first up performance by the New Zealand infantry in Italy.<sup>33</sup> The sporadic, poorly coordinated and dispirited resistance by 65 Division had made the task easier and the enemy had not been able to capitalise on the slowness of the armour to reach the isolated infantry. A better trained and equipped opposition would not have been so generous. 5 Brigade's casualties in the Sangro crossing had been very light — seven killed

<sup>26</sup> 5 Bde WD, 0255 hrs 28 November 1943, WA II 1 DA 52/1/47 NZNA.

<sup>27</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.324.

<sup>28</sup> 5 Bde WD, 0632 hrs 28 November 1943, WA II 1 DA 52/1/47 NZNA.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

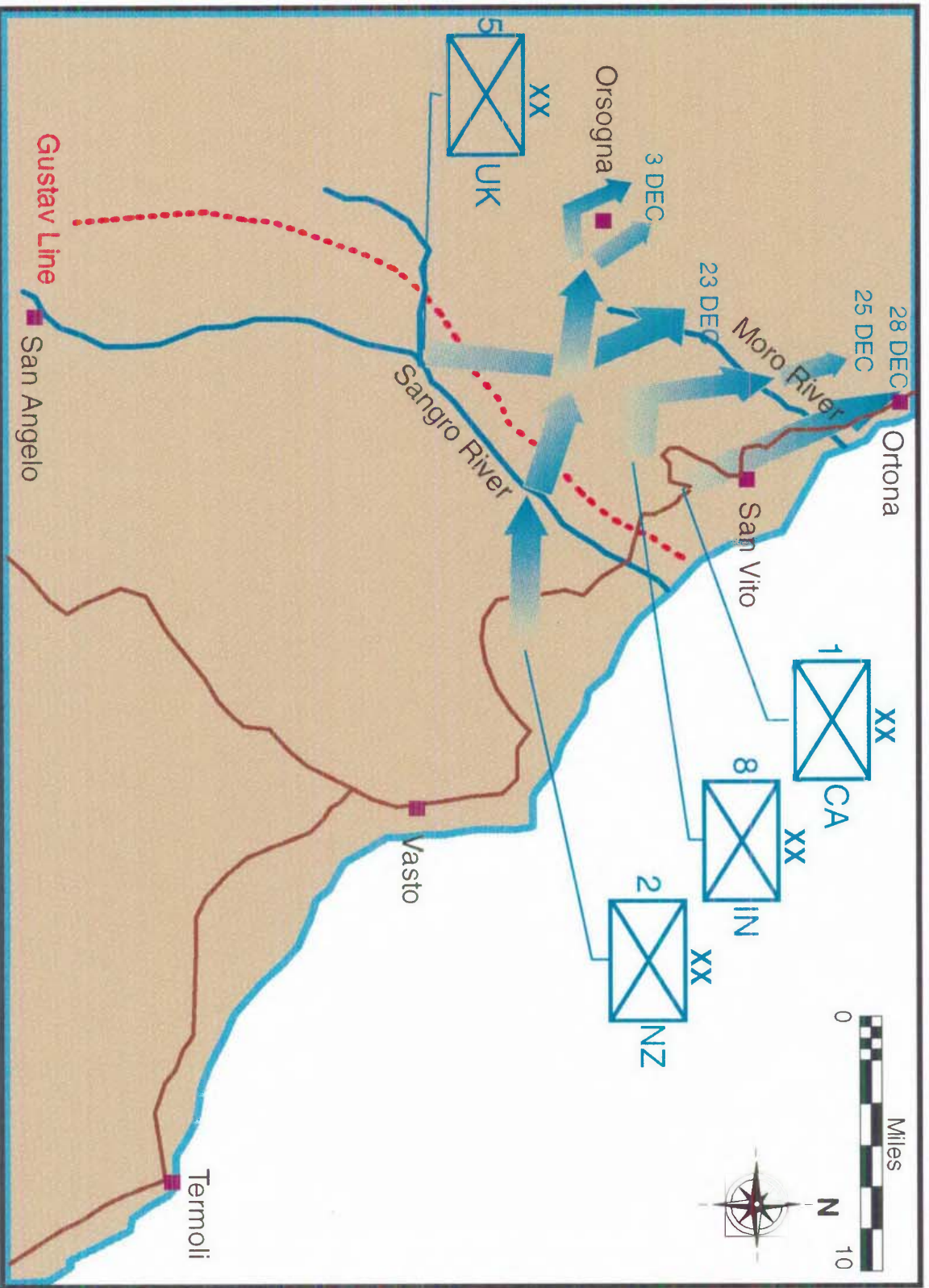
<sup>30</sup> Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.72.

<sup>31</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.324.

<sup>32</sup> Freyberg Diary, 28 November 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips, *op. cit.*, pp.68, 71.





# The breaching of the Gustav Line beyond the Sangro River

Italy, December 1943

and thirty-four wounded.<sup>34</sup>

The 28 November was occupied with consolidation of the newly won positions. On 29 November limited advances, mainly on the left flank, were made to straighten the New Zealand line. Freyberg recorded that he “received patrol reports which rather indicated all was well — went and saw Comd 5 Bde and climbed the OP — things seemed quiet”.<sup>35</sup> 6 Brigade advanced about a mile that day, 5 Brigade, with less straightening to do, much less than this. The 30 November was another day of quiet advances but of greater distances — an advance of seven miles. On 1 December Freyberg recorded “All Bns advanced with very little opposition”.<sup>36</sup> That evening 24 Battalion attempted to take the fortress town of Castelfrentano and seized its southern edge. Later that night a disgraced 65 Division withdrew from the town and 24 Battalion entered it next morning at 0700 hrs. The German Winter line had been breached without a major struggle and Allied confidence soared. That day General Montgomery conferred with Freyberg:

The Generals agreed that with the 5 Army pushing today the Boche was broken. General Montgomery: “I think you will be in Chieti in a couple of days”.<sup>37</sup>

Things were about to change quickly. 65 Division was replaced with the 90 Panzer Grenadier Division and the German commander coolly reorganised his defences. The German defences would hold firm along the mountain sector at Melone in the west but pivot back to the Orsogna-Ortona road to the sea behind the Moro River.

While 5 Brigade formed a firm base at Castelfrentano, 4 Armoured Brigade probed west and 6 Brigade tried to gate crash Orsogna but without much force or enthusiasm. Leaving a battalion outside of the town as an additional firm base to the one already provided by 5 Brigade, on 3 December 25 Battalion attempted to

<sup>34</sup> 5 Bde WD, 28 November 1943, WA II 1 DA 52/1/47 NZNA.

<sup>35</sup> Freyberg Diary, 29 November 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, 1 December 1943.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, 2 December 1943.

take Orsogna in a dawn attack. Using only two companies of infantry, but leaving one at the gates of the town, 25 Battalion were rudely awakened to the enemy's intentions when the single company in the town was attacked from two sides by armoured cars and infantry. The battalion had to abandon the attack and suffered eighty-three casualties in its half-hearted assault. The attempt to take Orsogna failed for three reasons: the seven hour delay in implementing a battalion attack on the town, the weakness with which it was carried out and the caution shown in doing so. Not only did 6 Brigade have a whole brigade as a firm base at Castelfrentano, Kip's 5 Brigade, it provided its own firm base outside of the town with its 24 Battalion. Then the assaulting battalion kept one of its companies in reserve, created its own firm base with another company at the gates of the town and carried out the assault on the town with only one company of infantry. The official historian is scathing about this missed opportunity:

Here was compounded reinsurance, defence in depth with a vengeance. For a lunge forward, there seems to have been disproportionate weight on the back foot. The firmness of the base far exceeded the sharpness of the apex.<sup>38</sup>

Certainly the caution demonstrated in this attack was excessive. It was the end of "peaceful penetration" of the German lines by the New Zealanders and it had become clear to all concerned that "we would have to prepare a full-scale attack. The task looked formidable".<sup>39</sup>

The task would indeed prove formidable and beyond the means of the division. Orsogna was a hilltop town with steep slopes to its south and east — the direction from which the New Zealand attacks would be made. It was perched on a high ridge through which the one approach road ran to Ortona the town on the eastern coast. Added to the great natural strength of Orsogna were the effects of winter weather which made movement of vehicles off the sealed roads impossible. Orsogna was heavily defended from the east, south, and north-east and could not be outflanked from the west. It would have to be carried in a direct assault and, as the New Zealand commanders were informed at their first

<sup>38</sup> Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.95.

<sup>39</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.326.

planning conference, the terrain "is reported to be hopeless for tanks".<sup>40</sup> The New Zealand Division would launch three assaults against this "Stalingrad of the Abruzzi".<sup>41</sup> All would fail.

The first assault, Operation TORSO, was planned for the afternoon of the 7 December 1943. There appear to have been several hiccups in the planning of the operation from the start. There were three different planning conferences, all of which changed the plan of attack in some way. There was also a clash between the two brigadiers, Kip and Parkinson, over the rate of the advance for the infantry, with Kip using the afternoon of 6 December to demonstrate a realistic rate of advance with one of his infantry battalions. At the last moment the plan was changed because Kip "got permission to make an eccentric attack with the Twenty-third and get established on the broad Sfasciata Spur".<sup>42</sup> While this attack on Sfasciata Spur would be the only success in TORSO it gave Kip's battalion commanders less than three hours to prepare their plans for the main event.

In a total break with tradition the attack was to begin at 1430 hours in order to allow Orsogna to be bombed from the air and to give the advancing infantry time to consolidate on their objectives while not allowing the enemy adequate daylight hours to launch a counter attack. The two infantry brigades were to attack the town from the east advancing down parallel spurs. Kip's 5 Brigade was to advance on the right with the object of cutting the Ortona road east of Orsogna while, on its left, 6 Brigade advanced parallel to them and took the town, exploiting to the high ground beyond. 6 Brigade was to have tank support in its assault on Orsogna and was to make the vital thrust of the operation. If this failed, the whole operation failed, yet Brigadier Parkinson planned to use only one of his three battalions to take the town. His 25 Battalion would provide a firm base for the brigade, the 26 would provide a flank guard on the left and 24 Battalion had the task of taking Orsogna. On 6 Brigade's right Kip planned to use 28 (Maori) Battalion to establish themselves across the Orsogna-Ortona Road while 23 Battalion occupied part of the Sfasciata Spur as a right flank guard. Facing 5 Brigade's line of advance was the 9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment and II Battalion from 146 Regiment. Defending the town were three companies of 26 Panzer Reconnaissance Unit.

<sup>40</sup> Notes of Conference, Main HQ 2 NZ Div 1700 hrs 5 Dec 43, WA II 8/32A NZNA.

<sup>41</sup> Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.96.

<sup>42</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.329.

The attack went ahead and Orsogna was subjected to a ninety minute bombardment, "highly spectacular but probably not very effective".<sup>43</sup> 6 Brigade had great difficulty advancing to Orsogna and its entry into the town met considerable opposition. Although the attacking companies reached the village square they were driven to cover by enemy tanks. The New Zealand armour had been held up by demolitions on the edge of town and when they finally entered Orsogna were again held up by a well-concealed German tank that proved impossible to shift. Minefields prevented an outflanking movement. The two infantry companies were driven from the town square, tried another attack but encountered more tanks and had to take up defensive positions on the edge of the town. At 0230 hrs Brigadier Parkinson and his battalion commander urged a withdrawal of troops from Orsogna and Freyberg agreed.

Meanwhile Kip's attack had met with some success. 23 Battalion had easily taken its objectives and was firmly established on the heights of Sfasciata Spur. 28 Battalion, after a very difficult advance, had succeeded in cutting the road and secured a deep lodgement of 500 yards into the German defences. Their position astride and across the Orsogna-Ortona road was precarious though and attempts to manhandle support weapons up to their positions failed despite "superhuman efforts under the Maori 2 i/c".<sup>44</sup> That night the Maoris repulsed several counterattacks by German infantry and tanks. Though some ground was lost the Maoris still held their penetration across the coast road. That evening Freyberg recorded in his diary:

It is utterly impossible to get any guns up on 5 Bde front. They have called for 2 Stonks and have asked for them again. Brig Kip said they were likely to have trouble until ORSOGNA is taken.<sup>45</sup>

Early on 8 December the Maori Battalion's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Fairbrother, pointed out to Kip that his battalion would be exposed to the full firepower of the defenders in daylight and his position would be untenable. Kip agreed, checked the progress of 6 Brigade, and then gave the order for the Maoris to withdraw. Freyberg readily concurred with his decision and recorded:

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p.331.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>45</sup> Freyberg Diary, 2015 hrs 7 December 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

it was obvious that unless the tanks got through Kip could not hold on the right with no supporting arms up. Efforts to get 6-pr through by manhandling had failed. I ordered 5 Bde to withdraw.<sup>46</sup>

For the second time the New Zealanders had failed to take Orsogna. Once again terrain and climate had exposed the limitation of armour in the attack role. The lesson learned in North Africa, that daylight attacks were very risky, had been reemphasised for the new campaign. New Zealand casualties amounted to about 160 of which thirty had been killed. German dead and wounded amounted to fewer than half of the New Zealand figures.<sup>47</sup>

5 Brigade's attack in Operation TORSO had been very successful but upon 6 Brigade's performance the success of the whole operation had rested. The only gain secured had been that of 23 Battalion on Sfasciata Spur which could be used as a springboard to envelop Orsogna from the north. The gaining of the spur was especially important as tanks could travel along its flat ridge. As Kip stated the possession of Sfasciata "was important and it directed attention to the only really promising approach".<sup>48</sup> That afternoon Freyberg and Kip conferred about securing the gain made by 23 Battalion:

They both agreed getting supporting arms forward was fundamental and the show must not go off half cock, therefore must consider operation two or three days later.<sup>49</sup>

The next day Kip secured 23 Battalion's lodgement on the spur by moving up six 6-pounder anti-tank guns. Freyberg recorded that "the operation to make a firm base on 5 Bde front now looks more promising".<sup>50</sup>

The next assault on Orsogna, Operation FLORENCE, would be launched from Sfasciata Spur on the morning of 15 December. From the end of TORSO to

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, 8 December 1943.

<sup>47</sup> Phillips, *op. cit*, p.116.

<sup>48</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.331.

<sup>49</sup> Freyberg Diary, 8 December 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, 9 December 1943.

the beginning of FLORENCE was a quiet period devoted to patrolling and peaceful penetration by 23 Battalion along the spur to within 500 yards of the road. Although it was a quiet period, the troops in the field were struggling under enormous handicaps. Most of the forward troops were in slit trenches exposed to the elements --- heavy rain, sleet and snow --- and "lived a wretched life".<sup>51</sup> Kip was immune from these hardships, however, as his HQ was in a large house and he had his Brigadier 's caravan. With a fire at night and supplies of cognac available Kip "had nothing to complain of" and passed "some pleasant evenings".<sup>52</sup> Although Kip claimed that the troops were still quite cheerful in their suffering, there is an uncomfortable feeling that his comfort compared to their living conditions, has an element of the *chateau* generalship of the Great War. Kip's caravan, however, was much closer to the front than the *Chatcaux* ever were and he was a constant visitor to the forward positions..

Flanking 5 Brigade's position on the spur was the British Fifth Division which Kip regarded as "overtrained and far too formal". It caused him some concern as its patrolling was poor and nowhere along its line was it in touch with the enemy. When Kip visited the division:

everybody we met or came in sight of saluted correctly, and Denis [his Brigade Major] was the whole time marching at attention while I was incessantly returning salutes, we had to retire, defeated. I never saw anything like it until I visited the Guards Depot at Caterham. Despite its good saluting this division had not then found the fighting form it later produced and we thought it a very unsatisfactory neighbour.<sup>53</sup>

While Kip could appreciate the need for parade ground "spit and polish" this had its place and was of little use if its fighting performance did not match the same standards a division set itself away from the battlefield. By contrast, New Zealand soldiers were not asked to nor expected to salute in the field.

On the 14 December Freyberg and Kip had agreed that "it now seemed like

<sup>51</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.334.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*, p.333.

the psychological moment”<sup>54</sup> to launch the attack. The operation planned for the next day was to be primarily a 5 Brigade affair assisted by the tanks of two armoured regiments. The plan envisaged an attack by 21 Battalion to the northwest with the object of seizing the next ridge just short of the Ortona road. 23 Battalion was directed west along Sfasciata Spur to capture one mile of the road north of the cemetery. The tanks of 18 Armoured Regiment were to be ready to assist in the attack by resisting any counterattacks made on the battalions and they were to be ready to exploit any gains. In reserve Kip had the Maori Battalion and 20 Armoured Regiment. 6 Brigade’s role in this attack was limited to providing flank protection.

Freyberg recorded that at 0100 hrs on 15 December the artillery barrage of 160 guns, one gun for every eleven yards of ground the infantry had to cross, opened fire and “our attempt to cut the the ORSOGNA-ORTONA road began”.<sup>55</sup> The attack initially started very well. 21 Battalion easily gained its objectives but 23 Battalion struck much heavier opposition and lost forty per cent of its assaulting infantry in gaining the road. Its CO was mortally wounded during this assault so that it the battalion was very weak and disorganised on its objective. 23 Battalion had to beat off an early counterattack before it was joined by the tanks of 18 Regiment at 0600. It had only five tanks in close support with another two troops in reserve — as Kip reported to Freyberg “less than half the tanks are up. Not enough to exploit”.<sup>56</sup> The attack, though, had taken the German defenders by surprise and accounted for some three companies of Panzer Grenadiers.

Kip called on a squadron of 20 Regiment to assist 23 Battalion, and it duly arrived at 1300 hrs. With these on the way and with no sign of enemy tanks Kip ordered 18 Regiment to begin its exploitation towards the town at 1100 hrs with a reconnaissance in force but urged caution. Six tanks of the regiment set off but halted beyond the cemetery when one was set aflame by an anti-tank gun. Two hours later the tanks of 20 Regiment tried to exploit along the road into Orsogna. Three more tanks were hit in the same location but the advance continued until they ran into three Mark IV Panzers. Two more tanks were hit, another became stuck in the mud, and, with no infantry in support and the light fading, the attempt at taking Orsogna was halted.

<sup>54</sup> Freyberg Diary, 9 December 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, 15 December 1943.

<sup>56</sup> Freyberg Diary, 15 December 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.



The infantry suffered 130 casualties in the attack, most in 23 Battalion, and twenty-five Shermans had been lost or damaged. Over 100 POWs were taken and three enemy tanks destroyed. Despite the losses and the failure of the armoured probes towards Orsogna hopes ran high in the New Zealand camp that the enemy were on their last legs and the town would be taken the next day. The Maori Battalion was brought forward and readied for the exploitation role on 16 December.

The Germans were indeed staggering under the weight of the New Zealand attack. The War Diary of 9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment recorded:

15 December had seen the regiment committed to the very last man. It had lost heavily in men and equipment. A large number of men were missing and it is considered that the vast majority must be killed or wounded, as they had stuck to their guns for hours under terrible shellfire and had shot away all their ammunition. We had no men to pick up the dead and wounded, even if the fire had permitted it.<sup>57</sup>

But the Germans were determined to seal the breach in their lines and Field Marshal Kesselring himself ordered every available gun against the New Zealand tanks. He also moved to the threatened sector a company of mountain troops, a company of engineers and the elite 6 Parachute Regiment. The local German commander decided to commit this regiment to an immediate counterattack on the New Zealand positions which was launched at 0315 hrs at 16 December. At 0450 Kip informed Freyberg that a "counterattack was coming on 21 Bn front with tanks, flamethrowers and infantry ... On 23 Bn another attack is being mounted". At 0620 Kip informed Freyberg that the "counterattack had been repulsed and front was quiet".<sup>58</sup> The Germans lost heavily in this attack — fifty dead and four tanks destroyed.

16 December was the crucial day for Operation FLORENCE. At 0700 hrs Kip sent two squadrons of 20 Regiment and two companies of 28 Battalion down the road in the direction of Orsogna. The rest of the infantry were used to provide covering fire. Once beyond the protection of the cemetery, the armour was immediately in trouble and drew the fire of numerous artillery and anti-

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<sup>57</sup> War Diary, 9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, quoted in Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.128.

<sup>58</sup> Freyberg Diary, 16 December 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

tank guns. The infantry accompanying the attack were immediately driven to cover, and contact and communications with the armour was immediately lost. The tanks travelled further down the road until they ran into enfiladed anti tank fire which halted their progress. At 1000 hrs Kip ordered the tanks back to the infantry positions. Ten more tanks had been lost in this brief attempt at exploitation. At 1210 Kip reported to Freyberg:

Kip said there was nothing very good to report — tanks had had very heavy shelling. Five knocked out last night, and six this morning. Forced to pull back. Infantry are all right and have not had very heavy shelling.<sup>59</sup>

Another attempt to take Orsogna had failed. The attack again revealed the difficulties of using armour in such terrain and had demonstrated the inadequate level of cooperation between infantry and armour. While the attack breached the German lines and cut the Orsogna-Ortona road which was now secured against counterattack, with twenty tanks and nine anti-tank guns in position, there was little comfort in these gains as the lodgement could not be extended and the defences of Orsogna still held firm. The fighting had been intense and Kip's brigade had responded well. As Freyberg recorded in his diary, "I didn't realise how big a job it was the infantry and tanks had done. I think they have done magnificently".<sup>60</sup> Kip's assessment of the assault was not entirely negative:

Although it was finally disappointing we gained a substantial success in this hard-fought action. The enemy had lost unusually heavily and we were securely across the Ortona road on a broad enough front to be able to launch further attacks when we were ready.<sup>61</sup>

Following this third attempt to take Orsogna there was a pause of several days while the division psyched itself up for one last try. Reconnaissance patrols on 17th confirmed that the German positions were intact and very strong. During this lull an unfortunate episode occurred in which Kip's judgment was

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, 17 December 1943.

<sup>61</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.338.

questioned by the Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Miles Dempsey. Ahead of 5 Brigade's position was an important feature, the ridge of Fontegrande, which Dempsey believed could be taken without a formal attack. Kip felt this was not feasible as enemy resistance had stiffened rather than slackened as Dempsey had implied. Nevertheless, Dempsey was supported by Freyberg and Kip was ordered to occupy the ridge the next night and to consolidate on the feature. It was not to be the last clash with Dempsey.

On the night of 17 December Kip sent out three patrols of twelve men with orders to advance silently to Fontegrande Ridge, dig in and wait to be reinforced. All three patrols ran into serious opposition. The War Diary tells the story:

Corps Comdr directs that 5 NZ INF BDE will occupy ridge approx 240040 by peaceful means. ... 21 BN to send fighting patrol fwd which will withdraw in the event of opposition. ... Opposition was encountered and DF called for. Patrol returned to BN area at 0420 hrs. Casualties 1 OR died of wounds, 2 OR wounded, 1 Offr and 1 OR wounded and missing.<sup>62</sup>

The missing officer had been killed and valuable maps and papers had been taken from his body by the Germans on the ridge. The raid simply confirmed what Kip had known and it is little wonder that Kip was in "a black temper" at the next conference with General Dempsey.<sup>63</sup>

The New Zealand troops had been in the front line for over a month in freezing, appalling conditions and were showing "signs of strain".<sup>64</sup> Yet, on 21 December, the policy of "go slow" was reversed and Kip was told to prepare an attack on the two forward ridges in front of 5 Brigade. The attack, Operation ULYSSES, would be carried out by two battalions of 5 Brigade and 26 Battalion from 6 Brigade placed under Kip's command. In an effort to turn the Orsogna defences from the north the three battalions were to advance from the Ortona road under cover of a massive creeping barrage, seize the two ridges and then use

<sup>62</sup> 5 Bde WD, 18 -19 December 1943, WA II 1 DA 52/1/48 NZNA.

<sup>63</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.339.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

20 Armoured Regiment to exploit. Kip was “not pleased, nor very optimistic” about having to make the attack, nor was he convinced the troops were at their best, but “I concealed my doubts and got ahead with the business”.<sup>65</sup> If Kip was unhappy about another attack the officers and men who would be required to make one last effort were even more so. The requirement for a fourth attempt at Orsogna caused “some bewilderment among officers as well as men that the offensive was being pressed so relentlessly when the commonsense course seemed to be to settle down for the winter”.<sup>66</sup> Kip summed up the feeling before the battle:

Generally things were not right before this action. The Twenty-first was unhappy and anxious about its right flank. The Twenty-sixth was in a strange brigade, on completely strange ground which it had not seen in daylight, and it was exhausted before it started. The Maoris were weak in numbers after their previous actions ... The Brigadier was in a sour and angry humour, which he peddled not at all. It was the day before Christmas -- which we all remembered.<sup>67</sup>

One of the causes of Kip’s “sour and angry” mood was the death of Reg Romans on 22 December from wounds received from shellfire on the 15th.<sup>68</sup> Kip had been with Romans in his last conscious hours, holding his hands and praying aloud for God to ease Roman’s suffering.<sup>69</sup> Kip had lost “one of my closest army friends”<sup>70</sup> and a brilliant battalion commander.

It was while preparing for this action that Kip had another clash with the Corps commander. Dempsey visited 5 Brigade on the afternoon before the assault and asked Kip what he thought were the prospects of success. Kip replied that they would get the first ridge but he was doubtful about the second. Truthful though it was, this was not the response Dempsey wanted to hear, but Kip

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 339, 340.

<sup>66</sup> Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.141.

<sup>67</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.342

<sup>68</sup> 5 Bde WD, 2316 hrs 22 December 1943, WA II 1 DA 52/1/48 NZNA.

<sup>69</sup> Kippenberger to Frank Thompson, 4 January 1944, in E. Low, “Charles Howard and Charlotte Thompson: A Colonial Saga”, *op. cit.*, pp.83-5.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

always maintained that “it was the duty of every officer not to be ‘yes men’”.<sup>71</sup> If an officer had doubts about the validity or chances of success of an operation, then it was his duty to voice them and this Kip did. Dempsey looked at Kip long and hard and said, “You’ve been a Brigadier for two years and gone from success to success”. Kip replied the brigade would do its best and Dempsey left without further comment, clearly unhappy with Kip’s reply. Kip was left “a little doubtful as to whether I would not be superseded in the next half-hour”.<sup>72</sup>

Kippenberger, depressed by the death of Romans, could see no point in these repeated attacks:

I quite agree that by 8 December it should have been perfectly obvious that 8th Army was held up and had no chance of profitably continuing offensive ops on the Adriatic front. You will note that in *Alamein to the Sangro* Montgomery very plainly loses interest in the operations after that date being, of course, largely concerned with the question of who was to get command of 21 Army Group. At the time I several times asked General Freyberg why we were carrying on and to some extent incurred his displeasure. I told General Dempsey before the attack on December 23rd that we could not take the objectives given and I saw no point in going on. This opinion was true enough but it did not do me any good.<sup>73</sup>

The attack started at 0400 hrs on Christmas Eve. The first ridge, Fontegrande, was taken but only after a fierce struggle by 21 Battalion which could only put one company on the second ridge. 26 Battalion took its first objective but could only get a few men on to the second ridge to join the weak company of 21 Battalion. The Maoris secured the invaluable junction of the two ridges just north of Orsogna. The lodgement on the second ridge was a tenuous foothold only and the troops were dangerously exposed. Kip gave permission for the troops there to withdraw but was overruled by Freyberg — “the only time he overruled me in battle or that I completely disagreed with his decision”.<sup>74</sup> Tanks from 20 Regiment mopped up the enemy opposition on the second ridge and the

<sup>71</sup> Kippenberger on Freyberg, note, Glue Papers.

<sup>72</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.342.

<sup>73</sup> Kippenberger to Weir, letter, 25 March 1949 IA 181/55, Glue Papers.

<sup>74</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.343.

lodgement was successfully held until the withdrawal from Orsogna. That evening Kip and 5 Brigade were relieved by 6 Brigade. There was no general exploitation though and the attack ended in stalemate. Orsogna remained unconquered and 119 New Zealand casualties would not be celebrating Christmas of 1943.

On the day of the attack after the initial success had petered out, Freyberg recorded, "Kip very tired — reliefs arranged for tonight" which may explain why Freyberg had found it necessary to overrule Kip in front of his subordinates. That the second ridge was held until the New Zealanders left Orsogna confirms that Freyberg was correct in overruling Kip and that Kip's assessment of the situation had been wrong. Freyberg also added: "The mistake was ever to come to Italy". This is followed by a Chronicler's Note, written by Freyberg's PA, John White, who recorded most of Freyberg's diary, that Freyberg in England "did his best to persuade people in the War Office that Italy was a mistake".<sup>75</sup>

An incident occurred during this third assault on Orsogna of which Kip only learned after the attack was over. It astounded Kip at the time, but demonstrated the war weariness of many of the New Zealand infantry. All but the officer and four men of a platoon from 21 Battalion had refused to go into action. Kip recorded in great astonishment: "Such a thing was unheard of in the Division and the C.O. was heartbroken".<sup>76</sup> The men were convicted and sentenced by court martial but allowed to redeem themselves by serving in other units. Kip and Freyberg blamed the platoon commander for the mutiny and he "was held to have failed in his duty to his men and was not again employed with the Division".<sup>77</sup> It was typical of Kip that the men and NCOs received a second chance, but the man on whose decision hung the lives or deaths of those he commanded received no such reprieve.

The New Zealand Division spent another three weeks at Orsogna during which time Freyberg instituted a policy of "offensive defence". This was mainly achieved through active patrolling, but initially the German paratroopers held

<sup>75</sup> Freyberg Diary, 24 December 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

<sup>76</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.344.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, p.345.

the upper hand at this technique of static warfare. This changed when Kip made some suggestions to the battalion commanders about effective patrolling and efficient defensive arrangements.

Conditions on the front line were dreadful and Freyberg recorded at the end of the year, "Mud worse than Flanders. ... We will end the year more bogged than ever before".<sup>78</sup> The Orsogna battles had demonstrated how terrain and climate dominated the battlefield in Italy and made a mockery of pretensions of manoeuvre and mobility. On this battlefield the engineer and the infantry soldier were the kingpins. Orsogna, more than anything else, had exposed the limitations of armoured forces in this new terrain and had exposed the fundamental weakness of a two-infantry-brigade division. It was to be the "perverse fate" of the New Zealand Division to have to borrow armour in North Africa and infantry in Italy.<sup>79</sup> The reality for the New Zealand Division in the Second World War was that its structure was never suited to the terrain in which it was currently fighting.

Before 2 New Zealand Division left Orsogna, General Montgomery left Italy for England to command 21 Army Group and indicated that he was very keen for the New Zealanders to go with him. Freyberg informed the New Zealand Government that Montgomery had "made it clear that he would like to have your Division under his command for the campaign ... as shipping difficulties are great it is not likely the question will be raised".<sup>80</sup> Montgomery followed this up by a secret and personal letter to Brooke. The New Zealand Division under Freyberg:

would be better employed in Western Europe than Italy. It is a motorised division, highly trained in mobile battle; its full capabilities cannot be properly exploited in Italy.<sup>81</sup>

It was not to be, but the New Zealand Division left Orsogna in mid January, much to the relief of all concerned, to join Fifth Army at Cassino "for a new and

<sup>78</sup> Freyberg Diary, 31 December 1943, WA II 8/46 NZNA.

<sup>79</sup> Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.172.

<sup>80</sup> Freyberg to External (Minister of Defence) Wellington, cipher message P189, 4 January 1944, Historical Notes January 1944, WA II 8/49 NZNA.

<sup>81</sup> Montgomery to Brooke, letter, 23 December 1943, quoted in Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield 1942-1944*, p.466.

unexpected mission better suited to *corps de chasse*'.<sup>82</sup>

Orsogna had been a defeat for Kippenberger and the New Zealand Division and was not a promising start to the Italian campaign. It remained in German hands for the rest of the winter. 5 Brigade's casualties for December 1944 had been heavy: 100 killed, 413 wounded and twenty-eight missing.<sup>83</sup> Kip summed up the campaign:

The Battle of the Sangro had driven the enemy from strong positions with heavy loss. But thanks to the difficult ground, the bad weather, the enemy's ability to reinforce their formations, Eighth Army had failed to reach its objectives.<sup>84</sup>

Campaigning in the alligator's belly was proving a nightmare for all the Allied divisions and it was clear that the New Zealanders were having considerable trouble adjusting to the Italian terrain. Kip had again proven to be the most able and astute of Freyberg's brigadiers, but was also experiencing considerable difficulties. He had clashed twice with Dempsey, and in each case Dempsey was in error. But he had also been directly challenged by Freyberg on a tactical decision, and events had proven Freyberg's decision to be correct. Kip lost one of his closest friends in this campaigning and had been shocked by a mutiny in his brigade. There is evidence to suggest that Kip, like many other New Zealand commanders, was tired, jaded and perhaps battleweary. After four years of constant campaigning, from which the furlough leave had provided no rest, Kip's decline in condition was only to be expected. In his next battle Kip would face his greatest challenge as a commander. He would need to utilise all of his talents if the New Zealand Division was to avoid a repetition of its Orsogna experience.

<sup>82</sup> Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.167.

<sup>83</sup> 5 Bde WD, 31 December 1944, WA II 1 DA 52/1/48 NZNA.

<sup>84</sup> Notes on Italian Campaign H.K.K., New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs. MS 1555, ATL.