

6TH SOUTH AFRICAN ARMoured DIVISION

The 6th South African Armoured Division, with its distinctive green-bordered yellow triangle insignia, was formed in South Africa on 1 February 1943. The division drew from experienced former members of the 1st and 2nd Infantry Divisions, plus others training in South Africa, all of which were volunteers. It was commanded by Major General W.H.E. Poole.

ARRIVAL IN ITALY

On arriving in Italy the 12th South African Motorised Infantry Brigade was put under the command of the 2nd New Zealand Division until the fall of Monte Cassino and the Allied breakout of the Anzio beachhead.

On 20 May 1944, the 6th South African Armoured Division was brought up to a strength of three brigades, when the 24th Guards Brigade was added. At the end of May, the division was attached to the Canadian I Corps after the breach of the Hitler Line. When Rome fell the division advanced up the Via Casalina to spearhead the British 3 Corps' advance.

On 10 June the 11th South African Armoured Brigade, which was leading the division's advance, ran into a strong German anti-tank screen south of Celleno. They were able to punch through and two days later the division had taken Orvieto, ending an advance of 75 miles (121km) in just 10 days.

TRASIMENE LINE

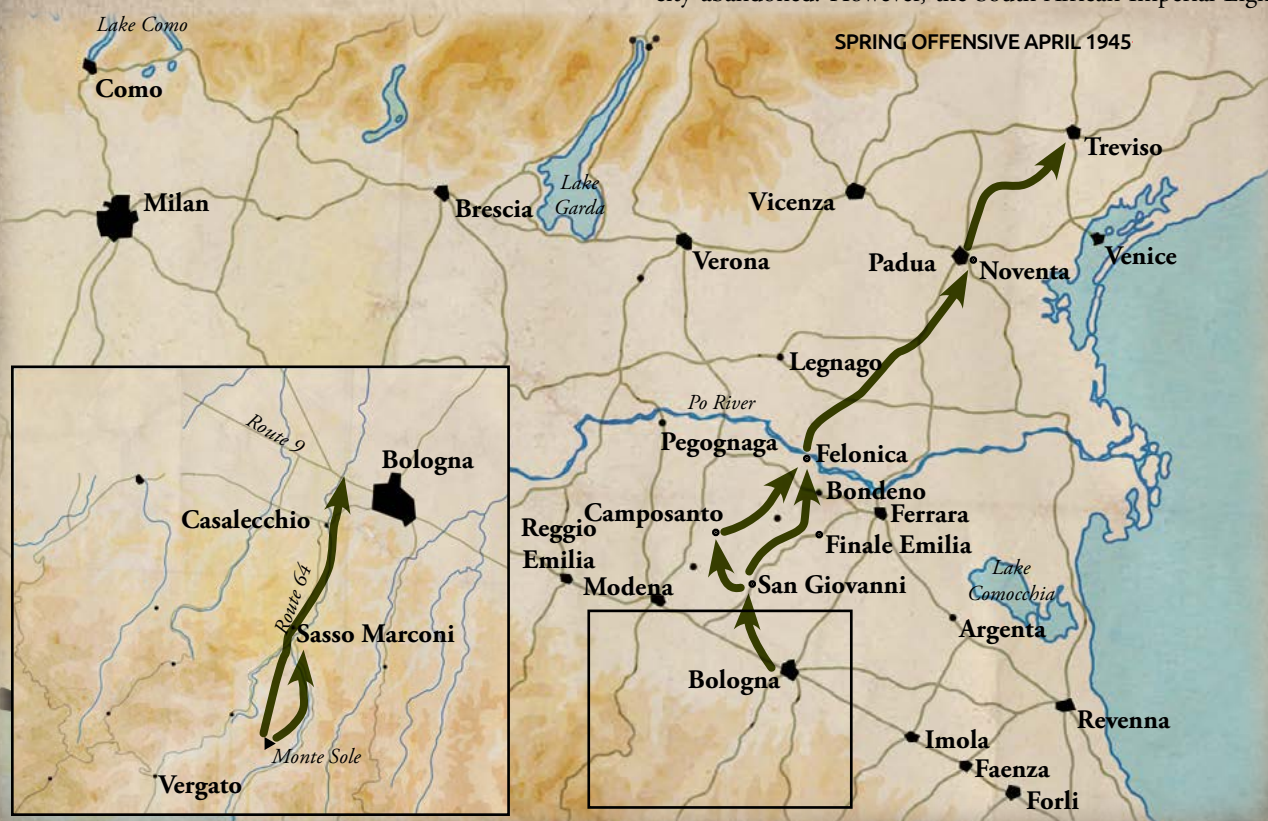
Continued contact with German delaying positions slowed their advance in the following days. On 17 June they met stubborn resistance by *Herman Göring Fallschirmpanzerdivision* infantry at Chiusi on the Trasimene Line. The battle for Chiusi would lead to the first major

setback for the South African division. On the night of 21/22 June A Company, First City/Cape Town Highlanders became isolated and were eventually forced to surrender. Since the surrender of 2nd Infantry Division at Tobruk in 1942, any surrender by South African troops had become a sensitive matter. South African Prime Minister Smuts made a personal visit to the divisional commander to seek assurances and discuss the consequences. Chiusi was finally taken on 23 June by the First City/Cape Town Highlanders.

ADVANCE TO FLORENCE

The Trasimene Line was completely broken by 28 June. The South Africans continued to advance on the Eighth Army's left flank. They eventually hit the *Georg* Line, a delaying position on the north side of Route 73. The terrain had become difficult and the South African armour had been withdrawn to reserve, leaving the infantry to hold the line. The British 6th Armoured Division and 2nd New Zealand Division attacked the Germans on 7 July and forced them to withdraw by 15 July, allowing the South Africans to continue their advance. On 20 July the division took the Chianti highlands, which overlooked the Arno Valley, clearing the way to Florence.

The usual pattern of attacks on German delaying positions, followed by German withdrawal continued up the Arno Valley. Their final obstacle before Florence, the Paula Line, was reached on 28 July. The South Africans and New Zealanders led the attack on the Paula Line 30 July. The next day columns of Commonwealth troops were streaming towards Florence. Advance parties found most of the bridges destroyed and the city abandoned. However, the South African Imperial Light



Horse/Kimberly Regiment found one small bridge intact and was the first Allied unit to enter Florence.

MOVE TO THE US FIFTH ARMY

On 17 August the 6th South African Armoured Division was transferred to the US IV Corps. They relieved the US 85th Infantry Division west of Florence along the Arno River between 24 August and 26 August 1944.

Reports from prisoners indicated that the German forces were withdrawing, confirmed by the sounds of demolition in the distance and patrols conducted on the night of 31 August/1 September. The Germans had withdrawn across a wide front to what was to later known as the Gothic Line. The division crossed the Arno River on 1 September and pushed into the Albano Hills overlooking the river and had taken Pistoia by 8 September.

APENNINES AND OPERATION OLIVE

The Eighth Army's offensive on the Gothic Line, Operation Olive, began on 25 August. The US Fifth Army attack was launched on 10 September against the mountain bastions south of Bologna. The main assault on the Gothic Line was to be delivered by the US II Corps up the Futa Pass, on the main highway between Florence and Bologna. The 6th South African Armoured Division was on the right flank of the US IV Corps and pushed into the hills north of Pistoia.

The South Africans advanced along Route 64 towards Vertigo and Bologna with the aim of capturing the twin peaks of Sole and Capara. On 12 September movement into the hills met increasing enemy resistance and there were fierce actions at Monte Alto and at Monte Porro Del Bagno. These were cleared by 22 September, depriving the Germans of their observation posts overlooking the South African positions. The division was then ordered to hold the Albano Massif, but by 22 September demolitions were again heard and it became evident that the Germans had started withdrawing again.

GOTHIC LINE BATTLES

The South African advance recommenced on Route 64. Retreating German forces were demolishing bridges, culverts and roads. The limited road network and severe traffic congestion made progress extremely slow.

The 11th Armoured Brigade and 24th Guards Brigade were ordered to capture the Catarelto Ridge and Monte Vigese. After several days of intense fighting, both the Cararelto Ridge and Monte Vigese were taken by 7 October. The South Africans continued their advance along the high ground through Prada to Monte Stanco. The 11th Armoured Brigade attacked Monte Stanco and Monte Salvato on 9 and 10 October. Three fierce battles were fought to take these objectives. The division finally took Monte Salvato on 14 October. By 25 October the division had reached Setta Creek and taken Hill 501 below Monte Sole. However, autumn torrential rain halted a planned attack on Monte Sole and the South Africans entered a quiet period until February 1945.

SPRING OFFENSIVE

On 18 February 1945 the 24th Guards Brigade was transferred out of the division, so the South Africans organised the 13th Motorised Infantry Brigade to replace the Guards. At the same time the South Africans were withdrawn to prepare to take part in the final push towards Bologna, known as Operation Grapeshot. The South Africans' role was to take Monte Sole and Monte Caprara, then break out and drive to the northwest of Bologna to link up with the Eighth Army.

On 15 April the 12th Motorized Infantry Brigade took Monte Sole and Monte Caprara. The division then led the advance of US II Corps. The 11th Armoured Brigade was directed through San Giovanni to Finale Emilia and 12th Motorised Infantry Brigade to Camposanto. Bypassing Bologna, the tanks rumbled off at 07:30 hours on 21 April. After many weary months 11th Armoured Brigade had returned to mobile warfare. Sweeping up the long straight road to San Giovanni the brigade soon started to collect prisoners and stragglers against sporadic opposition.

The following day they advanced on a two-brigade front taking San Giovanni and Camposanto. On the evening of 22 April 12th Motorised Infantry Brigade handed over Camposanto to an American unit and moved along the south bank of the Panaro River to Finale Emilia.

Many German units were in danger of isolation, and their attempts to withdraw became frantic as the Allies poured into the Po Plain. At Finale Emilia the bridges across the Panaro were virtually the only escape route for the German forces in the area. The Panaro was too deep for wading, and its steep banks were impassable to vehicles. On 22 April a German column pushing to cross the Panaro at Finale Emilia clashed with the 12th Motorised Infantry Brigade. Confused fighting broke out in the darkness. The South African tanks and mortars fired steadily into the column. Soon after, the South Africans found Finale Emilia clear of the enemy. The following day contact was made with the British 6th Armoured Division of Eighth Army.

Late on 24 April, 12th Motorised Infantry Brigade reached the Po River at Felonica. Large numbers of stragglers were trapped on the south bank and the area was littered with weapons and equipment. Opposition was light and disorganised and many prisoners were taken. Due to limited bridging equipment the brigade was not fully across the Po River until 27 April.

Soon after the 12th Motorised Infantry Brigade was moved into reserve. The 13th Motorised Infantry Brigade then led the advance, with the 11th Armoured Brigade in close support. Between 28 and 29 April the 13th Motorised Infantry Brigade and 11th Armoured Brigade made a rapid advance through Noventa and by nightfall 30 April they were three miles from Treviso.

On 1 May the 6th South African Armoured Division set off for Milan, to meet the threat of German forces in that area, but by the time they had arrived the Germans had surrendered, and the war in Italy was over.