



4TH NEW ZEALAND ARMoured BRIGADE



Following their arrival in Italy on 23 October 1943, and the first combat actions along the Sangro front, the battle on the Adriatic Coast had stagnated into a stalemate around Orsogna.

The 2nd New Zealand Division was transferred to the command of the US Fifth Army, located west of the Apennines in early 1944. The 2nd New Zealand Division was joined by the 4th Indian Division and the 78th British Division, and together with a combat command from the US 1st Armored Division formed the New Zealand Corps, which was ordered to capture the strategically important town of Cassino, whose skyline was dominated by a 13th century monastery.

The 4th New Zealand Armoured Brigade spent this period supporting the infantry in a variety of ways. Individual squadrons were employed in fire support roles, shortages of 25 pdr ammunition leading to the tanks often being used in static gun lines as makeshift artillery.

C Squadron of the 20th Armoured Regiment participated in a daring flanking attack, approaching the monastery on a specially constructed road from behind. Surprise was achieved, but insufficient infantry reserves were available to press the advantage saw the German defenders regain the upper hand, and the tanks were forced to fall back.

In March tanks from the 19th Armoured Regiment entered the town proper to support members of the 28th Maori Battalion in the bitter house to house fighting, using their 75mm guns to dig the defenders out of strongpoints. The amount of rubble clogging the streets made progress slow. By the end of the month, when relieved by the 20th Armoured Regiment, the Shermans had reverted to the role of static fire support.

This continued for the next two months, until the monastery finally fell to Polish forces on 19 May, with the tanks able to

provide little more than moral support to the infantry.

In July 1944 the division entered an area that was to become known to the tankers as 'Tiger' country. These formidable machines became a real thorn in the New Zealander's side, as at that time the first of the 17 pdr Firefly tanks had not yet arrived. Standard practice when encountering a Tiger was to try to choke it with smoke rounds forcing the crew to bail out, and then dispatch them with machine gun fire.

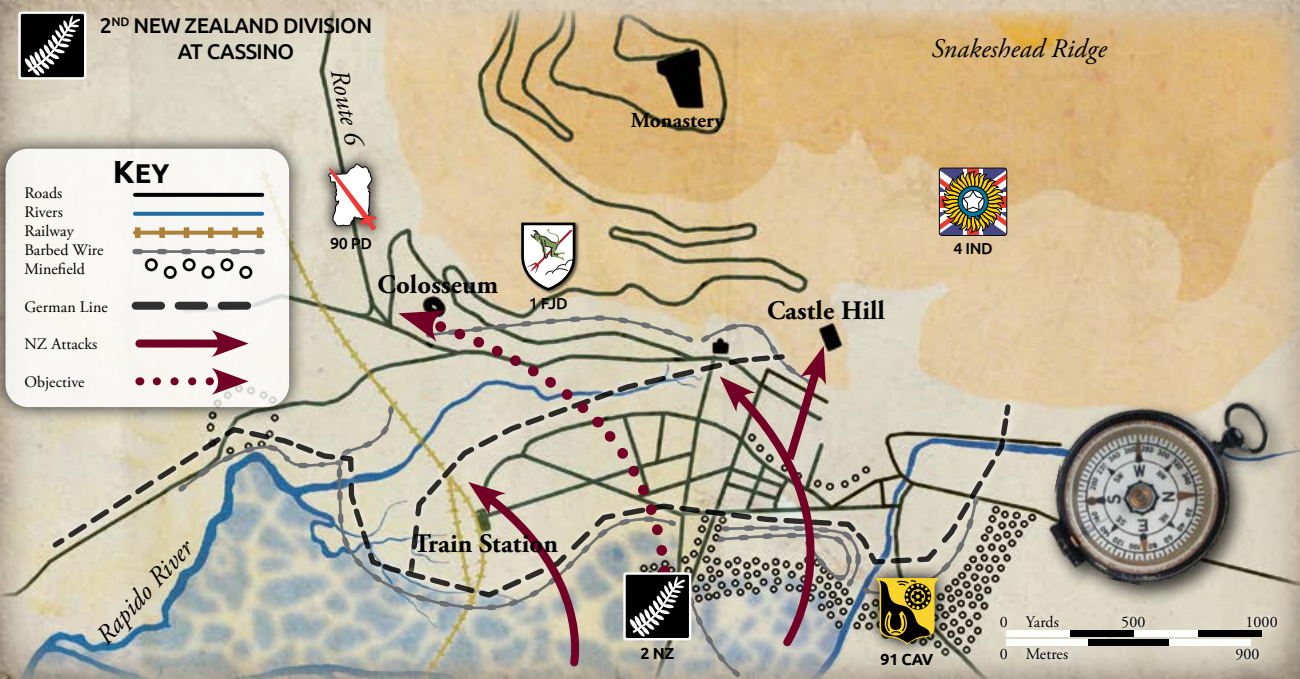
In August the 18th Armoured Regiment found themselves again employed in a novel manner during an attack on Castle, acting as gun tows for 6 pdr and 17 pdr guns, the guns crews being carried as passengers. The tactic proved successful as the guns were delivered in a timely manner and were pivotal to the success of the battle.

Following another period in reserve, the armoured regiments were called up to assist in the Eighth Army in attacks on the Adriatic end of the Gothic Line in September 1944.

The 18th Regiment encountered yet another first when it captured the airfield at Rimini while supporting the Greek Mountain Brigade. The airfield had been defended by a number of pillboxes topped with Panther turrets. Clever use of smoke and concentrated fire saw the Shermans overcome the obstacles.

Worsening weather turned the Romagna plains into a swamp-land, hampering advance and re-supply efforts. The Germans continued to put up strong resistance while retreating in an orderly fashion.

The final campaign began on the 9 April 1945 with some New Zealand armoured units again being utilized as ad hoc artillery to reinforce the bombardment. A number of rivers blocked the advance. These were progressively assaulted by infantry and in turn the armour moved up to support the





infantry while bridges were constructed. By this point the German troops had begun surrendering in large numbers, their retreat now bordering on a rout. The progress of the advance was only slowed by the lack of available bridging equipment.

With the final rivers behind them, the bulk of the New Zealand armoured brigade raced to the city of Trieste where they accepted the surrender of the German garrison.

Members of Tito's Yugoslav partisan army had also occupied the city and the presence of the New Zealanders in an area the Yugoslavs considered their spoils of war was not welcome. Tensions remained high, at one point escalating to a face off between 25 Yugoslav T-34s, which had entered the city, and the 19th Armoured Regiment. After some hours cooler heads prevailed and the Yugoslavs exited the city.

The 4th New Zealand Armoured Brigade remained as a garrison in Trieste for a month before surrendering most of their equipment to a British depot. Approximately 100 vehicles were retained to form the core of an armoured force for deployment to the Pacific or Far East. With the war in the Pacific also drawing to a close these tanks were also retired and on 2 December 1945 the 4th New Zealand Armoured Brigade was officially disbanded.

EQUIPMENT

In Italy the New Zealand Armoured Brigade was equipped with the diesel powered Sherman III (M4A2). The exception to this was during a brief period when they took control of some Canadian Shermans. In October 1944 limited supplies of Sherman Firefly ICs began to be received, but these were soon replaced by the VC Firefly model and the following two issues of Firefly tanks consisted of the VC model.

The reconnaissance troop was originally equipped with the Daimler Dingo scout car, but these were quickly replaced by the Canadian manufactured version of the same vehicle, known as the Lynx, as they were found to have better off-road performance.

These in turn were replaced by Stuart V light tanks, with the standard organization being three turreted models and eight turretless jalopy models. As well as scouting duties these were found to be invaluable for a range of roles such as bringing up ammunition, troop-carrying, and towing anti-tank guns.

ORGANISATION

The 4th New Zealand Armoured Brigade was composed of three armoured regiments, the 18th, 19th and 20th. The armoured regiments were organized along British lines

although with fewer tanks than their British counterparts. A New Zealand regiment consisted of 52 tanks. These included a regimental HQ troop of four tanks and three squadrons of sixteen tanks.

In addition each regiment contained a recce troop equipped with Stuart V light tanks in both turreted and turretless configurations and an intercommunication troop equipped with Lynx light scout cars.

Each squadron consisted of a squadron headquarters with four tanks and four troops each of three tanks.

January 1944 – September 1944: An armoured squadron from 4th New Zealand Armoured Brigade did not have any Firefly tanks at all.

October 1944 – March 1945: In October 1944 the 4th New Zealand Armoured Brigade received their first twelve Sherman Firefly IC tanks. These were later replaced with VC models.

March 1945 – May 1945: By March 1945 the 4th New Zealand Armoured Brigade had received a total of 36 Firefly tanks. This allowed the allocation of one per troop in each squadron in the 18th and 19th Armoured Regiments. 20th Regiment organised theirs slightly differently with a dedicated troop of Firefly tanks in their regimental HQ and a Firefly in each squadron HQ.

The brigade received 18 Sherman IB 105mm tanks. Initially these were employed alongside standard Shermans in the troops. The disadvantages of a lack of power traverse to the turrets soon became apparent and they were quickly re-assigned to squadron HQs at a ratio of 2 per squadron.

