

# **A practical guide in seven steps to Irish Brigade battles in the Liri valley during Operation Diadem on 14-17 May 1944**

By Edmund & Richard O'Sullivan and David O'Sullivan

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IN the fourth battle of Cassino, which began on 11 May 1944, the 38 (Irish) Brigade made a significant contribution to the success of the Allies' assault on one of the toughest defensive positions created by the German armed forces in the Second World War. This document provides a guide for all those who wish to understand in detail the way that the three battalions of the brigade were deployed in Operation Diadem, the code name for the assault on the German Gustav Line south of Cassino.

This guide is the result of five visits to the area by Richard O'Sullivan; three by Edmund O'Sullivan and one by both Richard and Edmund with the support of their nephew David O'Sullivan. Edmund and Richard are the sons of Edmund (Rosie) O'Sullivan who was Company Quarter Master Sergeant (CQMS) in E Company of the 2nd Battalion of the London Irish Rifles (2 LIR) from November 1942 until the end of the war in Europe in May 1945. The battalion was one of three that made up 38 (Irish) Brigade of the British 8th Army's 78th Division during Operation Diadem. The others were the 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers (1 RIRF) and the 6th Inniskilling Fusiliers (6 Innisks). All three battalions were initially largely comprised of men born in Ireland or of Irish descent.

CQMS O'Sullivan wrote his memoirs during the 1990s. These were published in 2007 under the title *All My Brothers: a London Irish Family at War*. The book includes a moving eyewitness account of the Irish Brigade's involvement in Operation Diadem during which more than 100 members of 2 LIR were killed or wounded. The casualties included 9 Platoon's Sergeant Edward (Eddie) Mayo MM, who died during the assault on the Pytchley Line near Sinagoga hamlet in the early afternoon of 16 May 1944. The book can be found on the Irish Brigade website ([www.irishbrigade.co.uk](http://www.irishbrigade.co.uk)), which was created in 2010 by Edmund and Richard O'Sullivan in honour of their father and his Irish Brigade comrades.

The most recent trip included a walk on 2 August 2012 that followed the brigade's line of advance on 14-17 May 1944, beginning at the site of the Congo bridge crossing of the River Gari, and over which all three battalions crossed. The story of the construction of this and other crossings during the first days of Diadem is an epic in its own right. The authors pay homage to those involved in this feat of engineering and bravery. The walk ended in the village of Piumarola, which is about six kilometres west of Congo bridge, and which was captured by 6 Innisks (the battalion will be referred to by its regimental nickname the Skins from now on) on the evening of 17 May 1944. Over those three days, all three battalions were continually in action and suffered more than 300 casualties. Their losses included two battalion commanders: one killed and one wounded, and of a half dozen company commanders and many NCOs and other ranks. This is evidence of the bitterness of the struggle and of the commitment shown at every level of the brigade.

The story of the Irish Brigade from its creation in early 1941 until it was dissolved in 1947 has been told in several wonderful books. The authors would like to thank Richard Doherty, author of *Clear The Way! A History of the 38th (Irish Brigade), 1941-47*, which was published in 1993. This guide would have been impossible without Mr Doherty's book. The authors would also like honour the memory of John Coldwell-Horsfall, DSO, MC, second-in-command of 2 LIR at the start

of the operation who took over command of the battalion on the afternoon of 15 May, the day before its attack on the Pytchley Line. ***Fling Our Banner to the Wind***, his book about the 2 LIR from March 1944, when he joined the battalion, until he was seriously wounded in November of that year, is one of the most eloquent and moving accounts of the achievements of an infantry battalion during the Second World War. It complements two previous books by Coldwell-Horsfall which cover the role of 1 RIRF during the Battle for France in May and June 1940 and in Tunisia during 1942/43. The trilogy is a superb work of literature and a tribute to the resilience of British Army infantry soldiers in the Second World War.

The authors would also like to thank Sir Nicholas Mosley, who was a lieutenant and 9 Platoon's commander within E Company of 2 LIR at the time of the brigade's Liri valley battles. Sir Nicholas was wounded just before the 2 LIR attack on Pytchley, and published ***Time at War*** in 2006 which provides further details of his experiences with the battalion including the days during the Liri valley operations.

Thanks are also due to Valerie Lynch (nee Franklyn-Vaile) and her partner Peter Fry. Valerie (Val), born in March 1942, is the only child of Olive and Lawrie Franklyn-Vaile, commanding officer of C Company of 1 RIRF in Operation Diadem. Her father left for Sicily in August 1943 when Valerie was 18 months old. Lawrie wrote about 100 letters to his wife from that time until 16 May 1944 during the Faughs' journey from Termoli to Cassino. These have previously been unpublished and extracts are included in pages 33 and 34 of this guide. Val and Peter now live in Melbourne, where Lawrie originates from and they continue to uncover further details about Lawrie's pre-war background and war time service.

This guide has also been helped immensely by ***Mailed Fist***, the account of the 6th Armoured Division in the Second World War written by Ken Ford. The Irish Brigade had been part of the 6th Armoured Division in the initial part of the Tunisian campaign and the tanks of that division supported the brigade in its Liri valley battles.

***The London Irish at War***, the official record of the war time experiences of the 1st and 2nd battalions of the London Irish Rifles, is a further excellent source. This can be found in full at [www.irishbrigade.co.uk](http://www.irishbrigade.co.uk). More detailed accounts are contained in the war diaries of 38 (Irish) Brigade, 2 LIR, 1 RIRF and The Skins, and these can be viewed on the Irish Brigade website. The guide has also been informed by an account of the attack on Pytchley written by Sir Mervyn Davies, QC, who was OC, E Company within 2 LIR at the time. It was sent to John Coldwell-Horsfall in 1978 at the time of his writing of ***Fling Our Banner to the Wind***. Other accounts of the battles included Colin Gunner's ***Front of the Line***. One of the most compelling sources for anyone wanting to walk Cassino battlefields is the illustrated book ***The Battles for Monte Cassino - Then and Now*** written by Jeffery Plowman and Perry Rowe. It contains a huge number of photographs taken in 1944 and contemporary photographs of the same locations. This is extremely helpful in guiding visitors to the exact locations of critical incidents during the battles.

By design, the guide focusses on the contribution made by the Irish Brigade. But the four battles of Cassino involved hundreds of thousands of men and many women from dozens of infantry regiments from the UK, New Zealand, the Indian subcontinent, France, Italy, the US, Canada and other countries of the Allied coalition. Tribute must also be paid to the tank and specialist machinegun regiments, the engineers and other support formations, the artillery, the reconnaissance and signals units, those who served in the medical and transport units, the air force and other elements of the huge Allied force that fought in Cassino in January-May 1944.

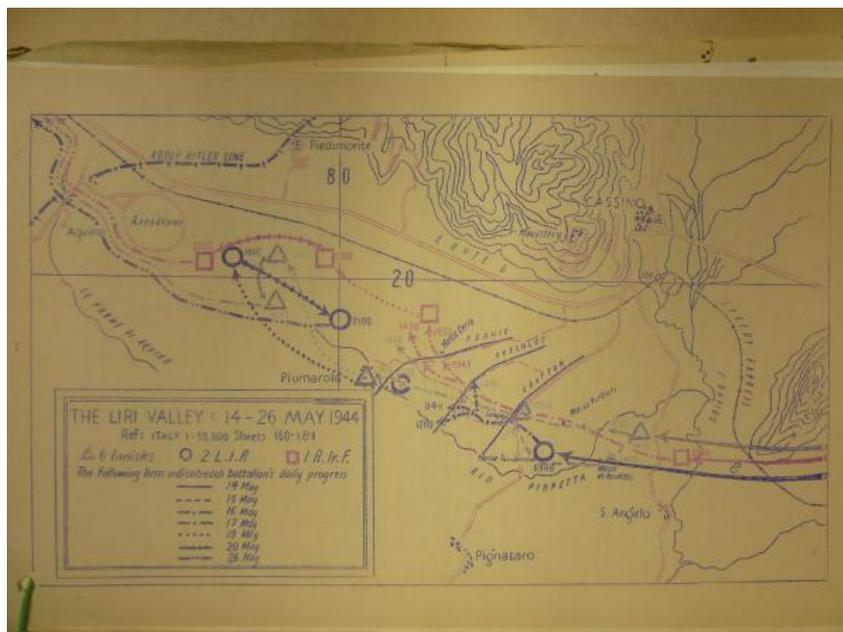
The struggle for Cassino was the longest of the many battles and encounters that spanned the whole of Italy from Syracuse in Sicily to the frontier with what is now Austria, and was then the Third Reich. The war in Italy started in July 1943 and lasted 22 months. It was the longest campaign in Western Europe and resulted in a total of almost 2 million casualties, half of them civilian. This guide is only a small portion of the story of suffering and courage that was the daily reality of Italian life in 1943-45.

The authors would like to thank many wonderful Italian friends who have so generously given their time and hospitality during their visits. They include Franco Sinagoga, son of Alessandro Sinagoga who was present at Sinagoga hamlet during the attack on 16 May, his wife Clara and their two children Alessandra and Antonio; Alessandro Campagna, a lawyer and historian who was our essential first contact in the Liri valley and Damiano Parravano and his colleagues of the Gustav Line Association (Associazione Linea Gustav) who accompanied the authors on our walk across the Liri valley battlefield in August 2012, along with his partner Marissa and their red setter Barillo. Thanks are due to the London Irish Rifles Association (LIRA) which has provided a huge amount of help and encouragement and to the associations of the other regiments represented in the Irish Brigade of May 1944.

Finally, the authors would like to express their sincere thanks to the remaining veterans of the Irish Brigade and to the friends and families of those that served in the brigade during those dramatic days in 1944. You were in our thoughts with every step we took.

### The setting

The area covered by this guide is located about 80 miles south of Rome. It is framed in the north by the old Via Casilina which runs along the base of the Monte Cassino massif and enters the town of Cassino from the west; the Pioppeto River to the south which flows into the Gari river; the river Gari to the east, and the Piumarola-to-Via Casilina road in the west. It extends roughly six kilometres east to west and two kilometres north to south.



*The route of the Irish Brigade in the Liri valley on 14-26 May. This has been taken from The Irish Brigade March 1944-March 1945 by Brigadier TPD Scott. Three of the four lines which were the brigade's objectives are shown: Grafton, Pytchley and Fernie.*

The area comprises many low hills divided by four streams that flow from east to west into the Pioppeto or directly into the Gari. The area has about 20 high points which reach 90 metres above sea level. The lowest points are in the Pioppeto valley which follows a flattened U shaped course from west to east. In the extreme west, the Pioppeto is about 70 metres above sea level and only about 20 metres below the highest points in the area. Closer to the Gari, the Pioppeto valley is more than 33 metres below the high points. The geography of the east was a major issue for those planning the Irish Brigade operation; in effect, German positions in the area were on a 100 foot high wall with an uninterrupted view of approaching attacks.

The area is also crisscrossed by dozens of what were, at the time, unpaved and, usually, tree-lined tracks in 1944. They connected stone farm buildings which, as they invariably do across Italy, occupy high points. The most significant road in the area at the time was the Cassino to Pignataro road. This runs from north-east to south-west through the middle of the battlefield area. This road defined the Grafton Line, the Irish Brigade's initial objective, which was reached by the Skins on the morning of 15 May.

The area covered by this guide has been farmed for more than 2,500 years. In May 1944, it was covered, as much of it still is today, with fields of wheat and Indian maize, olive groves, fruit orchards and woods. The area provided many opportunities for the German defenders to establish strongpoints and places where artillery pieces, mortars, nebelwerfers, machinegun posts and reinforcements could be hidden. As part of the Gustav Line, which extended from the Adriatic Sea to the Tyrrhenian Sea, the area had been fortified for months before the Allies first arrived in January 1944. Strongpoints were protected with barbed wire and minefields.

Brigadier TPD (Pat) Scott, the commanding officer (CO) of the Irish Brigade during Operation Diadem, described the Liri landscape in his narrative history of the brigade written at the time: "The country to the west of the Rapido (sic) is a mass of minor features, visibility was seldom more than 500 yards and often considerably less," he wrote. "It was perfect country from the Germans' point of view. A tributary of the Rapido called the Pioppeto ran in from the west just about where we were concentrating. Its bend to the north-east just before joining the Rapido entailed our having to bridge it. An indifferent track called ACE route ran from the Pioppeto bridge, along the north of that stream towards Aquino. This was our axis. Two main north and south roads from Cassino cut it, one to San Angelo and one to Pignataro, and a certain number of smaller tracks also cut it. All these, of course, were usually mined."

The area, consequently, presented a complex challenge to those planning the Irish Brigade operation. But the rationale of the attack was clear. The Allied advance toward Rome depended upon taking control of the Via Casilina. This required dislodging German defenders from Monte Cassino, a challenge that was attempted four times between the middle of January and the middle of May. It also required breaching German defences within the Liri valley. If left in German hands, the high ground south of the Via Casilina could be used to prevent Allied traffic flowing north to Rome. Capturing it would allow the Allies themselves to block German forces retreating from Cassino.

One source of confusion about the battlefield covered by the guide is the right name for the Rapido and Gari rivers. Many authors have treated them as if they were in fact a single river, which they are not, and called them both the Rapido. In reality, the Rapido flows north to south at the eastern foot of the Monte Cassino Massif. South of Cassino town, it then flows into the River Gari. In turn, the River Gari flows into the River Garigliano even further south after it joins

the Liri. In the section of the Liri valley covered by this guide, the relevant river will be called the Gari.

### **Operation Diadem**

Operation Diadem was the culmination of the Allied invasion of Italy which started with landings at Reggio de Calabria in September 1943. The initial strategy called for the mainly American 5th Army to drive up the west coast of Italy while the mainly British, Imperial and Commonwealth 8th Army advanced along the Adriatic coast. The Allies quickly discovered that Italy provided excellent defensive opportunities for the German Army, which had taken control of most of the country in September 1943. This followed the deposition of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in July and the Italian government's decision to pull-out of the war at the start September.

By the end of December 1943, the Allied advance along the Adriatic had ground to a halt against the eastern extension of the Gustav Line. The decision was then taken to transfer men and resources from there to the western side of the Apennines where the prospects for a decisive breakthrough to Rome and beyond seemed to be greater.

The first attack areas close to the Gustav Line started on 17 January along the River Garigliano. This penetrated up to six kilometres west of the river. On 20-22 January, an assault against the Gari river north of San Angelo in Theodice by a single US division was repulsed with heavy casualties. What is known as the first battle of Cassino, involving US and Free French forces, began on 24 January. When it was finally called off on 12 February, the attackers had captured part of the Monte Cassino Massif. The second battle, which began with the bombing of Monte Cassino Abbey on 15 February, was called off on 18 February. The third battle, which centred on the town of Cassino itself, began on 15 March and ended once more in stalemate on 22 March.

Allied high command comprehensively reviewed its strategy and decided that the next assault on the Gustav Line would involve a much wider front and many more troops. It called for a simultaneous attack along 20 miles of the Gustav Line from the Gulf of Gaeta to Cassino. The attack would involve the US II Corps in the west; the French Expeditionary Corps across the Aurunci Mountains; the British XIII Corps in the Liri valley and Polish II Corps on Monte Cassino. A total of 250,000 Allied troops were to be deployed.

Operation Diadem started at 11pm on 11 May 1944 with a massive artillery bombardment along the Gustav Line. The objective was to break through the Gustav Line into the Liri valley after weakening German positions in the mountains to the north and south. To achieve this goal, a total of eight bridges were to be built over the Gari to allow infantry and tanks to smash through German positions to the west.

The attempts to cross the river started before dawn on 12 May and were initially unsuccessful. Only small numbers of attackers managed to get over the Gari by the end of that day. But two bridges were completed during the first 36 hours, including Amazon bridge, which was closest to Cassino. It was finished in the early hours of 13 May.

The forces attacking into the Liri valley were divided into two and given separate objectives north and south of San Angelo in Theodice. The initial wave tasked with taking San Angelo and areas south of the village was provided by the 8th Indian Infantry Division. North of San Angelo, the first wave comprised the British 4th Infantry Division. This plan of attack called for the two divisions to cross the river and establish bridgeheads. Once this was done in the northern part, the 78th (Battleaxe) Infantry Division supported by tanks of the 6th Armoured Division would

take over the advance from the 4th Division. The 78th Division comprised three brigades: the 11th, the 36th and the 38th. The 1 Canadian Corps was to take over from the 8th Indian Division.

The Irish Brigade was prepared to move as soon as Diadem started. On 10 May, all three battalions including their support formations – the 152 Field Artillery Unit and the 16/5 Lancers – had moved to a concentration point south of Presenzano. Due to the delays in establishing bridgeheads on the west bank of the Gari, the brigade had to wait until the early morning of 14 May before conditions at the front were considered ripe for the brigade to join the fighting. The story of the brigade's involvement in Operation Diadem therefore begins on 13 May.

### **The equipment of the Irish Brigade**

The Irish Brigade was an infantry formation which was constructed upon the training, skill and courage of individual soldiers. In May 1944, the average infantryman's equipment was simple: a Lee-Enfield 0.303-inch caliber bolt-action rifle with a ten-round magazine, a bayonet and grenades. The 21-pound Lee-Enfield was the standard rifle of the British Army at the time. It was exceptionally accurate and could kill at up to 1,000 metres. It was also reliable and robust, though rapid-firing could lead to the magazine getting jammed.

The Lee-Enfield was, however, quite heavy and of limited value in close combat. Some NCOs were allocated US-made Thompson sub-machineguns (Tommy Guns), which could fire 600+ rounds a minute. Effective in close fighting, its accuracy beyond 50 metres was low. Later in the war, the lightweight, UK-made Sten gun was issued, though it was unpopular because of its tendency to jam.

Each section of eight-ten infantrymen would normally have a Bren gun, a portable light machinegun, originally designed in what was Czechoslovakia. It fired 0.303 calibre rounds used in the Lee-Enfield. Accurate up to 800 metres, the Bren gun was light enough to be carried by one man and could be operated by a single individual. The theoretical maximum rate of fire was 500 rounds a minute, but the gun was designed to fire in bursts of about five rounds. The rate of fire was also limited because each magazine contained only 30 bullets. In addition, each infantry battalion of about 1,000 men normally had a mortar unit which used a weapon that fired 2-inch high-explosive bombs. These had a range of up to 500 metres.

Irish Brigade battalions normally went into battle with the support of specialist heavy machinegun teams which used the Vickers gun. This was conventionally fired from a tripod. The Vickers was fed rounds from a belt and had a water-cooling system to allow continuous firing. It could fire up to 10,000 rounds an hour. Tank support was also routinely provided during most battles in Italy and this normally came in the form of Sherman tanks operated by a variety of regiments. In North Africa, the Irish Brigade was supported by the North Irish Horse, a cavalry regiment recruited in Northern Ireland that operated Churchill tanks. Canada's Three Rivers Regiment worked with the brigade in the battle for Termoli. Units of the 4th Armoured Brigade, including 44 Royal Tank Regiment, and the County of London Yeomanry participated in the battle for the River Sangro. Several other tank regiments played roles in other brigade battles. In the Liri valley, the support was provided by Sherman tanks operated by 16/5 Lancers and 17/21 Lancers. During the attack on Piumarola, the Irish Brigade was further supported by a squadron of tanks operated by the Lothian & Border Horse. Finally, no attack was considered feasible without substantial artillery support.

British military doctrine in the summer of 1944 was based on the idea of swift-moving infantry formations supported by tanks and machineguns attacking enemy positions after an artillery

bombardment. More attention was paid to the capacity of infantry to advance quickly rather than protection. Irish Brigade soldiers therefore went into battle in May 1944 in boots with canvas puttees; cotton trousers and a cotton shirt; a small pack and supporting webbing; a steel helmet and a rifle. The use of armoured vehicles providing protection to infantry as they advanced to positions from where they could get quickly to grips with the enemy was very limited. What are now known as armoured personnel carriers were only extensively used in the final part of the Italian campaign in April 1945. The consequence was that losses among British infantry units in Italy were often as high as they were in First World War. Casualty rates of 10 per cent seem to have been accepted and were sometimes more than 25 per cent in a single day.

The final battle of Cassino, however, marked a sea change in attitudes to losses in the British Army in Italy. Afterwards, men and resources were transferred to support the Normandy landings, which began on 6 June 1944, and the invasion of southern France, which started in August. As the UK's pool of fit young men dwindled, and the willingness of conscripted civilians to risk death and mutilation declined, commanders became increasingly cautious about operations that potentially entailed heavy losses. In the remaining 12 months of the war in Italy, the Allies dependence upon long-range artillery and air power to break German defensive lines intensified. Allied losses, nevertheless, continued to be high until German resistance collapsed at the end of April 1945.

### **The German Army in the Liri valley**

During the Liri valley battles, the Irish Brigade faced well-equipped, highly-trained and well-motivated German formations. These included Panzergrenadiers (motorised infantry formations); Jaeger Regiments and Fallschirmjaeger (Paratroopers). These were supported by strong tank and artillery forces. All were considered formidable opponents, though the paratroopers were regarded with particular awe by Allied troops. The equipment used by German soldiers was considered to be at least as good as that used by British infantrymen. The magazine-fed, bolt-action 98K Mauser rifle was the counterpart of the Lee-Enfield, though most German infantry formations were tactically trained to operate with a high level of machinegun support. The principal German sub-machinegun was the MP40 "Schmeisser", which at least matched the Thompson. The Schmeisser was mainly used by paratroopers and NCOs. The MG42 "Spandau" machine-gun, which usually took two men to operate, was a terrifying weapon, capable of firing up 1,200 rounds a minute and killing at 1,000 metres and more. Attacking Allied troops were trained to take cover when the Spandau opened up and to move during the short period that it took to change an overheated barrel. The Spandau was used with devastating effect during the Polish Corps' attacks on the Monte Cassino massif on 12 May.

German stick grenades had some advantages over the British Army's Mills bomb: they could be thrown further and did not suffer the tendency to roll downhill. The German Army's 8cm portable mortar was one of its most feared weapons because of its accuracy and rate of fire. The Irish Brigade was also subject to attacks by the five-barrel, 21cm Nebelwerfer 42. The German's 88mm artillery piece was probably the best weapon of its kind in the Second World War, although the British Army's versatile and mobile 25-pounder could be a battle winner. German tanks were generally considered better-armoured and more highly-powered than their Allied equivalents. In the Liri valley, the Irish Brigade occasionally came into contact with the Mark IV Panzer, which had a 75mm gun and became the German Army's workhorse in the second half of the war (see photograph above). Panther and Tiger tanks were not seen during Liri valley battles.

It is often written that the average German soldier showed more initiative and endurance than their opponents. The German Army operated under ferocious military discipline. Captured deserters were normally shot, often simply on the order of a senior officer. No one in the British soldier was executed for desertion or cowardice in the Second World War. A further motivating factor for the German Army was that it was fighting an enemy that had demanded unconditional surrender. This was unacceptable even to those plotting in the summer of 1944 to depose Adolph Hitler. Many German soldiers were disgusted by Nazi genocide. Very few, however, resisted the military indoctrination which was a central part of Nazi government rule since it was established in 1933. Conscientious objection was not recognised in Nazi Germany. The German Army was founded on an exceptionally high-level of training among junior officers and NCOs. German platoons and sections would continue to function effectively despite suffering losses that made most Allied units of a similar size collapse. There were, however, three areas in which British and Allied Armies were definitely superior at this stage of the war. The first was in air power: by the time of the final Cassino battle, the Allies were putting up far more aircraft than the Germans. The Allies inflicted huge damage to German supply lines. The Allies were also better-resourced than their opponents and had far more motor vehicles: the Germans continued to depend upon horsepower right until the end of the war. This advantage was, however, offset by the poor state of Italy's roads. The Allies often operated in rural and mountainous areas where there were no metaled roads. They too often depended upon mules to transport food and equipment. Finally, the Allies were generally better-fed. German rations were considered inferior to their British equivalent. British canned *Compo* rations – the envy of the British Army's American counterparts – made a critical contribution to bolstering the morale of the British infantryman in a campaign that, at times, seemed to never end.

### **Following in the footsteps of the Irish Brigade in the Liri valley**

There are two principal ways of getting to the Irish Brigade battlefields in the Liri valley. There is a regular train service from Rome to Cassino where a taxi can be hired. The alternative is to travel by car from Rome, which takes about 90 minutes. You will probably need a contemporary map, which can be acquired in the visitors' centre in Cassino town; a map of the area prepared before or during the war; the war diaries, which can be downloaded from the Irish Brigade website, and one or more of the books mentioned above.

It is also useful to seek the assistance of a knowledgeable local guide. The Irish Brigade website can help you contact the right person.

### **Step one: crossing Congo bridge.**

The attack on the Gustav Line started with a huge artillery bombardment from the Tyrrhenian Sea to Cassino. Infantry started to try and cross the Gari in the early hours of 12 May. With bridges in place and bridgeheads extending up to 2,000 metres to the west of the Gari by the morning of 13 May, the decision was taken to order the 78th Division into the battle. It was given successive objectives: the Grafton Line which ran from the north-east to the south-west along the route of the Cassino-Pignataro road; the Pytchley line which ran north-east to south-west across the highest points in the area and centred on the hamlet of Sinagoga, the Fernie Line north west of Pytchley which ran through Masseria (large farm) Cerro, and the Bedale Line which

ran through Piumarola to the ridge overlooking the Via Casilina. Three of these lines are shown on the map on page 4.

The division's overarching objective was to take this ground and interrupt the flow of vehicles and men to and from the Monte Cassino garrison and link up at Piedimonte with the Polish Corps, which was given the task of breaking through the Gustav Line on the Monte Cassino massif. No firm timeline was set but the original orders suggest that it was hoped that all three objectives could be taken in little more than a day. This was to prove to be highly unrealistic.

The plan called for a two-brigade advance: the 38th on the left and the 11th on the right. Each phase of the attack would normally involve a battalion from each brigade working side-by-side and supported by tanks, artillery and specialist heavy machinegun units. The Allied high command sought to direct the attack in detail. But the nature of the ground and the number of German strongpoints meant that local commanders had a high degree of autonomy. Company commanders and even platoon and section leaders often played decisive roles in the fighting, which was regularly close-quarter.

The Skins were the first battalion to move from the brigade's concentration area at Presenzano to the east of the front line. During the night of 13 May, the Skins were ordered to a new concentration point on the west side of Monte Trocchio, a rocky ridge about a mile from end to end that runs north to south, east of the Gari. Monte Trocchio provided a natural shelter from German machinegun fire, mortars and artillery, but there are hair-raising accounts of the conditions behind the mountain during Operation Diadem.

At 4am on 14 May, the Skins moved down the Gari valley to the east bank of the river. Here, there was to be an unexpected delay, as the battalion's War Diaries record: "On arrival at the departure point (at 10am), it was found the REs (Royal Engineers) had not quite finished the bridge across the river (the Gari) and a delay of three hours was caused."

The 100-foot bridge was named Congo. It was completed about 600 metres north of San Angelo at 11am. The Skins, without vehicles, crossed the river at 1pm and prepared to move to the front almost immediately.

**Congo bridge today** Congo bridge was dismantled following the battle and there is no trace of its existence. But its location can be identified by using the grid references in the war diaries of the Irish Brigade and its three battalions.

The best way to get there involves starting in central Cassino and heading south on the Via Sant'Appolinare to San Angelo past the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery (it is suggested that every reader of this guide pays a visit to this sombre and wonderful spot). The road passes over the Cassino to Pignataro road. About two kilometres south of the town, it crosses a stream, which should be noted but ignored. The second stream that is crossed is the Pioppeto river. Almost immediately after this bridge, there is a left turn which should be taken. This small road is called the Via Santa Brigada. Follow it for about 500 metres until there is a gap in the hedge line on the left where you will see the marks of car wheels through a field towards the Gari which is only about 200 metres away at this point. Cars should probably be left here.

Follow the car tracks more or less due west until you come to the Gari River. In high summer, this is probably no more than two metres deep. The river banks are however about four metres high. At this point, the Gari bends sharply to the west and this marks the location of Blackwater bridge. It was completed around midnight on 14 May, after all three Irish Brigade battalions had passed through the area.

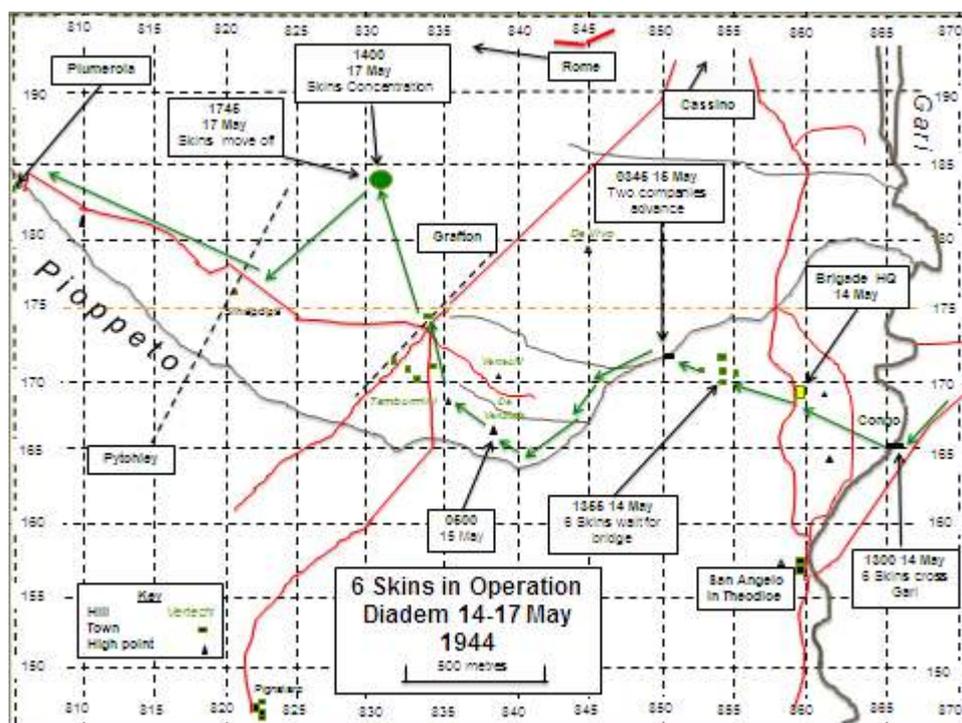
Head south around the bend in the river and after about 200 metres you will come across a concrete structure about three feet high with steel reinforcing bars sticking out of it. This is probably the remnant of a post-1945 structure, but it serves a useful purpose in indicating the stretch of the Gari where the Congo bridge was built on the morning of 14 May.

The flood-plain west of river at this point is flat and large enough to accommodate a large number of vehicles, tanks and personnel, as it did for the 78th Division during Operation Diadem.

The area is overlooked by the northern extension of the ridge east of the Gari upon which San Angelo lies (see the photograph above for a contemporary view of the area). Building and using the Congo bridge was therefore only possible once San Angelo and the connected high ground had been taken. After ferocious fighting and much loss of life, this was accomplished by the 1st/5th Gurkhas of the 8th Indian Division around 12 noon on 13 May.

There is evidence of the conditions that greeted the Skins on 14 May. During the Irish Brigade website's visit to the area on 2 August 2012, rust-covered pieces of shrapnel were found in the ploughed fields nearby. 2 LIR (the battalion will be referred to from now on by its war-time nickname the Rifles) crossed Congo on the afternoon of 14 May and 1 RIRF (the battalion's regimental nickname the Faughs will be used from now on) used the bridge at 730pm on the same day. The Skins and the Rifles moved directly through the bridgehead to the front. The Faughs, in contrast, stayed close to the bridge and were only called to the front on the afternoon of 16 May. The Brigade HQ was established for most of the following days in a deep German dug-out on the Cassino-San Angelo road (see the map below. The Brigade HQ is marked with a yellow cube). Scott established a mobile battlefield HQ that could move closer to the front line. This usually comprised a tank and an armoured car. Often the personnel of the Brigade's battlefield HQ comprised only Scott and a single support officer.

### Step two: the Pioppeto crossing



**Map 1.** The route of 6 Skins from Congo bridge on 14 May to Piumarola on 17 May.

The Skins headed west from Congo to the Via Santa Brigada and across the San Angelo ridge by one of the tracks crossing the high ground. There is no record of which route they took, but the war diaries report that the battalion halted around 2pm on 14 May on the west edge of the San Angelo ridge overlooking the Pioppeto (see map reference 855 170).

The hill opposite on the northern side of the Pioppeto is Masseria De Vivo. The diaries say that the original plan was for the Skins to advance immediately to this hill, but it was still held by Germans after the 2nd/4th Hampshires, part of 28th Infantry Brigade within 4th Division, had failed to take it earlier that day. The Skins' diaries record that the river was a serious impediment. "The River Pioppeto was found to be impassable to tanks owing to the soft banks – one tank became bogged and caused the river to swell." The Skins were told that the Hampshires would organise the construction of a bridge over the river by dawn. The battalion created defensive positions for the night of 14 May on the southern approaches to the Pioppeto. This was probably on the slopes overlooking the river.

**The battlefield today.** You can get to this point from the site of the Congo bridge by returning to the Cassino-San Angelo road and turning left just past the Pioppeto. This is Via Folcara. It heads west following the northern bank of the Pioppeto. After about 400 metres, there is a crossroads. Turn left and cross the Pioppeto. After a further 75 metres, there is an open area of about 10 metres square on the right side of the road. On closer inspection, you will discern the outline of a track about 10 metres wide which heads from this spot towards the Pioppeto. You can park here. There is no unambiguous evidence of where the Pioppeto bridge was built but there are clues. Today, there are in fact two bridges about 25 metres from each other. The one you have crossed is fairly modern, but further west and along the track where you have parked is a second one. It is covered in undergrowth and appears to be of earlier construction. The Irish Brigade website believes this bridge was constructed in the post-1945 period on the location of the original Pioppeto crossing. Further confirmation of the accuracy of this assertion is needed.

Two bridges were eventually built for the 78th Division at this spot to allow two-way traffic over the Pioppeto (see photograph on page 17 which was taken in May 1944). Dozens of tanks, armoured troop carriers and other vehicles crossed the river to support the division's attacks. The bridge was used successively by all three of the battalions of the Irish Brigade. Like Congo, this bridge is vital to your understanding of how the brigade's battle developed.

### **Step three: the Skins' attack on Masseria De Vendittis and Masseria Tamburinni**

The CO of the Skins on 14 May was Lieutenant-Colonel Bala Bredin MC, DSO, one of the most aggressive officers in the British Army in the Second World War. The Skins were told that the Hampshires were to make a further attack on De Vivo hill at 6am, just before dawn (see photograph above for the view of De Vivo from the north bank of the Pioppeto). In anticipation, Bredin sent out patrols into no-man's land to find out exactly where else the Germans were and to identify weak points. One went to the top of Vertechi hill (see photograph below taken in August 2012 of the view from Vertechi towards the Pioppeto), the next hill which lies to the west of De Vivo, and to Vendittis hill, the one beyond Vertechi. Another was sent to find out what was happening on De Vivo hill itself. All that was found there was a single infantryman from 1 Royal West Kents.

A patrol sent to the south made contact with the Rifles, which had crossed the Gari in the afternoon of 14 May. Scott, based just east of the Skins, recorded that 14 May was a quiet night and that the battalion was sleeping soundly until about midnight, when a message was received that said that “the highest authorities considered it essential to the success of the operations as a whole for the Skins to capture the line of Grafton by dawn.” Scott wrote that: “This was a bombshell which caused everyone furiously to think, and produced one of the more morose and sleepy types of O (Orders) Groups at about 0030hrs.”

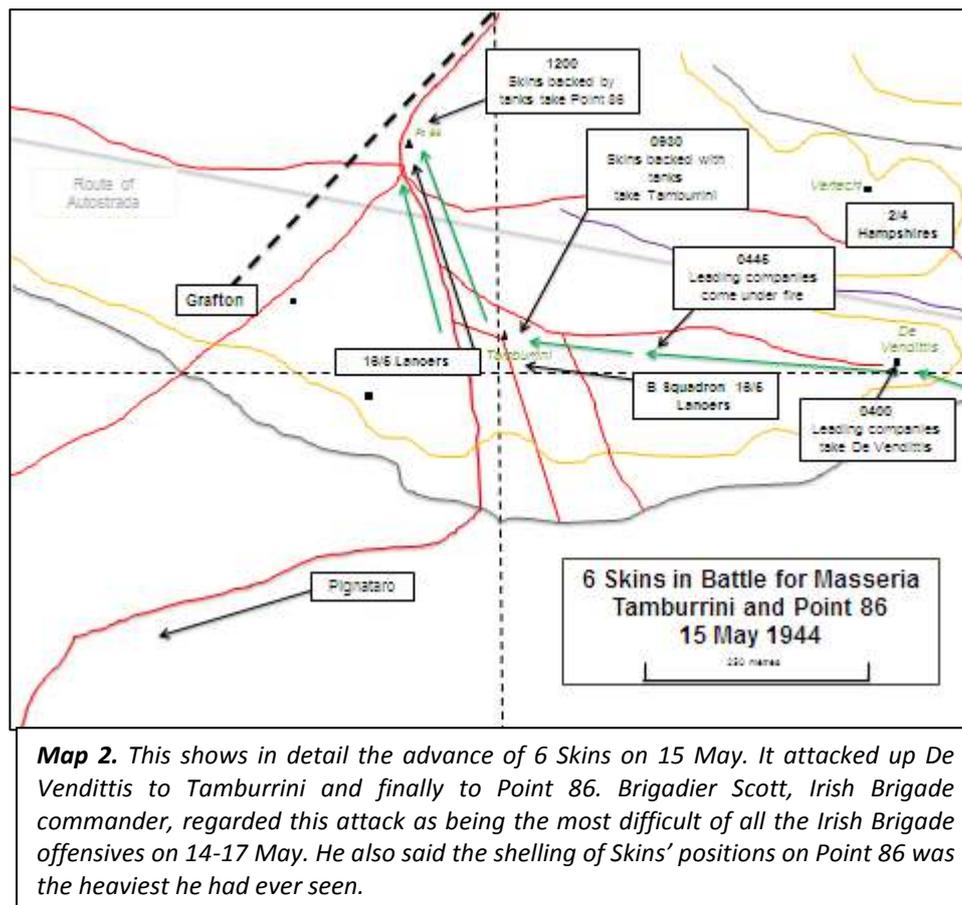
11th Brigade on the Skins’ right was given a similar order.

Scott wrote that at that point the following information was at hand:

- Masseria Vertechi was precariously held by the 2/4 Hampshires (of 11th Brigade)
- The southern end of Masseria De Vendittis was clear of enemy,
- Few tanks supporting the Hampshires had crossed the Pioppeto; one had got stuck the other side of the river and was blocking the way ahead.
- The moon would not rise until 130am and would not be effective until at least 2am.

A plan was developed and quickly executed. Bredin ordered A and D companies to move off at 3am, while it was still dark. The two companies forded the Pioppeto and turned to the left to follow the course of the Pioppeto to the west. This almost immediately involved crossing the Fossa di Cerro Antico, a stream about three feet wide and three feet deep that flows into the Pioppeto from the high ground that separates De Vivo from Vertechi, the hill then held by the Hampshires. About 250 metres to the west, there is a second stream about the same size. The companies crossed it and advanced about 300 metres further on the north bank of the Pioppeto to the foot of De Vendittis. This is a hill that rises to the north-west to about 20 metres above the Pioppeto.

Moving silently in the darkness, the companies were undetected by the German defenders and De Vendittis itself did not have a German strongpoint. “(A and D companies reached) Vendittis (8417) without meeting much resistance,” the Skins’ diaries record. They were on the hill by 0400, went to ground and waited for reinforcements.



Bredin ordered B and C companies to follow and they passed through A and D, climbing about 300 metres along the hill to Tamburrini, which is about 30 metres higher than De Vendittis (see photograph below of the view from the lower slopes of Tamburrini towards De Vendittis). At this point (around 445am) the Germans realised that a serious attack was under way. The diaries record that the Skins were halted by machinegun fire from about 70 metres further up Tamburrini. The two companies took cover in a field of corn and their presence was additionally hidden by thick mist. The Skins' HQ followed to join the four companies on De Vendittis-Tamburrini hill. Around 545am, C Company pushed forward to the road to Pignataro which runs north-south about 100 metres west of Tamburrini. The diaries record that the company ran into German tanks and went to ground under fire. Bredin informed Brigade HQ on the San Angelo ridge overlooking the Pioppeto that the completion of a bridge across the river was urgent so that tank support could be made available for the next phase of the operation. The first Pioppeto bridge was completed at about 8am and the Sherman tanks of B Squadron of the 16/5 Lancers were guided to the Skins HQ on De Vendittis. Tank commanders were taken to Tamburrini to study the countryside, meet Bredin and develop a plan. It was decided that the tanks would attack the German machinegun posts and pillboxes on the hill and then hold fixed positions until two Skins companies followed up. The process would be repeated further up the hill. The two other Skins' companies remained on De Vendittis with the anti-tank guns and other supporting weapons. The opposition on the hill was identified as the 115 Panzergrenadier Regiment.

While the tanks and the Skins were preparing to attack, German strongpoints continued to harass the Skins. A machinegun post was reported around 830am to be firing on the Skins' forward positions. The Skins responded with 2-inch mortar fire. The Germans in turn replied with

mortar fire which wounded all but one member of one platoon's HQ personnel. Bredin's reaction was to try and sort out the problem himself. Originally a Royal Ulster Rifles officer and a marksman, Bredin crawled forward to try to shoot the Germans in the machinegun nest. This failed as the German machine gunners were too well hidden.

At 835am, the planned attack began. Shermans, supported by D Company, advanced up the hill on the right and others supported by B Company attacked on the left. The commanders of the battalion's machine guns and mortars were told to follow close behind so they could consolidate the ground as soon as it was captured. The diaries recorded cheerily that: "The tanks considerably heartened the infantry who were seen moving in good order, firing as they went and getting straight into the enemy positions." A German anti-tank gun was put out of action and three prisoners were taken (see photograph below taken near the top of Tamburinni looking towards the Cassino-Pignataro road). The diaries record that the Skins were close to the top of the hill by 1050am. A further 21 prisoners were taken.

The final part of the attack involved taking Point 86 close to the junction between the Pignataro road, which was on the Grafton line, and the track to Vertechì to the east. At 10am, the divisional artillery pounded the area and airburst shells were fired over enemy positions south-east of Point 86. B Squadrons tanks "smothered" possible German positions with high explosive shells and machinegun fire, Scott wrote.

"At 1005, B and C Companies literally charged over the valley with the tanks and established themselves amongst the dugouts and ditches south-east of Point 86."

D Company was brought up and went through Grafton to a location north-east of Point 86. At 1110am, B Company went to high ground to the south-east of the point. A Company later moved to about 200 metres south-east of Point 86. One of the supporting Shermans hit a mine and was disabled. It was subsequently destroyed by a German self-propelled gun.

The fight ended at about noon with the entire battalion on the Grafton line. The Skins' achievement was considerable. It had worked around German strongpoints to attack the heart of the enemy positions on the high ground in the mouth of the Liri valley. It had successfully mounted a tactically-effective assault on strong German positions.

The diaries record that the Skins took a total of 53 prisoners and captured seven 75mm anti-tank guns plus some self-propelled guns. But two officers (Lieutenant M G Milner and Lieutenant BM Jackson) and three other ranks had been killed. Fifty others had been wounded. That was about 12 per cent of the battalion's fighting strength. Five Shermans had been knocked out.

The Skins had driven through the Gustav Line but were unsupported. The battalion was subject to constant and heavy bombardment and machine-gun fire from all directions.

"By midday, the Skins had shot their bolt after a magnificent performance," Scott wrote. "Theirs had perhaps been the most difficult operation to lay on of those that occurred during the next few days. They were still up against the crust of the Gustav Line... Their flanks were exposed."

The Skins needed relief as soon as possible. That was to be the task of the Rifles.

**De Vendittis and Tamburinni today.** The bridge over the Pioppeto is an excellent spot to consider the challenge the Skins faced on the morning of 15 May. De Vivo hill commands a sweeping view of the ground leading to and from the Pioppeto. It is crowned by a stone farm house that had been a German strongpoint. It is obvious why the Hampshires found capturing the hill to be difficult (see photograph on page 15).

The Irish Brigade website team walked what we believe was the route taken by the Skins on the morning of 15 May until reaching the second stream, which proved uncrossable. We followed the route of the stream uphill until blocked by fences and farm buildings which forced us to move to the east and reach the track from Vertechì which we followed. After about 400 metres, we turned left to cross the stream but found that the Milan-Naples Autostrada runs through the valley separating Vertechì and the connected hills of De Vendittis and Tamburinni to the west. A bridge across the Autostrada leads to a path that connects to an east-west track. This runs from De Vendittis to Tamburinni (see Map 2 on page 18 for details).

About 200 metres further west is the Cassino-Pignataro road where the Skins encountered German tanks on the morning of 15 May (see photograph below). It goes up the hill to the battalion's final objective: Point 86.

It is now almost impossible to locate the precise site of Point 86. A complex interchange connecting the Pignataro-Cassino road with the Milan-Naples Autostrada occupies most of the area. Point 86 is probably within the land of the Hotel Edra which lies north of the entrance of the lane to Sinagoga.

#### **Step four: preparing to attack Sinagoga**

The Rifles had embussed at their reserve position near Presenzano at 330am on 14 May and arrived behind Monte Trocchio at 715am, while the Skins in the Gari valley were waiting for Congo bridge to be finished. The battalion remained there for almost eight hours in conditions described by John Horsfall in *Fling Your Banner to the Wind*:

“It was a cheerless stunted spot and the hillside looked as though a hurricane had struck it. Seared and torn under the shelling, one would remember the destruction – and the satanic hiss of splinters as they ripped through the olive trees every few seconds. For several hours that afternoon, Monte Trocchio was a screaming madhouse with this, and our own guns, in serried ranks behind it, replying in kind.”

At 230pm, the Rifles were told that it would immediately be involved in an attack. It would involve them advancing simultaneously with the Skins from the Pioppeto in a northerly direction over Vertechì and De Vivo; across the Cassino-Pignataro road and a stream flowing into the Gari to a point overlooking Via Casilina at Cantoni. The planned attack would entail an advance of about 2 kilometres and would be supported by the armoured cars of the Derby Yeomanry; the 16/5 Lancers and the 17th Field Regiment of the Royal Artillery. This was one of several ambitious plans of attack that were to be cancelled as the reality of the problems facing the 78th Division became increasingly obvious. It was to take three more days for the objective defined in the aborted attack to be taken.

At 3pm, while the Skins were waiting for the Pioppeto bridge to be built, the battalion moved off on foot from Monte Trocchio, walking along the route of the railway line to Cassino, where the rails had been removed, and then down a track to the east side of the Congo Bridge, following the route taken earlier by the Skins. The battalion's CO Ion Goff had gone ahead with the Intelligence Officer to study the Rifles' concentration point on the Cassino-San Angelo road. Led by Horsfall, the Rifles were over the Gari by 4pm.

CQMS Colour Sergeant Edmund O'Sullivan, then 25, remembered the conditions around Congo in *All My Brothers*. “It was about 5pm on 14 May when we moved towards the river (the Gari) and

crossed a partly-submerged Bailey bridge (Congo), which was heavily smoked, and passed into the bridgehead. The company went into reserve positions (on the San Angelo ridge near the Via Sant'Appolinare)."

At that time, a brigade O Group was held at the Brigade HQ on the high ground overlooking the Pioppeto and it was told that the plan to drive to Cantoni that afternoon had been adjusted. The 2/4 Hampshires were to be given the task of taking De Vivo hill. Only then would the Skins be able to pass through the Hampshires to high ground further north (the Irish Brigade website believes this is probably Point 76 about 100 metres north-west of the Pignataro-Cassino road). The London Irish were then to pass through the Skins to Cantoni.

The O Group was told the attack was to begin at 6pm. The Rifles, west of Congo, were ready to move at 7pm but 15 minutes later information was passed back that a tank had become bogged in the Pioppeto. The attack was postponed. The battalion settled down in defensive positions for the night on the Via Sant'Appolinare

Later in the evening, fresh orders were received. The Rifles were told that the attack would go ahead as planned on the morning of 15 May with the 2/4 Hampshires aiming to take De Vivo hill after a bridge had been built over the Pioppeto. All other features of the planned attack seem to have been unchanged. The goal at this point still was to cut through to the Via Casilina as quickly as possible and probably by the end of 15 May.

At 8am on 15 May, Goff travelled by troop carrier to the Pioppeto bridge, which had just been built, to reconnoitre the battalion's forming up point north of the bridge. But news came back that the Skins had already moved off to the left to take De Vendittis and Tamburinni.

While this was happening, there was a further revision of plans. The Rifles were told that it would follow the Skins and then head to Pinchera via Sinagoga about 1 kilometre to the west (see Map 4 on page 29 for the location of Pinchera). There is no explanation in the diaries for the change in direction of the brigade attack from north to west. Possibly, it had been recognised that it would be difficult to get to the Via Casilina so long as German forces held highpoints around Sinagoga.

The initial requirement was for the Rifles to move along the Pioppeto to the stream between Vertechi and De Vendittis and concentrate half way up the valley (this was subsequently named "Happy Valley" in an ironic reference to the volume of shells and mortars that were directed on it by the Germans). This started at 1245pm. The Rifles, like the Skins on top of the hill, were hit by heavy German artillery and mortar fire. At about 3pm, Goff called an O Group in the valley and this was hit by concentrated German shelling. Goff was mortally wounded. Others were killed and wounded, including John Loveday, CO of the 16/5 Lancers. G Company commander Major Geoffrey Philips was seriously wounded. Lieutenant Ken Lovatt, the Rifles' signal's officer and most of his signals team, were also injured. Horsfall, after getting briefed at brigade headquarters, was rushed to the Rifles concentration area to take over command.

O'Sullivan vividly remembered the shocking moment when his CO was mortally wounded. "I was close to the ADS (dressing station) and a troop carrier used as an ambulance trundled in," he wrote in *All My Brothers*.

"I went over and found the battalion's commander, Colonel Goff, seriously wounded and in agony (he was to die soon after). I helped unload him. With him was what looked like a midget who was obviously dead. It took me some time to recognise the body as Goff's driver who was more than 6ft tall. He had lost both legs. Goff had been on reconnoitre and a shell had caught him and his O Group. Father Dan Kelleher (the brigade's Roman Catholic padre) called me over

and asked if I would help him with burials. The first was the badly mutilated driver. I held back the blanket while Father Dan anointed the stumps.”

To the Skins’ right, 11th Brigade led by the 5th Northamptonshires fought their way to the Pignataro road during 15 May. From 4pm, they encountered fierce German resistance but they reached their objectives along the road. The brigade’s other two battalions were, however, experiencing difficulties. The traffic flow over the Bailey Bridges was damaging the approaches with the result that they were not in a position to assist the Northamptonshires.

The Lancashire Fusiliers crossed the Gari in the early evening while the 1st East Surreys were still on the east bank at that point. The commander of the 78th Division decided to postpone the attack on Pytchley until 730pm. Soon after, orders arrived stating that the attack on Sinagoga and the Pytchley Line would not take place until 9am on 16 May.

**The battlefield today.** Most of the locations mentioned in the War Diaries of the Rifles have already been discussed, including the valley where Goff was killed.

### **Step five: the attack on Sinagoga**

After dark, the Rifles moved up the valley to the top of the hill, through the positions of the Skins and dug in about 400 metres to the east of the Casino-Pignataro road. At first light, Horsfall called an O Group and set out his plan of attack.

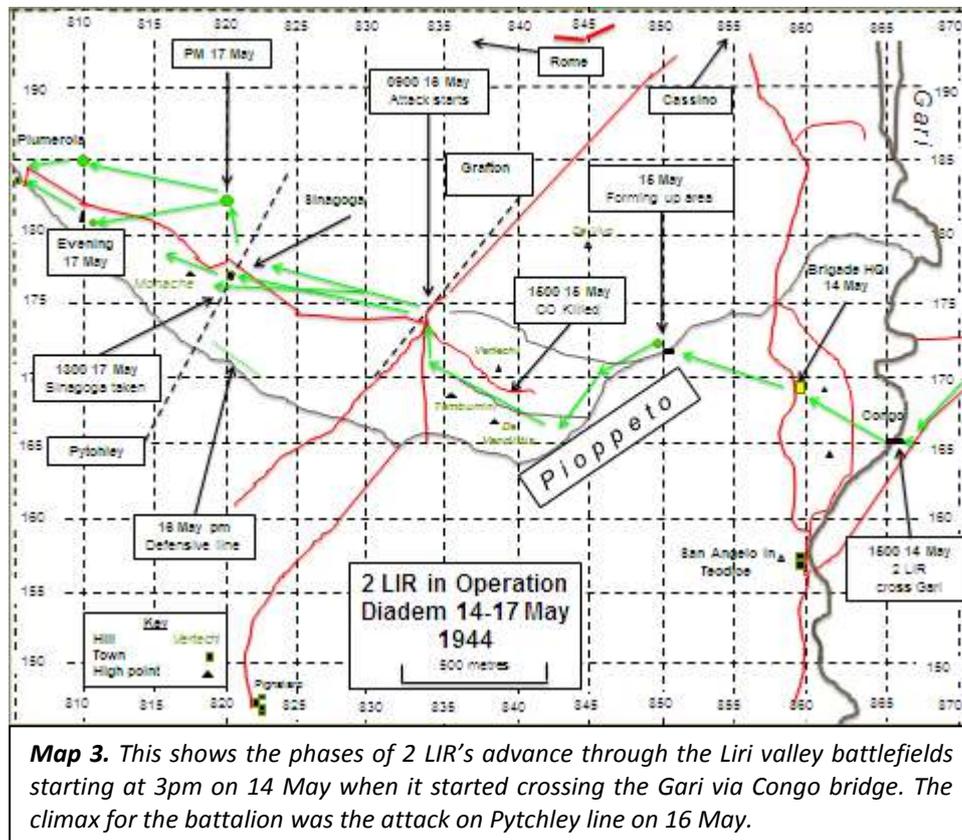
Three of the Rifles’ companies would advance forward with H Company under Major Desmond Woods at the centre following the line of the track west to Sinagoga from Point 86. E Company under Major Mervyn Davies would be on the left and G Company under Captain Peter Grannell (who had replaced Major Philips) would be on the right. Each company would be supported by one troop of tanks. F Company under Major Colin Gibbs would follow up in reserve. The principal objective would be the three main buildings that made up the Sinagoga hamlet about 50 metres south of the track from the Cassino-Pignataro road.

The attack was to be supported by the 17th Field Regiment under the command of Major Paul Lunn-Rockcliffe and B Squadron of 16/5 Lancers. A further 75 guns of the 78th Division’s artillery would deliver a long-range bombardment on German positions. The barrage was to start punctually at 9am and the Rifles would advance at 920am. There are two accounts of the feelings in the battalion at this critical moment.

“From darkness onwards (on 15 May) the enemy defensive fire began to wane and became spasmodic,” Horsfall wrote in ***Fling Our Banner to the Wind***. “Desmond (Woods) and Colin Gibbs came in to ask some questions during the late evening, and at one stage Corporal Telfer appeared fussing anxiously about feeding us. What he was doing in the front line I cannot think, but I am afraid on this occasion we were hardly responsive. Rum was adequate for all our requirements just then, and I think my companions Paul (Lunn-Rockcliffe) and Jerry Cole (the Rifles Adjutant) found it a satisfactory diet too, as we discussed what had to be done when the sun rose. Preliminary action at least was not required. Fortunately our forward companies were already in position, dug in on the start line, and all they had to do was to get up from their posts when the time came and go forward behind the barrage.”

That evening, O’Sullivan brought food and other supplies to E Company.

“I went up to the company in a 15cwt truck driven by “Benny” Goodman. I found that the attack due for the morning had been postponed while the new battalion commander John Horsfall, who was second in command, took over. Goodman crashed the vehicle and I had to walk the rest of the way. I rejoined E Company and stayed until dawn in a slit trench with my mate (9 Platoon Sergeant) Eddie Mayo.”



Mayo, 24, married and a Ford worker from Dagenham, had been conscripted into the Rifles on 18 October 1939, the same day as O’Sullivan. An outstanding soldier, Mayo was quickly promoted to sergeant and was awarded an MM in Tunisia. He had been wounded twice and sustained a third, minor wound earlier in the Italian campaign. This should have qualified him to be removed from front line duties, but the wound was dressed locally and not officially recorded. He had also been nominated for officer training, but had turned it down. O’Sullivan recalled that Mayo, while fingering a Luger pistol that he had taken from a German officer, had said to him that night: “You know what I’m going to do with this lot. Use this to make a living.” O’Sullivan thought he was only partly joking.

Horsfall, close by, also had a restless night. “Some time after midnight we lay up in the command post, formerly the embedded position of a German anti-tank gun, and slept for an hour or so in spite of the racket going on around us. Strangely enough I recall the slight sounds and chat from our signallers beside me rather than the pandemonium going on outside the dugout.”

There was a cloudless sky over the front-line on the morning of 16 May. O’Sullivan supervised the distribution of hot food and returned to the battalion’s supply base. Nicholas Mosley, who was the officer in command of 9 Platoon, recalled the moment in his book **A Time of War**. He

had served breakfast to his platoon and was reaching out with a spoon to take the small amount of stew remaining when he felt what was like a wasp sting on his wrist. He had been hit by shrapnel and the wound was serious enough for him to be sent to the ADS for treatment. Mayo took over command of 9 Platoon.

Horsfall, meanwhile, was scanning no-man's land. "Slap in front, a quarter mile distant, the Pignataro road stretched away across us. Beyond the road was thick with mines and covered in depth by 88s (German artillery pieces). So I sent the pioneers out...in the half light of dawn to disinfect where possible...Fortunately, the German anti-tank minefields were easily visible at the time, with most of the mines on the surface."

At 9am, the divisional artillery opened fire on the German lines. They were joined by medium batteries. "The landscape ahead just vanished under pitch black thunder cloud, pierced by the dancing orange lightning of the shell bursts," Horsfall wrote.

The crawling bombardment advanced at about 100 metres a minute over German positions about 1,000 metres to the front. It dwelt for 10 minutes on the principal strongpoints in and around Sinagoga. The three advance companies were told to keep as close as possible to the barrage and allow the defenders as little time as possible to recover.

The start of the bombardment was the Rifles' signal to attack. The three forward companies rose from their trenches at the appointed time and advanced. H Company commander Desmond Woods recalled that he almost immediately received complaints that his men were being hit by Allied artillery. He soon realised that accurate German counter-shelling was to blame. It killed one and wounded another of H Company's platoon commanders. It was a shocking experience.

"I will never forget the noise..." Woods wrote in an account included in **Clear the Way!** "One tried to move from one shell-hole to the next and I remember diving into a shell-hole and a chap – one of the riflemen from my Company HQ – landing on top of me and I said, 'get up, we must go on'. There was no movement; he was dead – he had a bit of shrapnel through his neck...About halfway through the attack...the barrage dwelt for ten minutes and we were able to get down to ground."

The Rifles' swift advance meant German defenders were quickly taken prisoner by H Company.

"Then we started moving forward again and I decided to bring up the reserve platoon to try to keep the impetus of the attack going," Woods wrote. "By then we had some German prisoners and they were moving along at my Company HQ. At times when the shelling was so bad we were lying flat on the ground, as close as we could get to it, and there was me beside these German prisoners – we were all made of human flesh, all dignity had gone, it was now a matter of could one stay alive until one got onto one's objective? "

H Company reached Sinagoga hamlet and started the process of clearing Germans from its buildings. The Shermans supporting the company moved through the advancing soldiers. They ran in into 88mm anti-tank guns and all the leading tanks were knocked out. Winkling out the defenders was largely left to the riflemen.

Scott recorded that the fighting in the village was bitter:

"H Company under Desmond Woods eventually broke into the village of Sinagoga where a ferocious hand-to-hand fight developed which lasted for over an hour with the (Germans) defending the buildings with grenades, machineguns and Schmeissers," he wrote.

H Company Corporal Jimmy Barnes led his section in a charge against an 88mm gun position deemed to be doing the most damage. All were cut down by machinegun fire from the left until Barnes was charging the gun alone. A final burst of gunfire killed him instantly but, before he fell, Barnes lobbed a grenade at the gun, killing at least one of its crew. Woods unsuccessfully recommended Barnes for a posthumous Victoria Cross.

H Company had reached its objective. But, by then, it only comprised about a dozen riflemen, a few corporals and one sergeant.

E Company on the left was also suffering at the hands of German defenders. Its commander Major Mervyn Davies recalled the company's advance in an account now held in the London Irish Rifles Association archives (see the end of the guide for a complete copy).

"We went forward with a troop of 16/5 Lancers," Davies wrote. "The initial advance was through a cornfield. The corn was quite golden and very tall and it was a shame to see the tanks mow it down. On the other hand, the corn afforded useful cover to the infantry. Due to the noise of our own artillery and tanks, we did not realise that we came under enemy fire until we saw the odd man fall. I remember seeing Lance Sergeant Williams, a young soldier who had come from the 70th Battalion, fall at this point."

E Company's line of advance was towards a wood that encompassed the Sinagoga hamlet and the area to its left. When the barrage ended, E Company found itself still in open ground short of the wood and completely exposed. Davies got up and ran towards the wood, hoping, rightly, that he would be followed by the rest of the company, though it suffered about a dozen casualties in the process. The company took 60 members of the 90th Panzergrenadier Regiment prisoner. After, Davies decided to check to see where the rest of the Rifles were.

"I walked through the wood to find G Company on our right had kept up with us. In the wood there was a small farm house which I took to be Sinagoga Farm. I went in and in a bedroom on the ground floor there were a very old man and his wife. They were unhurt and I tried to comfort them." Davies said he returned to the company's position in the wood. At that moment, the company was hit by nebelwerfers. Mayo and Corporal O'Reilly, another veteran with an MM, were killed. E Company lost two of its three other platoon commanders in the attack. Conditions on the right were a little more benign. G Company suffered fewer losses getting to its objective.

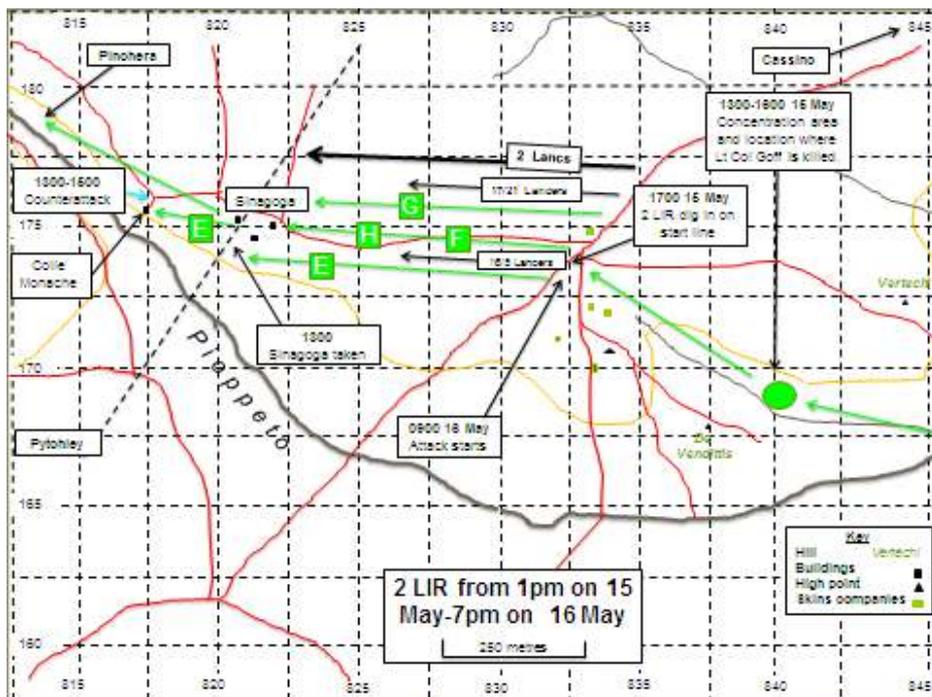
German tanks pushed forward through the gap between the Rifles and the Lancashire Fusiliers, on the right. These were repulsed by the 16/5 Lancers. F Company moving up from reserve was hit by German shells overshooting the attacking companies and sustained casualties. All four companies were in the fight and the Rifles secured its objective by about 1300. They now prepared for the counterattack. Mortar and Vickers machinegun units came up and started to counter increasing machinegun fire from across the Pioppeto to the south and west.

Closest to the river, E Company was most exposed and took up positions in and around a farm house at Colle Monache about 400 metres to the south east of Sinagoga (see the photograph above of the farm house today). German infantry, backed by tanks, crawled up from the Pioppeto. E Company supported by Vickers machinegun crews blazed away in response. German tanks were knocked out by the 16/5 Lancers or retreated over the river.

By dusk, the German counterattack had petered out. The survivors of H Company with F Company pushed forward 800 metres down the hill to the west to Pinchera. F Company held this position overnight. Horsfall, who used a Sherman as his command post and had been closely involved with the forward units, trundled back to Sinagoga at dusk. O'Sullivan returned to E

Company at nightfall with hot food for its survivors, probably in or dug-in around the farm house at Colle Monache. Riflemen in Mayo's platoon were weeping in the darkness. Lance-Corporal Gerald Keegan, a Lancashire Irishman aged 21 who had been made acting sergeant in Mayo's place, was carving tender words on a cross for their leader's grave. "Sergeant Eddie Mayo MM: the greatest sergeant that ever breathed." Keegan was killed by German shells five days later.

The battalion had secured all its objectives. But it had been a day of extreme violence. Scott wrote that German machinegun fire on 16 May was the most concentrated he had ever seen. The battalion's losses were high: nine officers; more than 100 NCOs and riflemen and more than 20 tank crewmen and other personnel from supporting units. The battalion had taken about 100 prisoners and killed about 100. Nine German tanks were knocked out.



**Map 4.** The advance of 2 LIR began with the concentration in the valley between Vertechi and Tamburrini/De Vendittis in the afternoon of 15 May where Lieutenant-Colonel Goff was killed. It ended at Pinchera at the map's top right-hand corner.

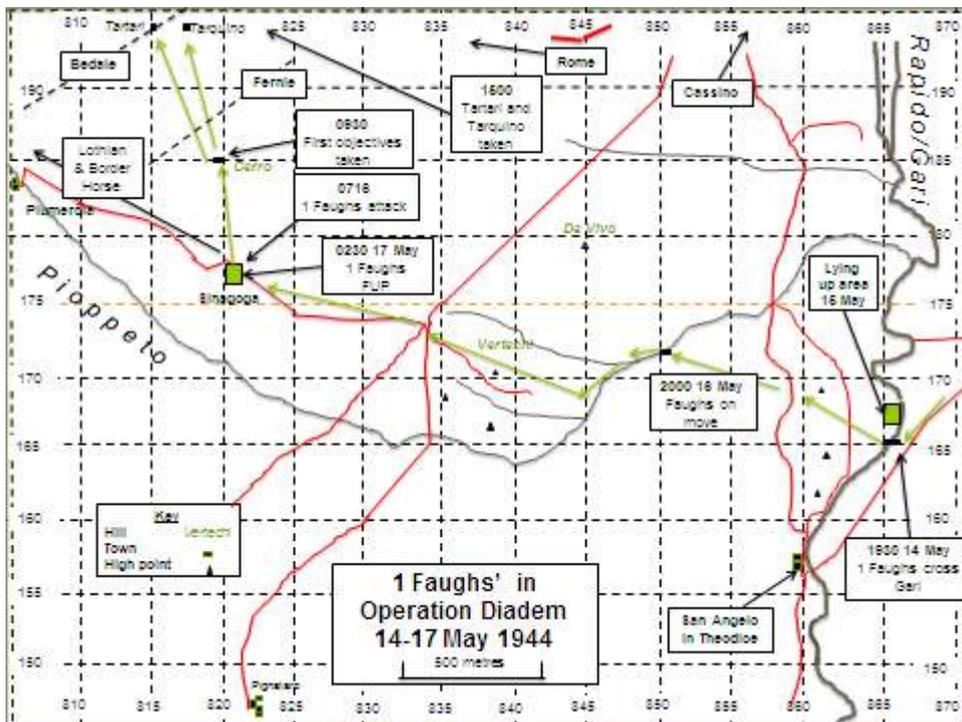
The success of the Rifles that day was echoed on the 11th Brigade's front where the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers supported by 17/21 Lancers reached Pytchley. Its advance company was being counter-attacked by Mark IV Panzers. A massive bombardment was called down on the enemy. At this moment Fusilier Jefferson singlehandedly knocked one tank out with a PIAT portable anti-tank gun and forced a second to withdraw. For this, Jefferson was awarded a Victoria Cross. This was one of three VCs won during the fourth Cassino battle. Sepoy Kamal Ram of the 3rd Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment was honoured for his valour at San Angelo on 12 May. Captain Wakeford of the 2/4 Hampshires won the VC during fighting on 13/14 May.

**The battlefield today.** Post-1945 development including the Milan-Naples Autostrada obscures parts of the Sinagoga battlefield, but it is still possible to walk the original track from Point 86 on the Pignataro road to the hamlet; this was the principal axis of advance for the Rifles on 16 May. The original Sinagoga farm house has been restored but what was a German bunker can be seen underneath one of the surrounding buildings. The rooms on its first floor were used by members

of the Rifles on the night of 16 May. The most compelling reminder of the battle is probably the farm house at Colle Monache which was held by E Company during the German counterattack across the Pioppeto in the afternoon of 16 May (see above). It has been cut off from Sinagoga by the Autostrada but a footbridge connecting it to the hamlet has been built so access is possible. The farm house was abandoned and never rebuilt after the war and looks today much as it did after the fighting finished. The huge hole in its roof was probably caused by shellfire or mortars.

The farm house also provides a clear view over the Pioppeto and it is possible to imagine German infantry and tanks climbing up from the river to the farm house. Pinchera, the most westerly point reached by the Rifles on 16 May, lies today beneath the Autostrada.

### Step six: the Faughs attack on Masseria Cerro



**Map 5.** 1 Faughs waited for two days near Congo bridge before moving off on 16 May over Pioppeto bridge, across Point 86 to Sinagoga where they arrived after dark. The Faughs' attack on Cerro hill began at 7am on 17 May. The first objectives were taken by around 930am and the battalion reached farm houses at Tartari and Tarquino hills in the evening. That night, a patrol was sent out from Tartari to the railway line to fire illuminating mortars over Via Casilina and disrupt German movements along the road.

The Faughs were the last to cross the Congo, arriving on the west bank of the Gari at about 730pm on 14 May, while the Skins were settling down for the night south of the Pioppeto. The battalion camped for the night and all of 15 May close to the bridge. At 7pm that day, a planning conference was held to discuss the attack on the Fernie Line on 17 May. The Faughs marched up to its concentration point south of Sinagoga hamlet in the afternoon of 16 May while the battle for Sinagoga was finishing. They were in place ready for their attack by midnight. Horsfall, based in the hamlet, recalled a visit from the Faughs' CO James Dunnill.

“There was smoke drifting everywhere over the battlefield but the night was a bright one under the livid light of the stars. Later the moon came up, bathing the smouldering landscape in its brilliance, until the settling smoke gradually turned into fog and shrouded the destruction about us.”

C Company of the Faughs had been given the lead role in the attack on Fernie. Its commander Captain Laurie Franklyn-Vaile wrote a letter to his wife Olive on 16 May, possibly while he and his company were waiting on the west bank of the Gari close to Congo bridge. She was then living in Nottingham.

“The weather is now very hot and the roads are extremely dusty,” Franklyn-Vaile wrote. “Needless to say that they are in an extremely bad condition. The colossal amount of traffic and the lack of repair is absolutely ruining them. My jeep has no windscreen and on a dusty road it is absolute misery, one gets covered from head to foot with thick white dust and on any long line of traffic the vision is basically completely obscured.”

The Faughs’ objective was Masseria Cerro on a hill about 80 metres above sea level. It was about 1 kilometre north of the Sinagoga hamlet and the two locations were connected by a track that ran almost exactly south to north. The first half of the advance was gently downhill and the second half further uphill, but the change of elevation was probably less than 50 feet.

The plan of attack called for C Company, led by Franklyn-Vaile, and D Company, led by Captain Jimmy Clarke, to take the advance positions. A Company, under Jack Phelan, and B Company, under Dickie Richards, were held in reserve for the follow-up attack. Richards had previously been Franklyn-Vaile’s second in command.

“I was very sorry to lose him as he was a magnificent 2 i/c, but I am glad for his sake,” Franklyn-Vaile said in his letter of 16 May. “He certainly deserves it, out here from the beginning and still going just as strong as ever. He is easily my best friend in the battalion and there is a very strong bond between us. He will certainly make a success of it. He was married in May 1942 and has had very little time with his wife.”

The Faughs were the senior battalion of the Irish Brigade and the formation upon which the 38th was built. All the brigade’s commanders were Faughs, regular soldiers who had served in Palestine before the war and in the Battle of France in May-June 1940. Franklyn-Vaile nevertheless knew that morale could be shaky. In his letter to his wife, he recorded how 7 Platoon reacted badly when it had been previously shelled:

“...a couple of them got shell shock or “bomb happy” as we call it out here,” Franklyn-Vaile wrote. “I sat on the side of a ditch watching them cover over, not that I wanted to occupy such a position but it seemed the only thing to do to steady morale and, best of all, Frank Higgins, who was in the middle of a shave at the time, just calmly continuing shaving – a pretty good show I thought.”

“I had a lot of trouble with that platoon that day, four men went and deserted and it began to look as if the real rot was setting in,” Franklyn-Vaile continued. “So I had a very straight talk with 7 – and got the whole company together and gave them a real hard-hitting talk ‘Straight from the Shoulder’. I spoke of the ‘white-livered, gutless skunks’ who deserted their comrades, painted a very grim picture of what would happen to them, told them that my risk was greater than theirs but said I would rather die and ‘know my wife and daughter could hold up their heads for the rest of their lives knowing I had done my job’ rather than ‘live disgraced and bring shame and

misery on my family'. I spoke quietly but put every ounce of force I possessed into what I was saying and delivered at such a time and place it had a very big effect."

Horsfall recorded his reaction to seeing the Faughs prepare to attack. "It had been interesting watching these experienced veterans moving up..," he wrote in **Fling Our Banner to the Wind.**" Horsfall had been commander of D Company of the Faughs during the battles in France and the fighting in Tunisia. The attack began at 7am on 17 May with an artillery barrage on the Fernie Line and German strongpoints. The barrage crawled forward as the Faughs supported by a squadron of Sherman tanks from the 16/5 Lancers advanced to Cerro. Opposition was strong; the German forces had been supplemented by paratroopers. The Faughs were hit by machinegun fire, mortars and shells. The Lancers' squadron commander Robert Gill was killed by shrapnel as he was mounting his Sherman. A shell hit D Company's HQ team, killing Franklyn-Vaile and his runner. Scott wrote: "Poor Laurie (sic) was killed within 15 minutes of the battle beginning, and his loss undoubtedly affected his men who had learned (sic) to adore this commander who so completely gave himself to the well being (sic) of his men."

C and D companies nevertheless took Cerro within two hours of the start of the attack. A and B companies passed through them and moved on towards the farm house on Colle Tartari about 750 metres further north and another on Colle Tarquino. Both commanded views over the Via Casilina and they were taken by the end of the afternoon of 17 May.

D Company followed up to join A Company at Colle Tartari (see photograph on page 35). After nightfall, an A Company patrol led by Lieutenant James Baker was sent down the hill to the railway line at the foot of the hill. From there, they fired illuminating mortars over Via Casilina to disrupt the withdrawal of German troops from Monte Cassino.

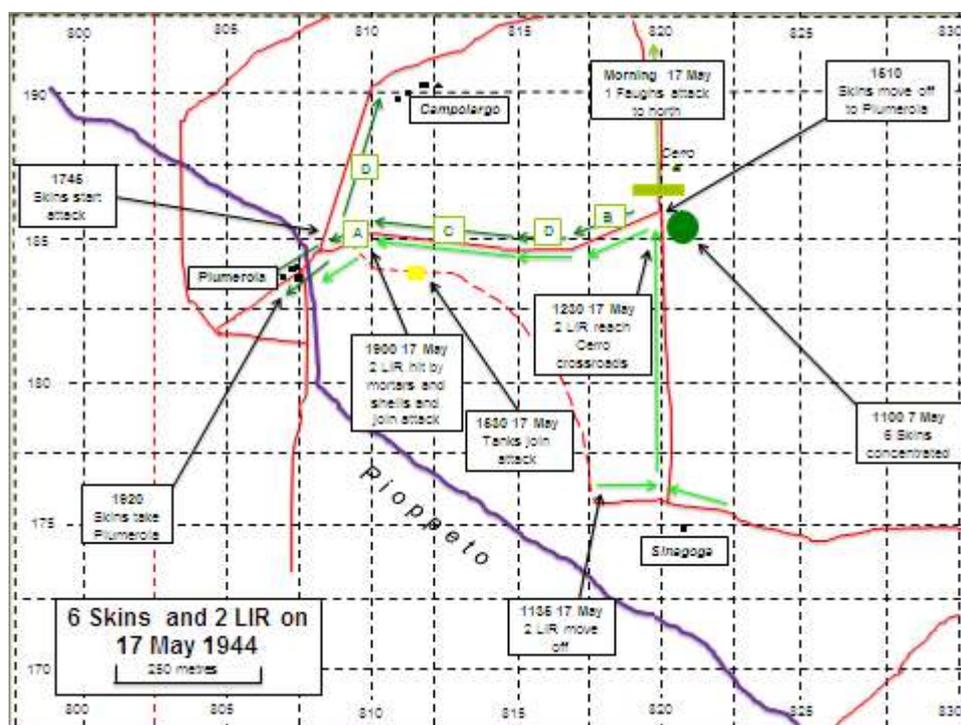
**The battlefield today.** The start line for the attack was the east-west track to Sinagoga and the axis of advance was along the existing road from there to the north (see photograph on page 33). The route to Cerro is interrupted by a new road connecting Piumarola to Via Casilina. This will have to be crossed. At the other side of the road, there is a new crossroads and a roundabout. Turn left and drive for about 200 metres to a junction where you turn right. About 200 metres along this road and set back from the road on the right hand side is the Cerro farm house that was the central first objective of the Faughs' dawn attack. It occupies a site next to a new factory.

Follow the same road north and a road joins from the left about 750 metres from Cerro farm house. Turn left and drive about 250 metres. You will see a narrow lane to the right with trees on each side. Walk down this for about 200 metres and you will find Casa Tartari, the farm house occupying Colle Tartari that was taken by A Company during the afternoon of 17 May. The building was repaired after the war but apparently quickly abandoned. From beside it, you can look down to the valley where the Via Casilina runs about 1 kilometre to the north (see photograph below). Between Casa Tartari and Via Casilina is the railway line from Cassino to Rome. The railway marks the area where Lieutenant Baker's patrol went to disrupt traffic on the Via Casilina on the night of 17 May. Return by the lane to the road, turn round and drive back to the junction you previously passed through.

Drive down the hill for about 200 metres and you will see on the right Casa Tarquino, which was taken by B Company around the same time as A Company took Tartari.

## Step Seven: The Skins attack on Piumarola

Due to the Faughs' swift success at Cerro, it was decided to investigate whether it was possible for the brigade to push on immediately to Piumarola. The Skins were called up to concentrate just south of the Cerro crossroads, where they arrived by 11am while the Faughs were pushing north to Tartari and Tarquino. A patrol supported by tanks headed west along the road towards Piumarola. At 330pm, they reported that Piumarola was still occupied and that they had made contact with a troop of 2 Lothian & Border tanks south of the road to Piumarola (see photograph on page 37 of the area where the tanks were located). The Lothians reported that there were anti-tank and self-propelled guns in and around Piumarola and a Mark IV tank in the area of Campolargo, north-east of the village. An attack plan was devised and the Skins set off west towards Piumarola with A and C companies in advance and B Company in the rear. The column was supported by tanks. Once the column had reached the Piumarola-Campolargo road, D Company split off to go north to Campolargo. The Skins concentrated less than 500 metres from Piumarola. The attack on the village started at 545pm with A Company and C Company in the lead. Bredin recorded that it went in with "almost indecent haste." Most went over the bridge into the village but one platoon of A Company placed a telegraph pole over the Pioppeto and clambered over. The Skins' commander Bredin was hit in both legs by shrapnel but continued to direct the battalion while strapped to the bonnet of a jeep. He eventually passed out and was sent back for medical treatment. The Rifles had earlier moved out of Sinagoga to support the Skins. They arrived close to the Skins concentration area near Cerro at 1230pm. While waiting, the battalion was heavily shelled. The battalion moved off following the route of the Skins at around 6pm and reached close to the Piumarola-Campolargo road at about 7pm when it was again shelled and mortared. The Rifles joined the attack.



**Map 6.** 6 Skins brought the Irish Brigade's role in Operation Diadem to a close with the capture of Piumarola on the evening of 17 May. The attack was devised in the light of the Faughs' rapid advance that morning. The Skins linked up with Lothian & Border tanks and were supported by the 16/5 Lancers. 2LIR was called up to support the attack in its final phases.

Resistance in Piumarola was quickly ended. The Skins took more than 100 prisoners including paratroopers. Captured equipment included anti-tank guns, self-propelled guns, machineguns and reconnaissance vehicles. The quick success in the town was a further moment for the Skins to savour and there were reports that some of the battalion's men had to be restrained from pressing on the attack beyond Piumarola. The battalion suffered four killed and 31 wounded, including Bredin. The Rifles had a more difficult time, suffering 25 casualties. It took as prisoners 15 German paratroopers including the CO of the 1st Paratroop Regiment. Scott wrote that the capture of Piumarola brought the Irish Brigade's involvement in Operation Diadem to a close. "This battle gave the final death blow to the Gustav Line," he wrote.

**The battlefield today.** The section of the battlefield from Sinagoga to Piumarola is largely unspoiled. You can drive or walk the road from Cerro to Piumarola and follow the principal line of the Skins attack into the village over the single bridge. The village has been rebuilt and much expanded since 1945 and includes a square dedicated to Italians who died fighting for their country in the Second World War. You can park here and explore the area, including the Roman ruins in the east of the village.

### **A final word**

Almost 70 years after the events recorded here took place, you might wonder why anyone should spend so much time reliving horrors that many believe are best consigned to the history books. For the authors, there is more than one answer. It is to make a connection with a father and grandfather whose post-1945 life was overshadowed by his experiences in the Second World War and by the events of May 1944 in particular. He never forgot those who suffered and died on both sides and was acutely aware of the trauma inflicted on the kind-hearted and innocent Italian civilian population the brigade passed through in its war in Italy. So why should we?

We wanted to help those wishing to make a similar journey of remembrance through the Liri valley. And there is the joy we have experienced in our encounters with the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the men and women who lived through the drama of the four battles of Cassino. The story this guide tells is also theirs.

Above all, this guide a reminder of how intolerably horrible war actually is. The Rapido-Gari river crossings, the Pioppeto and connected streams, the high-points and the open fields are a physical challenge in days of peace. How horrible it must have been to have walked this route when every step taken could be your last. Fear of death and wounds was constant. Shock caused by the terrible way comrades died or were mutilated left permanent psychological scars. There was nobility, selflessness and unbelievable courage. But there was also horror at the awfulness of it all. That is probably why so few veterans spoke about their front-line experiences. They were almost impossible to describe. Many veterans thought they were probably best forgotten.

The veterans have largely gone. The countryside of the Liri valley has long been at peace. But for the visitor who wants to understand what happened in this place almost 70 years ago, bullet-holes in farm-house walls, derelict buildings left as they were in 1944 and shrapnel splinters that can still be found in the fields of the Liri valley fuel the imagination and inspire thoughts in a way that words never can.

*We will remember them.*

**Edmund O'Sullivan**

**Richard O'Sullivan**

**David O'Sullivan**