

FOREWORD

Some time ago the Committee of your Regimental Association decided that we would celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the Battle of Medicina at the lunch party following the Combined Cavalry Association Parade and Service this year. I can't remember who decided to produce a booklet for the occasion but Colonel Dicky Talbot's name was volunteered unanimously as the author! He has taken an immense amount of trouble to write this account of the battle and events leading up to it and I am most grateful to him. I hope you will keep it as a souvenir not only of the 40th Anniversary but also, for those of you who were fortunate enough to take part, of the Battle itself. The personal accounts contained in this booklet are a very significant addition to the inevitably more impersonal official history. We of the succeeding generation salute our war-time predecessors and their Gurkha comrades in arms, as we read with excitement and pride of their exploits so vividly recounted in this booklet.

JMP

Editor's Note

I want to thank all those who have sent me their recollections of those days in mid-April 1945 which led up to the capture of Medicina. Some contributions were long and some short — all were to the point and of interest. The longer personal accounts I have put at the end of the story in order not to break the thread; the shorter ones I have interpolated into the story without, I hope, causing too many diversions. Some letters included actions after Medicina and, whilst I could not publish these, they have all been included in the Regimental Archives.

I must also thank Major Bill Williams and Mrs. Joan Smith, his secretary for all their hard work in the production of this tract. Clearly, if it had not been for them, it would never have been produced. Also, my thanks to Captain Richard Shirreff for the detailed investigations he carried out with the Skorski Museum and the Polish Institute, including supplying and translating logs, maps etc.

It soon became clear to me that, in order to get an important battle like Medicina into perspective, I should include a certain amount of the background both from a general and Regimental viewpoint. To this end I have started the narrative on 17th March 1945 when the Regiment was ordered from its San Donato/San Clemente/Fantanelice positions to an area near Cesena.

Finally, I must make it quite plain that the narrative of this story of Medicina is taken from the brilliantly written 'The Emperor's Chambermaids' the Author of which is Lieutenant Colonel L B Oatts, DSO. He could not have written a more vivid and exciting account.

GALCT

ORDER OF BATTLE

43rd Lorried Gurkha Brigade Group
(Commander: Brigadier A R Barker DSO OBE MC)

2nd/6th Gurkha Rifles
2nd/8th Gurkha Rifles
2nd/10th Gurkha Rifles
14th/20th King's Hussars
2nd Royal Tank Regiment
R' Battery, 15th Field Regiment RA
25th Field Regiment RA
The Duke of Lancaster's Own Yeomanry (Medium Artillery)
One Battery, Polish Anti-Tank Guns (self-propelled)
One Assault Squadron RE, comprising:—
One Troop Sherman Dozers
One Troop Bridging Tanks (ARKS)
One Troop Armoured Vehicles RE

The Brigade was under command of II Polish Corps.

On the 12th March 1945, a warning order was received from HQ Eighth Army for a move to a new concentration area near Cesena, to be completed by the 18th. 'C' Squadron was to be left behind until relieved, and 'A' Squadron (Major Strudd) was to exchange its Sherman tanks for Kangaroos (armoured troop carriers), which turned out to be converted Priests (self-propelled guns) from which the 105 mm guns had been removed, and additional armour plating added. After its conversion 'A' Squadron was to be able to mount a whole infantry battalion and, to enable it to do so, 'B' and 'C' Squadrons had to give it personnel of one tank troop apiece. The Regiment was not best pleased at being 'mucked about' in this manner, but everyone cheered up considerably on learning that the infantry which they were going to escort round the battlefield were their old friends of the 43rd Lorried Gurkha Brigade, with whom they had practised such tactics as *mausum*, and who were just as anxious to try them out on the Germans as the Regiment were themselves.

The conversion of 'A' Squadron in this manner was a highly complicated business. The whole Regiment had to work hard to complete it in the short time available and carry out some training with the Gurkhas. Each Kangaroo had a crew of two; the Commander/wireless operator, and the driver. Each troop in the re-organised Squadron carried a complete Gurkha company, while the Squadron HQ Troop carried the Battalion HQ and HQ Company. The wireless network was complex, for besides the normal squadron communications, additional communications had to be provided for the Brigadier and Battalion Commander, and for various specialist officers including RA and RE. This meant that several Kangaroos had to carry as many as four wireless sets.

The main German line of resistance, the 'Genghis Khan Line', ran along the southern shore of Lake Comacchio and across the lower valley of the Po to the Senio River. Continuing westwards over the mountain tops of Monte Grande and Belmont it crossed the Reno to Vergato. On the Allied side, Monte Grande was the junction between the Fifth and Eighth Armies, and for the coming offensive formed the pivot

upon which the Eighth Army, attacking a few days before the Fifth, would swing north-westerly towards the Po valley.

On the Eighth Army front, the order of battle from right to left was the Vth Corps, the IInd Polish Corps, the Xth Corps and the XIIIth Corps. The plan was for the Vth and Polish Corps to attack across the Senio and secure crossing bridgeheads beyond the Santerno, from which the Vth Corps would advance north towards Basia and Argenta. The Polish Corps would advance towards Medicina on the right, towards Budrio, and to Castel San Pietro on the left. The Xth and XIIIth Corps were to create as much uproar as possible in order to mislead the enemy as to the main direction of the offensive, and then to advance as opportunity offered.

The task of the 43rd Lorried Gurkha Brigade Group was to follow up the Poles and break through when the moment arrived. Unlike the 14th/20th, the Gurkhas had been fighting in Italy since the previous September — on their feet, not in lorries, which were seldom of much practical use in this theatre where the country was either mountainous or enclosed. Now they were to be carried into action in Kangaroos driven by their old friends the 14th/20th King's Hussars.

'War', said Napoleon, 'is a great and impassioned drama'. Had he been sitting on his horse on the banks of the Senio River, watching the opening of the Vth Corps offensive during the afternoon of the 9th April 1945, he might well have felt that he had been guilty of a gross understatement. Fleets of heavy bombers arrived, and for an hour and a half their bombs rained down along the German line, raising a dense cloud of yellow dust and smoke. They were succeeded by an artillery bombardment reminiscent of those on the Somme thirty years before and when the infantry went in to attack they were accompanied by flame throwing tanks squirting out long streams of fire, while the sky above was black with fighter-bombers diving down with their cannons roaring, and followed by medium bombers dropping sticks of bombs. It was a strange thing, however, as Napoleon might further have reflected, that this impressive holocaust did not result in nearly as many dead as he had been accustomed to expect during his own campaigns in this same country.

The Germans at any rate were not dismayed, but put up the most determined resistance. Nevertheless the advance of the Vth Corps went well, although the skilful withdrawal by the enemy prevented the destruction of the German divisions in the salient before Bologna, which had been hoped for. The Polish Corps had heard the news of the Yalta Conference, at which Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt had discussed the policy to be followed during the closing stages of the war and after final victory. The Russian demands with regard to the restriction of Poland's frontiers were acceded to, and this caused much resentment in the Polish Corps. However, under General Anders, their brilliant,



Major Jock Mann, Commanding 'B' Squadron

tough and resourceful Commander, they did not allow this bad news to weaken their resolution. The 43rd Lorried Gurkha Brigade, including the Regiment, was under General Anders' orders and Col Tilney had to report to his HQ for briefing. At lunch in the officers' mess, his neighbour remarked: 'Apart from our hatred of Germans we have nothing left to fight for. All of us have lost everything — yes everything! Country, family, home, possessions; the Russians or Germans have them all! As may be imagined, Col Tilney was at a loss for a reply.

The 2nd/8th and 2nd/10th Gurkha Rifles went into action on foot when the Poles were held up along the Santerno River on the 12th April, and led the way to the Sillaro River. Here the 2nd/8th, supported by the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment, had some heavy fighting along the south bank, but the 2nd/10th came up and forced a crossing during the night of the 15th. Meanwhile, the 14th/20th, carrying the 2nd/6th, had moved up to an assembly area 1,500 yards in the rear, with the intention of crossing at dawn and pushing on to Medicina, about 5 miles beyond.

The enemy had, of course, blown up all the bridges over the Sillaro. In addition all likely crossing places were heavily mined, and the south bank had been accurately registered by the German artillery. The Gurkhas had not had an easy time getting over, and they were infantry, trained in the use of assault craft and bridges. Getting tanks and armoured personnel carriers over was a different problem, which the vigilance of the German gunners made difficult to solve. The accuracy of the salvoes directed against every reconnaissance party which showed itself in daylight gave everyone a very lively time, and in fact made a detailed reconnaissance impossible. The Regiment was fortunate to escape casualties at this time, and the only tank hit was Lt Kneller's whose .50 Browning was blown away, whilst he was in the act of clearing and adjusting it. Laurie Kneller was commanding that part of the 'HQ' Squadron Reconnaissance Troop attached to the 'C' Squadron group.

Lt George Camburn, Troop Leader of 1st Troop, 'C' Sqn: 'I was an eye-witness of the Laurie Kneller .50 Browning incident which took place on the eve of Medicina. In retrospect it was very amusing but those present had a tremendous fright: one chap literally took off! Fortunately there were no casualties. My Troop was parked nearby, at the foot of an embankment, and large numbers of German shells were smacking into it — having passed either just over or very close to the three tanks. Needless to say the chaps were completely unperturbed and, when I suggested digging in a little, they laughed it off as a joke. It was a very noisy night with the artillery from both sides having a whale of a time.'

Crossing tanks over rivers was done with the help of an 'ARK', a specially constructed bridging tank which, when positioned in the middle of the river, allowed other tanks to drive over it. It required careful siting, which was lacking in this case owing to the difficulties of prior reconnaissance. Two tanks of the



Lt George Camburn, 1st Troop, 'C' Squadron

Royal Tank Regiment got over, but no others could negotiate the further bank and they had to be towed up it with great difficulty and delay. The enemy defensive fire then came down on the crossing, but fortunately an armoured bulldozer arrived at the same time and, after it had scraped a passage up the far bank the whole Regiment got across. Again, George Camburn: 'The next day I was ordered to head the 'C' Sqn advance across the Sillaro River via the famous ARK. Laurie Kneller had previously managed to get his light armoured reconnaissance vehicles across without much trouble and I was able to follow because my Sherman had composite rubber tracks. However, the other two tanks of my Troop, (Sgt Matiland and Cpl Beavis) had steel tracks which did not grip, hence the general hold-up whilst an armoured bulldozer scraped away at the bank and managed to lower the pontoon. In the meantime I remained in splendid isolation on the north side of the river for a most unpleasant half hour or so, whilst every type of projectile whizzed past (overhead). However I was able to give some assistance to Laurie'. Of the crossing of the Sillaro, Capt (now Colonel) Brian Tayleur — Adjutant to Col Freckles Tilney — writes 'I was in the CO's tank with Sgt Harris, the Regimental Signals Sergeant. Col Freckles positioned the tank at the entrance to the white taped lane through the minefield. Looking through the gun sight I saw the ARK put itself into the river and watched the two RTR tanks go over. When one of our tanks got stuck, Col Freckles was furious and ignoring the white tapes motored through the minefield. I quickly lifted my feet off the floor and remonstrated! Apart from artillery fire nothing else exploded!'

Having crossed the Sillaro, the Regiment emerged into a country of thick vineyards and orchards, intersected by canals and ditches, and by scattered groups of houses along the roads to Medicina, each of which was a potential fortification from which the enemy could hold up the advance.

It was known that the 2nd New Zealand Division was advancing on the right, but touch had been lost with the Poles on the left, and a squadron of the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment, which was under command of the Regiment, was therefore sent out as left flank guard. 'C' Sqn, under Maj 'Bodge' Browne, then moved on as advance guard, with a troop of 'A' Sqn carrying a company of the 2nd/6th under command. Forward Observation Officers from 'R' Battery 15th Field Regiment RA accompanied the advanced and flank guards.

'C' Sqn soon came under heavy artillery fire, and Lt Camburn was wounded. Leading up to this incident of his wounding, George Camburn says: 'Once the remainder of the Troop were across the river we managed to move ahead under fire, though couldn't see very much of the enemy. I saw several RTR Churchills burning quite merrily to the left and was able to loose off some 75 mm and .57.30 rounds. Whilst flushing out some very frightened Germans from a dug-out with my tommy gun, my tank received a direct hit and I caught a nasty packet in the right hand. At about the same time Cpl Beavis' tank received a hit. I am pleased to say that everybody survived. At this stage there was a pause in the squadron advance and regretfully my participation—which I was thoroughly enjoying—came to an end with some six weeks in hospital. Incidentally, I was very touched to receive a visit from Freckles Tilney in hospital in Pesaro, when on his way back.'

The road to Medicina was, however, found to be unmined and uncratered, which was a pleasant surprise and enabled a fair pace to be kept up. It had to be assumed that the road-bridge over the Scolo Sillaro had been blown and therefore, before reaching it, 'C' Sqn was directed to move off the road and take to the country, thereafter reconnoitring for an alternative crossing. 'C' Sqn and the left flank guard

then both began to come under heavy fire from self-propelled guns. Communications within 'C' Sqn were disrupted, and the Royal Tank Squadron was held up, but after numbers of Germans had surrendered and were ordered back to the rear, the advance continued.

In the meantime, Lt Kneller with his reconnaissance troop was having to take brisk avoiding action from the attentions of several SP guns while trying to find a crossing over the Scolo Sillaro, while 'C' Sqn ran into a hornets' nest, with each troop fighting it out on its own against every conceivable type of opposition. Two tanks were destroyed by Bazookas and two others put out of action, all of them Shermans. One Stuart tank was also destroyed, one man killed and ten wounded. The gains were worth while; one SP gun was captured intact, 30 enemy were killed or badly wounded, and 40 others surrendered when Lt Kneller drove his tank along a ditch in which they were sheltering. The dismounting of a Gurkha Company enabled the Scolo Sillaro to be reconnoitred and a crossing found. It was a resolute and gallant performance in which Sgt Hall particularly distinguished himself after his Troop Leader's tank had been knocked out and several others badly damaged. His own tank was hit five times and his gun put out of action, but he went on fighting with his secondary armament until obliged to abandon ship after the tank had been brought to a standstill in the middle of a 'bracket'. He was given an immediate award of the DCM.

Speaking of Sgt Hall, TQMS (now Lt Col) Ron Roberts writes: 'We all recall vivid memories of the battle but one I recall as though yesterday is the vision of Henry sitting at the roadside, legs dangling in an irrigation ditch leading to the vineyards. He had a glazed but angry look having shot up two enemy held farmhouses at point blank range. His anger had been directed at the Germans in the houses who had mown down men of his own forward burning tanks who were desperately attempting to evacuate the vehicle.'

Says Capt Brian Tayleur: 'The approach to Medicina was masked by olive trees and long grass. From my own point of view I could often hear the squadrons but could not see them. RHQ's final advance to the town was behind a Polish SP gun, which drove so fast that it was quickly out of sight. The Polish vehicle appeared from our left flank which surprised us and he seemed to be operating independently.'

However, to revert to the events before crossing the Scolo Sillaro, some of the leading tanks of 'C' Sqn were now shooting into Medicina, whose domes and spires (with enemy OPs in most of them) were visible in the fading light, about 4,000 yards distant. The Squadron was still on the wrong side of the Scolo Sillaro, but, as already described a crossing was found by the Gurkhas. At this moment a New Zealand Armoured Bulldozer appeared on the right, dug out a crossing and disappeared again. The whole Regiment were soon across, including the Kangaroos with the 2nd/6th, but there were still two water obstacles ahead, and Col Tilney came to the conclusion that it might be time to dismount the Gurkhas. However, after consultation with the Brigadier 'Tochi' Barker, who had driven up, he decided that the tanks should continue to lead the way. So, without hesitation, he called up 'C' Sqn and ordered it to close on the main axis, then: 'Get your whips out and go like hell!' This was a perfectly acceptable order to a man of the temperament of Maj Browne. Cpl Charlie Braithwaite (Lt Brailey's wireless operator in 2nd Troop 'A' Sqn — a part of the 'C' Sqn Group) recalls that the message that came over the air from Maj Browne on the 'C' Sqn command net was: 'Let's show them a good old cavalry charge!' He was soon roaring down the road at the head of his squadron, with guns blazing away to right and left at every building or cover where Germans might be lurking with their Spandaus and Bazookas. At 7.45 p.m. he wirelessed: 'I'm in Medicina.'

Medicina was a fantastic sight. Much of it was ablaze; the streets were full of rubble, enemy guns and vehicles, and houses full of Germans, who had been taken completely by surprise but were quickly recovering themselves and were full of fight. Col Tilney had followed 'C' Sqn with his tactical HQ, but as no more tanks could get into the town he halted on the edge and ordered 'B' Sqn to bring up the Kangaroos, dismount the Gurkhas and then stand-by in case of a counter-attack. 'RHQ' closed up on the southern edge of Medicina town at about the time 'C' Sqn began its entry — again I quote Capt Brian Tayleur — 'Col Freckles left the tank and was in a nearby building either with 'Teohi' or Will Amcoore (Commanding 2nd/6th Gurkha Rifles). In the meantime Sergeant Harris and I amused ourselves by shooting main armament at snipers in the many towers. This was not initially hazardous to the snipers as the gun had not been 'T and A'd', and so it took a few shots before I hit anything. Darkness soon fell and even the burning town did not produce sufficient light to see what was going on from the tank turret.

Maj Browne had meanwhile dashed on through the town and blown up an SP gun, which then slewed across his path. His tank just managed to get past before a nearby building collapsed and blocked the street, and he then drove on and put two 88 mm guns out of action, killing their crews before they had time to get a shot off. Thus he reached the station square, in which every surrounding house was full of snipers and Bazookas. He had just time to wireless orders to the squadron before his tank was set on fire and he and his operator, Sgt Evans, were badly wounded. Burt, the gunner was killed, but Armstrong, the driver, and McGregor, the lap-gunner/second operator were unhurt and so jumped out of the tank and attacked the house containing the Bazooka which had set it on fire. The two of them killed most of the Germans inside and chased the others out of the door and round the corner, after which they returned to the tank and got Browne and Evans out under cover. All this was done under heavy rifle fire and Spandau fire.

SSM Long who was following Browne and endeavouring to give his tank covering fire, was then killed while firing his Tommy-gun from his open turret. Capt Heath, the second Captain of 'C' Sqn was held up by the blown SP gun and rubble blocking the main street. He was joined by Armstrong and McGregor from Browne's tank, who had come back under heavy fire to report, ignoring the exploding ammunition in the SP gun. Heath took over command and sent a troop round the south east side to the station square, followed by a Kangaroo troop led by Lt Brailey. Cpl Plumley's tank was hit by a Bazooka and set on fire. The gunner, Nixon, was killed and Plumley and the rest of the crew wounded, except for Harper, the co-driver, who baled out. Then realising that his comrades were wounded he re-entered the burning tank and got Plumley out, just before the ammunition exploded. The others managed to get out on their own.

The Kangaroos had arrived by then and the Gurkhas went into action with the kukris. The first blood was drawn by the Subedar who chased the man with the Bazooka responsible for blowing up Plumley's tank, and chopped him up round a corner. The Gurkhas then went off in full cry, hunting Germans through the houses and killing them in cellars, lofts and on the roof-tops. Some escaped, others managed to surrender, but great numbers came to a violent end.

Speaking of our Gurkhas, Sgt Les Trimby (4th Troop 'A' Sqn) says: 'We can and we must always be proud of being granted the honour and privilege to have been able to fight alongside them.' And this was the feeling of us all in the Regiment.

Night fell at last, with the town of Medicina in British hands and not a live German left in it. It had been 'C' Sqn's day; the luck of the draw having kept it in the forefront from the beginning. The other squadrons carried out their orders in an exemplary



Major Bodge Browne, Commanding 'C' Squadron

manner. Casualties to the Regiment on this day amounted to five killed and 23 wounded. Five tanks were destroyed and two badly damaged. The enemy losses could not be determined accurately, but were in the region of 139 killed and wounded. Two 88 mm guns, five SP guns, three Panther tanks and one Tiger tank were captured or destroyed, and 80 prisoners were taken.

The Regiment received four immediate awards for gallantry in this action: Maj Browne the DSO, Sgt Hall the DCM, and LCpl McGregor and Tpr Armstrong the MM; Capt Heath and Lt Brailey later received awards of the MC.

After the battle, the Brigade Group came under command of the 2nd New Zealand Division — part of the XIIIth Corps — whose commander, Sir Bernard Freyburg, greeted Brig 'Tochi' Barker with the words 'Well done! You are the only formation the New Zealand Division has ever admired from behind!'



Captain Douglas Heath, second Captain 'C' Squadron

The first of the personal recollections of the battle must, of course, come from Capt Douglas Heath — the second captain of 'C' Sqn. He wants to make it clear that his story is entirely from memory which, after 40 years, can be tricky. 'After so long one only remembers personal highlights — some incidents seemed interminable and others passed in a flash . . . but above all don't let my bad memory offend anyone.' He heads his story:

One Tank Commander's Memories of 16th April Forty Years Ago

'Bodge's last order, as might have been expected, was: 'You remember that exercise at . . . well, the same again. After we cross the Sillaro, the section of the Recce Troop will lead the squadron's normal two up with the Gurkhas (in Kangaroos) following Squadron HQ'. No questions!

We harboured the night of 15th April just south of the Sillaro River in a scrubby wood, after what seemed a long approach march through dust. We moved before first light, again in thick dust, to a crowded crossing of the river. My memory recalls moving in quick spurts in line ahead with endless halts whilst we wondered what was causing the delay. Bodge had gone forward, presumably to the river bank, and we could occasionally hear on the radio of the difficulties being encountered by Laurie Kneller in trying to find a possible crossing. Laurie was commanding the Section of the Recce Troop which had been allotted to 'C' Sqn and, in addition to terrain obstacles, he and all others in the vicinity of the river were encountering strong enemy DF. Eventually, after what seemed hours of delay, we crossed using an ARK and then climbed up a messy exit cleared by an armoured bulldozer.

When the Regiment shook out across the river, the advance continued with a squadron of 2RTR (under command) on the left and 'C' Sqn, with a section of Recce Troop and a company of 2/6 GR in 'A' Sqn Kangaroos under command, leading on the right. Although we were advanced guard I seem to remember RHQ, 'B' Sqn and the remainder being more to the left rear and closer to it not astride the main road to Medicina.

Although the going was now good, the character and lay-out of the cultivation greatly aided the enemy. We found ourselves in open fields, with vine hedgerows running lengthwise along our line of advance, spaced about 200 metres apart. The vines, as usual, had the propensity to block completely our vision at turret height and gave good cover to the enemy rearguard.

Our formation behind the Recce Section was now 'two-up' with Russell Burgham and George Camburn's Troops leading; we were one troop short as Rusty Rutter and his Troop had been lent to the 2 RTR Sqn. I was acting as Squadron 2IC as Phillip Marham had been LOB (Left Out of Battle), so Squadron HQ consisted of three tanks in one up formation — myself leading followed by Bodge and SSM 'Knocker' Long. Bodge had a 75 mm gun and the SSM and I both had 105 mm close support guns with hand traverse only — this to our disadvantage later.

Soon after we started Laurie reported coming under fire from SP's hidden in the hedges. Bodge ordered him to push on but after they encountered more heavy HE and one of the 'sawn-off' Homeys (the Recce Troop's tank) was destroyed, the Section was pulled back behind Squadron HQ. The advance tried to continue with First and Second Troops leading. One tank of first Troop (George Camburn) was hit and brewed up immediately and George was wounded and another tank of his Troop was put out of action. There were many other near misses and HE fire precluded further use of the Recce vehicles and immediate use of the infantry. Regrettably, the SP's had our number, as they could and did keep changing position under complete cover from view. Very occasionally we saw a flash but never a sight of any of the guns. We tried outflanking but every move called for a bloody nose.

After what seemed hours of minor movement, trying to get some momentum going, we were told to hold fast. We gathered that 'B' Sqn had come up on our left, had also met similar opposition and were held up as we were by the Scolo Sillaro, a branch of the river we had crossed. At this stage we could see the town of Medicina and we kept busy putting down rounds, mainly from our 105's on likely enemy

positions. We knew from the results of any movement we made that they had an OP in the Clock Tower. I tried to shake them out with HE and HESH without avail, although later inspection showed the odd 'hit' on the tower; possibly mine — at least I like to think so! Late in the afternoon Bodge was told there now appeared a chance to break through 'B' Sqn's front and to go straight for Medicina 'S..... or Bust'. He gave his usual brief orders and then we moved with Sgt Hall and the other remaining tank of First Troop leading followed by Squadron HQ and then our remaining tanks. We passed through 'B' Sqn, some of whom were bogged down and were towing themselves out with the help of their own ARV (Armoured Recovery Vehicles). Our leading Troop then got stuck in a wadi, were engaged by the enemy, and Bodge ordered Squadron HQ with me as 'Point' to take the lead at full speed.

All went at full gallop for two or three hundred metres until I had to slow down to cross what I remember as being the last stream before the main road and the town. As we entered the stream, I received what I thought was a near miss of HE just off the front of my right track. This momentarily shook my driver and we entered the stream askew. (I don't know whether that HE was shell, mine or mortar — I believe the latter. Anyway we later found an ominous crack in a track link). Whilst I was extricating myself, a matter of seconds rather than minutes, Bodge impatient as ever, sped past me and took up the lead followed by the Sgt-Maj. I caught up as they entered the outskirts of the town and overtook the SSM but, as all who knew Bodge would realise, was not able or allowed to pass him.

Consequently, the Squadron led by its Squadron Leader, and the rest of the Squadron HQ came to the crossroads at the bottom end of the main street of Medicina at dusk. As we reached there, we came under sniper fire from second story windows so the SSM and I tried to engage them with our main armament and coax. I found my turret had jammed through displacement of the cribs (wooden sleepers carried on the tank decks as an aid to ditch crossing) by the near miss mentioned earlier, so I warned my crew and jumped out on to the engine decking to throw them off (never realised I had such strength). As I got back into my turret I trampled on my crew coming out — they had been feeling abandoned and lonely without me. The Sgt-Maj and I both found that our turret reaction was too slow as the 105's didn't have powered traverse, so I covered Bodge from snipers with my .30 Ack Ack cupola-mounted Browning and the SSM covered me with his tommy gun standing well up in his turret to do so, his Browning had been damaged. This selfless act cost him his life and probably saved mine as a sniper got him through the head.

Meanwhile, Bodge started engaging two SPs and a towed 88 which had been parked half way down the main street outside a billet. The crew now running to man their guns had been inside having their evening meal, never believing that our force of armour would enter a town at dusk.

As the street was so narrow and Bodge was in front of me, I could only fire my 105 (loaded with HESH) once and had to satisfy myself by resuming my anti-second floor cover with Browning. However, further fire from me was unnecessary as Bodge's tank destroyed the targets, and no sooner had he squeezed by them, than one at least of the SPs blew up and scattered itself across the road blazing. My driver charged at what had been a gap but my tank couldn't force a way through and had to back off the pile of burning debris as quickly as possible to avoid blowing ourselves up.

Whilst this was going on, Bodge had told me (on the air) that he was at the end of the main street at the railway station square and asked me to find a way round to him, informing me as an after thought that he had a leg wound. Tprs Armstrong and McGregor, Bodge's driver and lap-gunner/operator respectively, came running out of the smoke and haze to report and tell me that they had been hit by a Bazooka shot

from close range which had gone in one side of the turret, through the Sqn Ldr's leg and set the tank on fire. Burt, the gunner, was killed, but they had climbed back onto the tank and had rescued Bodge and his operator Sgt Evans, both of whom were badly wounded.

By this time RHQ, or possibly only the CO, had come up to the crossroads. Col Freckles told me to take the Squadron round a diversion to the right but that most of the roads had roadblocks. I would have to pull back to the crossroads and find a deviation from there. He said that the GURKHAS had already debussed from the Kangaroo and would fight through to Bodge, clearing the street as they went. Indeed I could see them. He further told me that on my way round I would pass the MO setting up a RAP by the crossroads and asked me carry any of our own and GURKHA wounded to it as I passed.

Whilst the remaining tanks were turning ready to follow me when I passed, I turned and stopped at the crossroads and saw a Lance-Naik of the 2nd/5th with some wounded and prisoners. I told him to get the prisoners to load the wounded on the back of my tank. He did so and asked what he should do with the prisoners. Anxious to move off with my command, I replied without thinking: 'I don't mind — get rid of them.' My tank was moving, so I don't know what happened to them.

I now had four tanks left including my own, so led by Russell Burgham and his second tank we moved as quickly as possible round the eastern perimeter road and came to the station square. The GURKHAS had arrived, I made contact, and they pushed out in a defensive rim on the far side of the station. We put Bodge and Sgt Evans into a stretcher-bearing Honey tank and I gave Bodge my last bottle of rum which had been smuggled across in our 'dry' ship from Palestine endless months before. I later gathered he made good use of it despite best medical practice.

I placed my tanks roughly in a square covering forward beyond the railway station and to either flank, particularly along the side road towards the north west in the direction the enemy had fled. By this time it was dark except that unfortunately we were silhouetted by the flames from Bodge's tank, at the centre back of our position, which maintained their strength for several hours. Although it was dark, we were 'Standing-to' because we could hear the rumble of tracks to our left front. Suddenly there was a small bang and Cpl Plumley's tank burst into flame. The gunner, Tpr Nixon was killed and the remainder wounded except for the co-driver, Tpr Harper, who baled out with the others, returned and got Cpl Plumley out when he realised he needed help.

The shot seemed to come from amongst us and sure enough the GURKHAS wrinkled a panzer-grenadier and his Bazooka out of a dog kennel in the yard behind us. Things settled down after that, but being early evening when radio mosh was frequently at its worst and because we had the buildings of the town between us and RHQ, our communications were practically non-existent. After a bit, I gathered the others around me underneath the rear of my tank leaving one guard crew and a sentry listening watch in each tank. I had brought out my last bottle of whiskey to share — the only thing any of us had — and just had one sip when I heard RHQ trying to contact us on the air but couldn't make out what they were saying. We heard tanks approaching — the echo was such that we couldn't be sure of their direction — so flew back to our turrets and manned guns. Our consternation died down when a voice broke into my net saying something about a friendly relative visiting or some similar jargon. It turned out to be a very welcome Angus Ross and his Troop from 'B' Sqn sent to help us. After greeting him I tried to find the bottle of John Haig which had been pushed under my tank in our rapid jump to arms. It was gone and I remembered Johnny GURKHAS love for the spirit and night stalking ability. After

what they had done for us that evening. I didn't begrudge it — after I simmered down.

Around midnight or sometime thereafter, we were relieved by anti-tank guns and led back into harbour where we found Philip and Rusty with his Troop awaiting us with food and other welcome victuals.

Obviously, no story of the battle of Medicina would be complete without a contribution from the Garkhas and, in particular, the 2nd/6th. Below is an account of the battle from Capt Geoffrey Skellett, 2nd/6th Garkha Rifles.

"For the spring offensive, the Brigade came under command of the 2nd Polish Corps. For the Brigade, there was a dramatic change in both operation style and 'associates'. We changed from three ton lorries, as our means of mobility, to 'Kangaroos', the Priest SP gun with its gun removed and converted to a troop carrier. Our direct support unit was the 14th/20th King's Hussars, and their troops were the drivers of our Kangaroos. With Gunner and Sapper support coming directly under Brigade command, the Eighth Army had a formidable strike and pursuit force.

The enemy defences on the Senio were assaulted and broken on the 11th April. On our front the assault was led by the Polish troops with the 43rd Brigade in support. The Senio and the next river westwards, the Samerno, were soon behind us. With the 2nd/8th leading we reached the river Sillaro on 15th April. Without delay, the 2nd/10th passed through and, in a brilliant attack, forced a crossing. A single ARK bridge was thrown across, and the pursuit group of the 2nd/6th and the 14/20H moved to exploit the advantage.

Although the advances of those early days of the offensive had been substantial, and the last 24 hours breathtaking, experience of the enemy in Italy invariably generated an element of caution. As we advanced north-westerly and towards the key town of Medicina, it was some time before we appreciated how much freedom we had achieved. Indeed, the enemy were not just in retreat; we were outpacing them in our advance and leaving them well behind.

The moment of truth will live in the minds of those present for ever — that moment when, over the wireless, we received the order 'full speed ahead for Medicina'.

The countryside was riddled with canals and tributaries of the River Po. We took these in our stride: a steep descent from the flood bank, across the bed of the stream, and then an equally steep ascent up the further bank. All this was repeated time and again, whilst the 'passengers' held on to whatever fixture they could find in order to prevent being thrown about inside the carrier.

As Medicina came into view in the distant north-west, so did another pursuit force on our northern flank. This was the New Zealand pursuit force, and our paths were converging onto the same target. A new dimension had come into the action; it had now become a race. The 2nd/6th — 14th/20th combination won by a short head.

We hit Medicina at dusk. There followed ten minutes of 'controlled chaos' and confusion. The pursuit force, in a single moment, found itself translated from the wide-open spaces of the Po valley countryside into the narrow, tunnel-like confines of the town streets, and in the descending gloom. On the other side, the enemy were totally unaware of the proximity of any allied troops. The confusion created by our arrival was almost comic. The ten minutes of action and near panic was marked by some remarkable shooting by the 14/20H, and aggression of some Garkhas, both demonstrating exceptional bravery, and countered to some degree by courageous and instant reaction by some of the enemy paras.

With the descent of darkness, the enemy withdrew to the cellars and attics of the town. The pursuit group established control of the key points of the town, and started the systematic flushing of the enemy from their hideaways. At the same time the remainder of the group set about consolidating the achievement by establishing defensive positions west of Medicina with a view to rapidly continuing the advance.

At daylight the following morning the remnants of the enemy crawled from their refuges and surrendered. By then the 2nd/6th were well into reconnaissance of their next objective, the Gaiana River . . .



Major Eddie Studd, Commanding 'A' Squadron

It has been said the 'A' Squadron did not have much of a write up after the battle, so I am now including several stories from members of the Squadron — of which I was 2IC to Maj Eddie Studd. The first is from Tpr Steve Benham, the driver of Cpl Bill Shepstone's Kangaroo. He was in the 2nd Troop of 'A' Squadron which was commanded by Lt Ken Bratley, who, so very sadly, is now dead.