

WEST N.S.R. - DIARY - 16-26 MAY 44 INCL

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On 16th May the West N S R was ordered to relieve two companies of the Mahrattas and two of the East Kents. CO ordered Coy Comd's forward on recce at 0830 hrs to vicinity FIGNATARO. The LIRI valley and especially Monte Cassino and the Monastery were well smoked and some difficulty was experienced by everyone in finding the location of the Bn. we were to relieve. However the recce was carried out and under heavy shelling and mortar fire the relief was successfully completed by 2100 hrs that day. Morale was high and everyone in good spirits at the thought of really getting going again after the long weary winter months on the ORTONA front.

17th May - O Gp at Bn HQ at 0430 hrs. Bn to be ready to attack at 0630 hrs. A hot breakfast was brought up and under intermittent shelling and mortar fire the rifle coys formed up along the FIGNATARO Rd. at 1000 hrs Major Allan, OC "B" Coy was wounded at cross-roads. At 1030 hrs the order at last came through to attack. The coys crossed the start line in perfect order and in the first few hundred yards had taken many prisoners. "D" Coy advancing through very close country experienced considerable difficulty in keeping direction and 16 Platoon got way off the axis of advance and finally wandered off on to 78 Div front. Number 17 and 18 Platoons both overshot the objective and went right through our own barrage, luckily with very few casualties. The other coys quickly reached their objectives and consolidated. The Scouts and Snipers and Carrier Pl came to "D" Coy's assistance and Pt 101, their objective, was captured with little difficulty. The tanks who were supporting the rifle coy's experienced considerable difficulty in crossing a ditch about 300 yards from the start line and were soon outdistanced by the infantry, however they caught up on the objectives and assisted in the consolidation. Resistance was slight and most of the casualties were caused by shelling and mortar fire. At about 1730 hrs word came through to move again and the Bn concentrated round a road junction at 802158. Rear Bn came up and a hot meal was served and mail distributed. Fairly heavy shelling of the area continued until after dark, at which time the rifle coys moved forward about two miles to form a firm base from where the Carlt & York's could advance the next morning.

18th May - The enemy were now withdrawing fairly quickly to the Adolf Hitler line and the Bde moved forward with nothing much to contend with except shelling and mortar fire. The actual ground bore little resemblance to the map but the Bn stayed well together and no one got lost. Everyone was glad to see the CO at a place marked as a main x-rds on the map which turned out to be merely a grassy track. The rifle coys again dug in under quite heavy mortar fire, and the Carlt & York's started to pass through again.

19th May - The Bn withdrew to the vicinity of Rear Bn where a hot meal was served, and at 0830 hrs were formed up on the road ready to move forward. Again heavy mortaring and shelling as the Bn moved up to relieve the R 22e R, who had taken a bit of a beating in the morning. Dug in under intensive mortaring, shelling and MG fire, and to add to our joys rain set in about 1600 hrs.

20th May - Still raining, mortaring and shelling continued intermittently. However hot meals were got up to coys during the day and morale was still high in spite of inclement weather and Tedesci. Sun shone through again at 1400 hrs, everyone felt immensely cheered to see the QM, Capt Whynacht, bringing up hot food and shortages through the hate.

21st May - Talk of being relieved all day finally cancelled at 2100 hrs. Coy Comd's recce'd new area at 0700 hrs. Just the same as 20th May, mortaring and shelling intermittently but weather fine.

22nd May - Relieved in afternoon by PPCLI, somewhat earlier than expected. Moved down to new area where Coy Comd's agreed on and pointed out forming up places to Pl Comd's for next days attack. Everyone in good spirits again and betting going on as to how long it will take to smash the Adolf Hitler line. ~~next day.~~

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23rd May - Breakfast at 0430 hrs in the dark, companies moving down to forming up place in the early morning light, fitted in in their proper places with amazing precision. An air of confidence about everywhere, orders being quietly given and quickly obeyed. At 0600 hrs all companies formed up, marriage with tanks completed. Everyone knows exactly what is expected of them and what they are to do. All ranks waiting expectantly for the code word to advance. Rain sets in - 1030 hrs still waiting - word has come to dig in, already quite a number of casualties from shelling and mortar fire. Tank squadrons in bad shape, several Churchill tanks blazing in every company area. 1230 hrs - More tanks on fire, casualties being taken out as quickly as possible, shell and mortar fire intense, everyone is getting a bit worried, no news, what can be holding up the attack? Coy cooks and COMS's plus carrying parties from carrier platoon arrive with a hot meal and mail. Coys had expected to be on objective before noon and had not bothered with haversack rations. The rise in spirits is immediately noticeable, everyone feels that we have really put something over on Jerry. Rain has ceased for the time. 1630 hrs - Intense shelling and mortar fire all afternoon, considerable casualties, tanks practically wiped out. At last word arrives - "Tank reinforcements coming up - attack 1640 hrs". Three minutes left for marrying up with troop from 3 Rivers Regiment. "A" and "B" coys cross the start line to the second. "C" and "D" Coys move off about two hundred yards behind. The leading companies really lean on the barrage, being little more than a hundred yards behind the bursting shells. Very little difficulty experienced in getting through wire and mine fields which have been fairly well gapped. Coy's through the Carlt & York positions well ahead of schedule, tanks having considerable trouble keeping up, finally stopped at intermediate objective, a very steep gully. Surprised jerries, mostly of 90th Pz Grenadier Regt, just manning their fighting positions as leading infantry hit them. Leading companies pressing forward for PONTECORVO Rd. Reserve companies mopping up, rain really pouring down, jerry prisoners and dead everywhere, they are completely demoralized at the speed of the attack but the shelling and mortaring is still intense. Before reaching the PONTECORVO Rd the advance has been so rapid that the enemy counter barrage is dropping behind the reserve companies. "B" Coy reports Caparetto-code word for final objective, less than three quarters of an hour after passing the start line. Seconds later "A" Coy reports the same. The CO is so surprised he cannot at first believe it. Five minutes later "D" and "C" coy's report on objectives. "B" Coy already consolidating and "A" Coy moving forward to high ridge beyond the road. "D" Coy perform an intricate left wheel as if they had practised it for months and press forward diagonally to consolidate left flank. "A" Coy in position and immediately counter attacked by enemy tanks and infantry. Complete company with the exception of coy comd and ten men taken prisoner. Jerry apparently in ~~ignorance~~ complete ignorance of our strength march the captives straight into "B" coy position, who not only free the prisoners but kill or capture the captors. "A" Coy withdraw behind PONTECORVO Rd and runner sent to inform "D" Coy of the fact is killed. "B" Coy hear enemy forming up in gully beyond the rd, are joined by troop of tanks from 3 Rivers Regt and attack and disperse enemy, then withdraw 100 yards behind PONTECORVO Rd. "E" Coy are out in half, half remain close to "D" Coy and the other half withdraw to house between "D" Coy and PONTECORVO Rd. Meanwhile "D" Coy are being attacked frontally by one Mk IV tank and from the left flank by two Mk IV tanks. German infantry form up behind tanks on left, are dispersed by accurate small arms fire and many killed and wounded. Enemy tanks withdraw behind ridge to everyone's relief as the coy only has one Piat left. "A" coy call for and bring down heavy and accurate arty fire on tank in front and quiet that down. "D" Coy consolidate before dawn, having been much cheered during night by hearing vehicles moving on road behind them, believed to be our supporting arms coming up. In the morning it turns out to be enemy vehicles withdrawing through PONTECORVO, which was ~~believed~~ believed to be in our hands.

24th May - Just before dawn enemy tanks heard moving on Bn front, wireless had practically failed. All wounded had been collected during night but were soaking wet from yesterdays rain, and no blankets to cover them, however all the wounded were cheerful. ~~and~~ "D" Coy got two runners through in time to warn ~~xxxxxxx~~ tanks who were starting to shoot up "C" and "D" companies positions. An extremely ticklish position is beginning to look better and the fog of war gradually rolling away. Coys withdraw to just behind PONTECORVO Rd to re-organize and all wounded evacuated by 1600 hrs. Salvage collected and our own dead buried.

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25th May - Advance again, this time to establish bridgehead across MELFI River. Terribly open ground to cross in broad daylight and enemy has the ford across river beautifully taped. All rifle coys across with only one man killed. Jerry has missed the chance of a lifetime. Support company have several casualties from mortar fire which reaches a new height of intensity during afternoon. Objectives impossible to occupy during daylight hours. Bn consolidate after dusk and patrol clashes occur during night.

26th May - Whole Bn practically out on its feet having been fighting or under shell and mortar fire continually since 16th May with very little sleep. Orders come to move forward again at 0500 hrs. 0515 hrs 5th Cdn Armd Div deploying behind us and moving through. Our best moment in days - move forward about a mile to new area, dig in and sleep.

J. Hilly
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