

ROMMEL &
CAPORETTO

JOHN WILKS & EILEEN WILKS

Caporetto
Vincenzo & Adelina

Caporetto

First published in Great Britain in 2001 by
LEO COOPER
an imprint of
Pen & Sword Books Ltd
47 Church Street
Barnsley
South Yorkshire
S70 2AS

© Wilks & Wilks, 2001

ISBN 978 1 848 84883 2

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

Typeset in 10/11 Amasis by Phoenix Typesetting, Ilkley, West Yorkshire

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

on the morning of 25 October, while the Brigade (now transferred to XXIV Corps) was withdrawing according to orders, the Italian line was penetrated on either side of them, and they were surrounded and obliged to surrender. On receiving this news the Corps Commander, General Cavaglia, passed it on without comment to 2nd Army. Unfortunately a 2nd Army bulletin which mentioned the surrender gave the impression that the Brigade had not fought at all either on 24 or 25 October. Cavaglia was much embarrassed by not having made the position more clear to 2nd Army, and he gives a detailed account of this episode in his book *Caporetto*.¹²⁸

As another example of misleading information received by the Army Command, messages sent by IV Corps to Army and adjacent Corps in the early hours of 24 October referred to 'the modest efficiency of chemical attacks'. In the 50th Division the gas masks were said to have acted 'most efficiently', and in the 46th Division they functioned 'well'. Yet other reports refer to the finding of 500 to 600 dead Italians in trenches near Bovec killed by gas.¹³⁸

Finally, just as success breeds success, so failure bred failure. At an early stage, masses of troops were moving towards the rear in various states of disorder, some still in units, many as stragglers separated from their units, some deserters. Filling the narrow roads running down from the Kolovrat to Cividale and the plain, the disordered columns would have produced an unsettling effect on the troops of the reserve units still making their way up to the front.

There were undoubtedly scenes of confusion and incidents of flight and panic, but perhaps one should recall a comment on Caporetto in the British official account, *Military Operations in Italy 1917 - 1918*. 'Much is written after all retreats of the confusion and the panics and the loosening of the bonds of discipline . . . such incidents undoubtedly occur on a major or minor scale during retirements and are seen of many and are reported, but little is said of the units and bodies of brave men who remain, even move up to the front, counter-attack and do all they can to delay the enemy, for they are seen by fewer spectators'.¹³¹

Rommel on the Kolovrat and Matajur

5.1 Prelude (18-23 October)

We now turn to Rommel's part in the first stage of the battle of Caporetto. On the night of 18 October the Wurttemberg Mountain Battalion (WMB) left their concentration area near Kranj in the Sava valley to move up to the front. Rommel usually marching at the head of his detachment. It was a miserable journey, always in the dark, often raining, sometimes heavily. During daylight men and animals were concealed in uncomfortable and inadequate accommodation with below standard rations. But morale was high for 'in three years of war the troops had learnt to endure hard conditions without losing their vigour'.¹ After three nights and 40 miles the Battalion arrived at Kneza about five miles short of the Isonzo, as far as they could go without coming into range of the Italian guns.

The next afternoon, on 21 October, Major Sproesser and his detachment commanders reconnoitred their assembly area for the initial attack. It was sited on the north slope of Hill 510, a small summit on the right bank of the river, south of Tolmin, rising about 300m above the valley floor (Map 3). The area is shown wooded by Krafft,² and is described by Rommel as rugged, nearly impassable terrain, with little space for marshalling the troops except for some scree slopes and precipitous gulleys. It presented a dismal prospect but there was no alternative as so many troops were now crowded together near Tolmin. Indeed this was probably the most critical time of all for the XIVth Army, for as Krafft wrote later a systematic destructive fire from the Italian batteries would have caused grave losses.³

The WMB moved into their assembly positions on the night of 22 October, and for the first time encountered Italian opposition. Powerful searchlights on the Kolovrat and Jeza forced them to lie motionless for minutes on end, some artillery fire struck around them, and it appeared that they were facing 'an unusually active and well equipped enemy'.⁴ Leaving their animals at the foot of the hill, Rommel's detachment of

two rifle and an MG Company, heavily laden with machine guns and ammunition, made an exhausting climb to their position. The detachment arrived unharmed, and set about digging in where they could, and camouflaging their positions with shrubbery and branches.

The WMB was now in position to play their part in the assault on Na Gradu (1114m), on the extreme right of the Alpine Corps, with the Bavarian Life Guards on their left. The day of 23 October passed slowly. Attempts to sleep were interrupted by Italian heavy batteries firing intermittently on the roads and installations around Tolmin, and on one occasion sending rocks tumbling down past the detachment. The weather was murky so all that could be seen of the enemy was the apparently well-constructed and well-wired positions of the front line on the valley floor.

5.2 Hlevnik and Hill 1066 (24 October)

At 02.00 on 24 October, the hitherto silent guns of the XIVth Army opened a bombardment of the Italian positions particularly around Tolmin and Bovec. Flashes from a thousand guns on the hillsides lit up the dark and stormy night. Although not so great a concentration as sometimes on the Western Front, the uninterrupted sound of the guns and exploding shells were reflected back and forth between the hills. The WMB saw and heard the bombardment with amazement, and were relieved that only a few Italian batteries answered the German fire, and that these became weaker.

Between 04.30 and 05.30 the bombardment died away. Then at 06.30 it resumed at full strength concentrating on the front line defences, and reached a crescendo in the final fifteen minutes before the infantry assault at 08.00.⁵ Meanwhile, shortly after daybreak, the WMB had moved off down the boulder-strewn slope of Hill 510, into positions close behind the right wing of the Life Guards, for the assault on Na Gradu (Map 4). At 08.00 the guns fell silent. The Life Guards and the WMB came up to the first defence line, and saw that the defences had been almost annihilated, with survivors hurrying out to surrender.

The first objective of the WMB was the north side of the ridge running up to Monte Hlevnik, including enemy positions around the little village of Foni. The Rommel detachment (the 1st and 2nd Rifle and 1st Machine-Gun Companies) took the lead, along a rising path on the north side of the ridge running up first to Foni, and then towards the summit of Hlevnik. The whole area was wooded, with the ground rising or falling steeply on either side of the path, which in places was overgrown with bushes. The detachment proceeded cautiously with a point section in front, followed by a machine-gun platoon, then by Rommel and his staff, and finally the three companies

at 150 yard intervals. The autumn leaves were still on the trees, the weather cloudy and misty, and visibility was often only a few yards, so there was no possibility of artillery support. Everything was very quiet and the detachment proceeded cautiously, careful to make no noise. Suddenly the silence was broken by the sound of machine-gun fire at close quarters, and news came back to Rommel that the point section had encountered barbed-wire defences, and that five men had been wounded.

Rommel had little idea of the enemy's strength, but it was obvious that a direct attack on this position, across overgrown and steeply sloping ground, was unlikely to succeed. Leaving the point section in contact with the enemy, he drew back about 200 yards to a rough open gully running up the hillside, and reported back to Major Spreesser that he intended to outflank the enemy from above on the left. A new point section climbed the gully, followed by Rommel and Lieutenant Streicher, and then 40 yards behind by a heavy machine-gun crew.

The gully was steep and rough, and very hard going for the machine-gunners carrying their heavy loads. A rolling boulder struck Rommel's foot and nearly put him out of action. As the point section climbed upwards, in pouring rain, the stony gully gave way to dense undergrowth, and they eventually emerged from the woods about 200 metres or so below the crest of the ridge running up towards the summit of Hlevnik, about a mile away. To the right of the detachment a continuous line of wire defences ran down from the ridge across open ground and then entered the woods, presumably to connect with the defences on the path to Foni. Beyond the wire, they could see a few men moving about apparently unaware of their presence.

If the enemy were at all alert a direct assault on the wired line, across 60 yards or so of scrub-covered hillside, could be very costly. Rommel saw another possibility. Along the front edge of the wood there was a camouflaged path, obviously a supply route to the Italian positions higher up the mountain, and sufficiently camouflaged that any troops using it would be scarcely visible. Hence, Rommel selected Lance Corporal Kiefler and sent him, with a squad of eight men, to move along the path to the right, hoping that if they were seen they would be thought to be Italians. His order to Kiefler was to follow the path through the wire defences, and then capture the garrison on either side, if possible with no noise of guns or grenades which would give a general alarm. At the same time the rest of the detachment would be in place ready to support him if a fight should ensue.

Lance Corporal Kiefler led his men up the path; Rommel and his three companies waited anxiously, ready to respond at the first sound of a shot, but heard nothing except the drip of steady rain falling on the trees. Eventually a message came back from Kiefler saying that he had

captured a dug-out, seventeen Italians, and a machine gun, and that the rest of the garrison had not been alarmed. Assault teams then succeeded in widening the breach in the defence line to about fifty yards on either side of the path, and by their skilful approach quietly captured several dozen Italians found in dug-outs sheltering from the rain. All this without any sign of reaction from the enemy.

Just prior to this success, Rommel had been joined by Lieutenant Schlielein's detachment (3rd, 6th Rifles; 2nd MG), and he was now in command of both detachments. Meanwhile Major Sprosser and the third detachment (Lieutenant Wahrenberger), lower down, were moving towards Foni. Rommel states that he had now to choose between either rolling up the Italian positions along the defence line, or pushing on directly towards the summit of Hlevnik. Being Rommel, he decided that the further he penetrated into the enemy front, the more likely he was to achieve surprise, and that once the peak was secured it would be easy to mop up the remaining enemy positions.

The Rommel group, now of six companies, spaced along a thousand-yard column, worked its way up towards the ridge, taking what cover it could from bush to bush, and in concealed hollows and gullies. By 11.00 the group had reached the ridge, where they made contact with the 3rd Battalion of the Bavarian Life Guards, and accompanied them up the ridge towards the summit of Hlevnik. The German artillery was still firing at the summit so the Guards paused to rest until the artillery shifted its fire. Rommel did not pause, but led his companies off the ridge on to the north face of Hlevnik, where they were in dead ground, and thus reached the peak at 12.00 without encountering any opposition. The German artillery fire had now ceased and the weather was improving. The rain had stopped, and breaks in the cloud gave glimpses of Na Gradu and the line of the Kolovrat on the right (Map 4).

From the summit of Hlevnik the way to Na Gradu was down the south-west ridge to the col known as Passo Zagradan (Plate 14), and then up the side of Na Gradu to the summit about 200 metres above. The improving visibility was soon followed by heavy Italian artillery fire directed at Rommel's group on Hlevnik. Therefore Rommel moved both detachments into dead ground on the north face, and gave orders to mop up any enemy artillery positions between there and Foni. By 15.30 the Rommel group had captured seventeen guns, twelve of them heavy, while units of the 3rd Battalion of the Life Guards had arrived at Passo Zagradan.

To obtain some picture of the subsequent events on the Kolovrat we must keep in mind that the top of this ridge is not a narrow edge, but rather a grassy plateau, of the order of a hundred yards wide, interspersed with hummocks, rocky outcrops and hollows, and mainly

bare of trees. On either side of this plateau the ground falls away quite steeply, so an enemy on the slopes below the ridge, as at Passo Zagradan, was unable to obtain any good view of the plateau. Equally, the defenders on the plateau could see very little of an attack coming up from below, out of the line of sight and often hidden by trees. On the plateau, the height differences between the various summits Nagnoj, Piatto (Trinski vrh), and Na Gradu are only of the order of 50 metres, and none of the summits are as recognizable on the ground as their corresponding points on a map. Any cloud or mist can make route finding difficult, and even on a clear day the hummocky nature of the plateau can obscure events even a short distance away.

About 16.00 the Life Guards moved off from Passo Zagradan along a camouflaged road leading to Na Gradu via Hill 1066. (Hill 1066 is shown on one of Rommel's sketch maps,⁶ and is probably the point shown by Kraft as Hill 1041.7) The task of the WMB was to protect the right flank of the Life Guards, so the Rommel detachment moved off behind them. At about 17.00 the Life Guards came under fire as they approached Hill 1066 (now described as a rocky outcrop) and took cover. Rommel brought his six companies up under cover to positions on the right of the Life Guards, and went to consult with their officers.

The Life Guards had already sent out scouts to test the enemy positions on Na Gradu (generally referred to by the Germans as Hill 1114) and found that they were facing a strong and resolute enemy in good defensive positions, which could only be taken by an attack supported by the artillery. By dusk, however, the 12th Company of the Life Guards, under Lieutenant Schoerner, had worked its way up the south side of Na Gradu while the attention of the defenders was engaged by patrols on the north-east slopes. Arriving at the wire defences, these Life Guards found a yard and a half gap, stormed in, and created such surprise that there was little effective resistance. Schoerner then launched a three-pronged attack on the summit itself. Although the first two attacks were repelled, the third broke through, and by 17.30 the almost impossible had been achieved thanks to the audacious action led by Lieutenant Schoerner.⁸ Over 300 prisoners, a large number of machine guns, and much ammunition was captured, but the Italians were still in firm possession of an extensive system of wired trenches and strong points, both nearby and on the ridge of the Kolovrat towards Monte Piatto about half a mile to the west.

At about 19.00 Major Courn von Bothmer, the Commander of the Life Guards, arrived at Rommel's command post near Hill 1066. Rommel reported on his group and positions, and was told by Bothmer that the whole group would now come under his command. Rommel

respectfully replied that he took his orders from Major Sproesser, who he believed was senior to Bothner, and that he was expecting Sproesser to arrive at any moment. Bothner then told Rommel that the Life Guards had been given the objective of capturing Na Gradu and the rest of the Kolovrat to the west, and he forbade the Rommel detachment from moving either against Na Gradu or further to the west. Rommel could, however, either occupy and secure Na Gradu after its capture by the Life Guards, or follow behind the Guards as they advanced to the west. Rommel returned to his command post 'not at all happy'.

At 21.00 the WMB quartermaster, Lieutenant Autenrieth arrived at Rommel's command post with the news that Major Sproesser and Lieutenant Wahrenberger's detachment had broken the defences around Foni in the late afternoon, capturing prisoners and guns, and that the 12(g) Division had made excellent progress in the Isonzo valley. Autenrieth also informed Rommel that he had encountered the Life Guards on his way up, and learnt an attack with artillery support against Na Gradu and the Kolovrat was planned for the next morning. Rommel informed Autenrieth of the present situation of his group, and asked him to return to Foni, with all speed through the dark night, and request Major Sproesser to come to Hill 1066 as soon as possible, preferably accompanied by the Wahrenberger detachment.

The Rommel group in their wet clothes spent another wet night with a cold wind. Patrols probed the enemy defences looking for weak spots, but found the Italian sentries alert and ready to use hand-grenades and machine-gun fire. Half asleep, Rommel continued to think how the WMB could play a more substantial role than following behind its old rival the Life Guards. He was anxious to push forward as fast as possible, but the attack on Na Gradu would have to await a thorough artillery preparation, and in any case he had been forbidden to take part. Suppose, however, that the WMB were to traverse out of sight along the north side of the Kolovrat, and then make a surprise attack into the Italian positions on the ridge well to the west of Na Gradu. But any such move had been vetoed by Major Bothner, so for the moment Rommel had to await the arrival of Major Sproesser.

5.3 The Kolovrat (25 October)

At 05.00 on 25 October, while the night was still very dark, Major Sproesser arrived at Rommel's command post with the other three companies of the WMB, and Rommel explained his plan of by-passing Na Gradu with four rifle and two machine-gun companies. Sproesser agreed that he should make the attempt, but initially with only two rifle and one machine-gun company. However, he would remain in contact

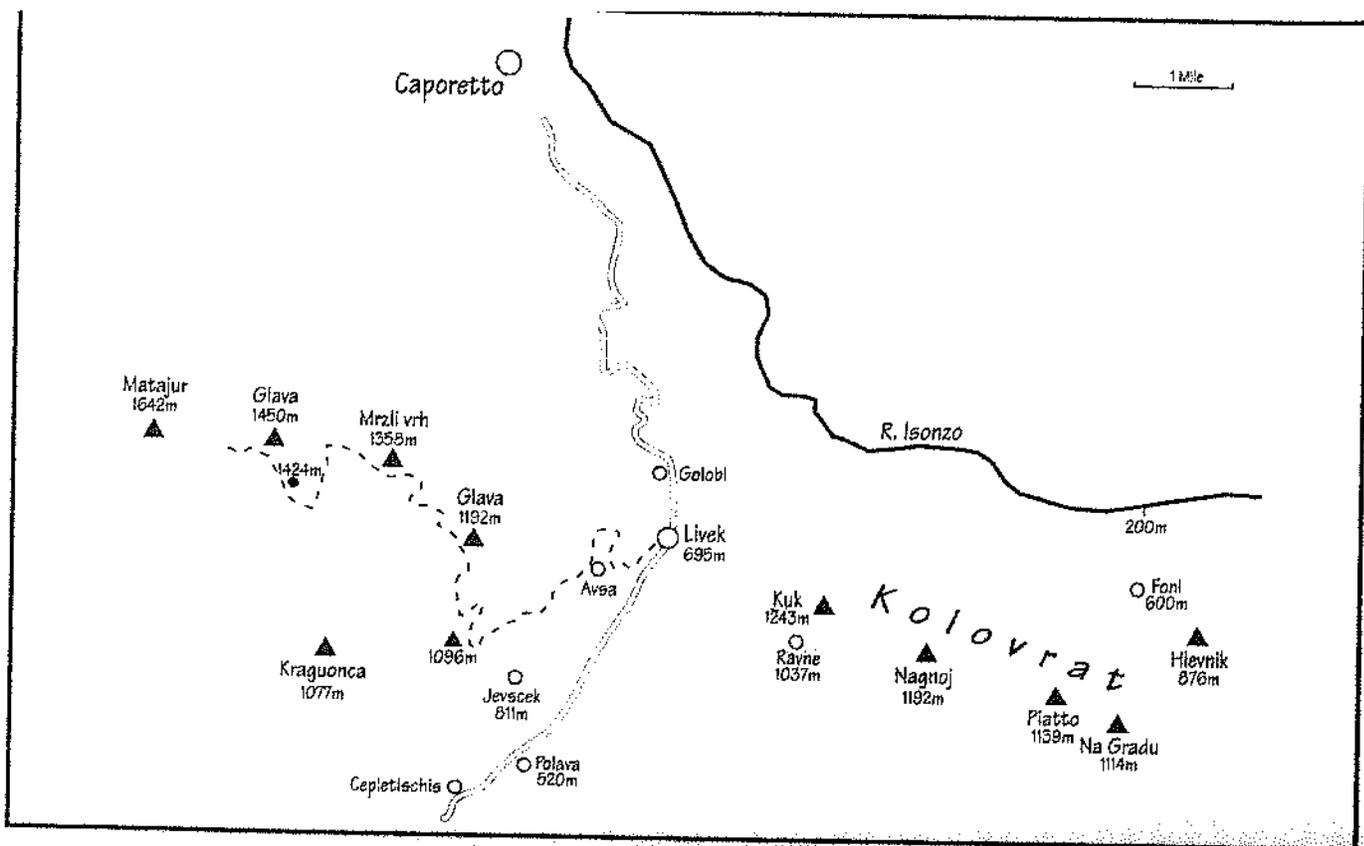
with Rommel by a telephone line, and promised Rommel full support if he were successful.

Rommel states that, as he was preparing to set out, Major Bothner arrived at the WMB positions, and that Major Sproesser succeeded in reaching an understanding with him. Sproesser gives rather more detail of this understanding. On arriving at the WMB positions Bothner informed Sproesser that, as Rommel had stated, the Life Guards had been given the task of capturing the whole ridge from Hill 1114 to Monte Kuk, and the task of the WMB was to act as a reserve and as flank protection to the Life Guards. Sproesser did not agree with this. He saw the WMB with its six rifle companies and three machine-gun companies as too valuable a resource to be left in reserve at this critical stage of the offensive. He replied 'I must thank you. I am fully occupied with my battalion. Moreover, I have no intention of remaining with your 3rd Battalion. I will advance towards Kuk, Luico [Livek] and Matajur. The Rommel detachment is now well on its way, and I can see them in my field glasses moving through the bushes up towards Kuk.'¹⁰

Rommel with the 2nd and 3rd Rifle Companies and the 1st Machine-Gun Company had left their positions on Hill 1066 at first light, and in improving weather were now traversing westward along the steep north side of the Kolovrat (Maps 4 and 7) some 200 metres or so below the line of wired obstacles visible near the top of the ridge. All now depended on achieving surprise. At first, folds in the ground, and bushes and undergrowth made it possible to traverse unseen below the ridge. But bare ground and the sight of enemy obstacles sited on various knolls on the twisting ridge called for time-consuming detours towards the valley. From time to time Rommel called a halt to decide the best route to maintain cover, and to ponder the critical decision of where to turn up the hillside to break through the enemy defences. After rather more than an hour the detachment was about a mile and a half beyond Hill 1066, and all was quiet except for the sound of machine-gun fire from the direction of Na Gradu behind them.

Rommel paused for a moment in a hollow in the hillside to decide how best to reach the bare ridge above them, and then noticed some disturbance behind him. The lead squad of the 2nd Company had noticed some Italians asleep in the bushes, and then captured fifty men and two machine guns, while a few sentries fled down the hillside: all this being done silently with no shots fired. Having achieved this surprise Rommel immediately made up his mind 'here to attempt the breakthrough'.¹¹

The point section was ordered to move up the hollow to within a hundred yards of the wire, while the rest of the detachment deployed with extreme caution in a small area giving cover from view.



7. The Kolovrat and Matajur.

Lieutenant Streicher with five men and a light machine gun went forward to reconnoitre the defences, and if necessary to cut a gap. The telephone squad had now established a line to Hill 1066, so Rommel spoke to Major Sproesser to report progress and request further support. Sproesser, who had been observing Rommel from Hill 1066, agreed to this request, and also informed Rommel that the projected attack on Na Gradu had been forestalled by a strong Italian counter-attack. Shortly afterwards a message arrived from Lieutenant Streicher, saying that his squad had broken through and taken guns and prisoners.

The entire detachment raced up the steep slopes at full speed to arrive at a shallow saddle on the Kolovrat dotted with dug-outs, heavy guns, and a few dozen prisoners some of whom had been surprised while washing. It was now a clear, bright, autumn day. Rommel's first objective, Hill 1192, was no more than half a mile along the ridge to the west. It appeared to be well fortified with defence lines running transversely across the line of the ridge, and was probably held by a substantial garrison. But could they be surprised? Rommel summed up the position and gave his orders. The two rifle companies were to advance on either side of the ridge in order to attack the Italian positions from each flank. At the same time, Sergeant Spadinger with a machine-gun squad would remain at the saddle as a rear guard against any enemy troops advancing along the ridge from the east.

On the right-hand side of the ridge, the 2nd Company led by Lieutenant Ludwig traversed the north slope of the Kolovrat, towards Hill 1192, and found most of the garrison in their dug-outs. According to Rommel, the sudden and unexpected appearance of the Wurttembergers so paralysed the garrison that only one or two sentries were needed to marshal the prisoners. Meanwhile, on the south side of the Kolovrat, Rommel, with the 3rd Company and the Machine-Gun Company, had been hurrying along the camouflaged military road running just below the summit ridge. At first all went well and several gun positions were captured. Then the scout squad in front turned up to the final saddle in the ridge before Hill 1192. At this point heavy machine-gun fire from 1192 forced the squad, and Rommel and the 3rd Company, to halt on the road. Shortly afterwards, Rommel heard noise of firing and hand grenades coming from the other side of the ridge, suggesting that all the 2nd Company was now engaged.

Events had suddenly turned against the Rommel detachment. The 2nd Company had a strength of only eighty rifles and six machine guns, and if they were overrun, the enemy might regain all the positions on the Kolovrat so recently captured. It was imperative for the 3rd Company to support the 2nd Company, and the nearest way to them was across the adjacent saddle on the ridge. But this route was

so dominated by enemy fire, that Rommel judged it quite impractical, even though the alternative was to go back to the saddle they had started from, and take the 2nd Company's route on the north side of the ridge.

Rommel hurried the 3rd Company back along the camouflaged road to their starting point, pausing only to reinforce Spadinger's squad with two additional squads to protect the detachment's rear. Hastening along the north side of the ridge, they passed the Italian positions taken by the 2nd Company, and then saw 'two mountain soldiers guarding about a thousand prisoners gathered together above the wire entanglements'.¹¹ After ordering the prisoners to be put below the wire, and as the sounds of the battle greatly increased, Rommel moved on to survey the scene from a knoll about a hundred yards east of 1192.

The 2nd Company had captured some sections of a trench near the foot of the slope rising up to 1192, but were encircled on the west, south and east by what appeared to be an entire battalion. Any retirement to the north was ruled out by the high wire entanglement to their rear, and only their rapid fire was holding back the Italians, massing no more than fifty yards or so away. Sooner or later they would be overwhelmed, and Rommel at once decided that the only way out of this desperate situation was to launch a surprise attack of his own.

Orders were rapidly given, two heavy machine guns were set up in concealed positions, and the 3rd Company concentrated in a shallow depression to the left of the trench. As the machine guns opened fire, the 3rd Company rushed forward in a ferocious assault on the rear and flank of the enemy. Surprised, the Italians halted their attack on the 2nd Company, and turned to face the 3rd Company. Given this opportunity, the 2nd Company leapt from their trench to join the attack on the now disoriented Italians. Taken aback, about a whole battalion surrendered, 8 officers and 500 men. Thus by 09.15 the WMB had captured half a mile of the Kolovrat, including the summit of 1192, and some 1,500 prisoners from the 213rd Regiment of the Arno Brigade.¹²

(Later Rommel was to write of this capture, 'our satisfaction over our success achieved against difficulty was tempered by grief over individual losses. Besides several wounded, two exceptionally brave young fighters lost their lives; Lance Corporal Kiefler who the day before had so superbly led the assault detachment on Hlevnik, and the young Sergeant Kneule who died in hand to hand fighting.'¹³ He also describes a typical Rommel episode when the Italian battalion surrendered. The men had laid down their arms, the officers apparently acquiescing, but when the Wurttembergers were only a few yards away some officers drew their pistols. They were soon overpowered, and 'it needed my intervention to save them from the fury of the mountain troops'.¹⁴

The detachment took up positions to consolidate their hold on 1192.

The 2nd Company and half the machine-gun company faced west; the 3rd Company and the other half of the machine-gun company were in more sheltered positions on the north-east slope, and a platoon acted as a rearguard on the ridge half a mile to the east. A counter-attack by local reserves was beaten off, but the detachment was under machine-gun fire coming from the west, south-east and east, while artillery on Monte Kum (Maps 4 and 5) to the south was sending down heavy shells. Looking towards Kuk, Rommel could see considerable numbers of the enemy, perhaps one or two battalions, descending the terrace-like slopes of the south-east face in extended lines. To the south, on the road high up on Monte Kum, there was automotive traffic and many troops moving up from Cividale to the Kolovrat. Also, a mile or two further back the Italians appeared to be attacking the recently gained German positions around Na Gradu. All the indications were that the Italians were preparing to regain 1192 by a full-scale attack from their appreciably higher positions on Kuk. Rommel knew that the rest of the WMB were on their way, but they had yet to arrive. So he was much relieved when the Italians began to dig themselves in along three lines on the eastern slope of Kuk, and he began to sketch out a plan for attack when the reinforcements arrived.

A telephone call to the Alpine Corps HQ arranged for artillery fire by heavy batteries on the east and north-east slopes of Kuk between 11.15 and 11.45. The 2nd Rifle Company with a detachment of six light machine-guns, and the 1st Machine-Gun Company would be concealed on either side of 1192 to provide covering fire for the advance. Assault squads would first probe the defences on either side of the east face to determine the site for the main assault. At 10.30 Major Sproesser arrived with the 4th and 6th Rifle Companies and the 2nd and 3rd Machine-Gun Companies, and allotted the 4th Rifle and both Machine-Gun Companies to Rommel, ordering the 6th Company to mop up the ridge to the east of 1192, and to protect their rear. In addition, just before the attack was due to begin, the leading elements of the 2nd Life Guards arrived in support, having followed Rommel's route below the ridge while fighting was still continuing around Na Gradu and Piatto.

The bombardment began at 11.15, while the main body of Rommel's detachment waited in dead ground in the saddle. As the shells burst on the east face of Kuk, sending stones rumbling down the hillside, sixteen-man squads from the 2nd and 3rd Companies went forward to probe the defences on the north and south sides of the ridge. The squad on the north side encountered tenacious resistance, but the squad from the 3rd Company, on the south side, reached the saddle between 1192 and Kuk without being fired on. Disregarding the stone avalanches produced by the German artillery, they began to climb

towards the summit and were soon within hand-grenade range. Many of the Italians were exposed to the artillery fire with almost no cover, so some of the Wurttembergers began to wave white handkerchiefs, and soon the first deserters were running down the hill. As soon as this news was reported back to Rommel by his observers, he decided that the main assault would be on that side, and ordered the 3rd and 4th Companies and the two machine-gun companies to follow the detachment staff along the camouflaged road on the south side of the Kolovrat just below the summit plateau.

The attention of the Italians defending Kuk appears to have been fully occupied by the fire coming from 1192, and by the squad on the north side of the ridge, so that by the time that Rommel arrived below the col between 1192 and Kuk, the assault squad on this side had already taken about a hundred prisoners. During the next quarter of an hour the squad collected more prisoners, and Rommel received news that elements of the Life Guards were following him along the ridge road. There was now ample strength to force the east face of Kuk, so Rommel decided on a more ambitious plan. Leaving the rest of the WMB and the Life Guards to take Kuk from the east, his detachment would continue along the camouflaged road on the south side of Kuk, and work round and surprise any enemy positions on the slopes of Kuk west of the summit. He later wrote that he was well aware that there might have been a large enemy reserve force on the reverse west slope of Kuk, but that 'no task was too difficult for the mountain troops who had already proved themselves in so many battles . . . so without further thought I decided to attempt the advance.'¹⁵

From Rommel's present position below the col the camouflaged road began to descend on the side of Kuk towards the villages of Ravne (1037m) and Livek (695m). He charged down the road with his point section, followed by a machine-gun company sweating and gasping in the hot sunshine, under the heavy loads they had been carrying since leaving Tolmin. It was about noon when they arrived at Ravne where they surprised Italian troops who had thought themselves well away from the front. Taken aback the Italians turned and fled, and their pack animals stampeded, without a shot being fired.

Just beyond the village a knoll gave Rommel a good view of the general scene. To his right the slopes of Kuk rose towards the summit, and to his surprise he saw no sign of any enemy. In front of him the slopes of Kuk descended towards Livek, where both the village and its neighbourhood appeared to be full of Italian troops, while the minor road to the south from Livek to Savogna was crowded with vehicular traffic going in both directions, including a heavy horse-drawn battery leaving Livek. To the north of the village he heard sounds of fighting, presumably where three battalions of the 12(g) Division had come up

against the Italian positions near Golobi. Then to the left, beyond the road to Cеплетischis and Civridale the ground rose up towards Mirzli vrh (1358m) and Matajur (1642m) (Map 7) about four miles away.

Rommel reviewed the situation. The garrison on Kuk would certainly be captured by either the rest of the WMB, the Life Guards or units of the 12(g) Division. What then should he do next? One possibility would be a surprise attack on the troops at Livek, but most of them might escape by taking to the wooded eastern slopes below Mirzli vrh. Therefore he would attempt to cut off the Italian forces at Livek and Golobi, by descending to block the Savogna road near the village of Polava, and then move up the opposite hillside to the road leading to the Italian positions on Mirzli vrh and Matajur.

At this moment it seems that only the 4th Rifle and 3rd Machine-Gun Companies were right up with Rommel; the other companies were behind and out of sight. So runners were sent back with orders that they make for Polava. Meanwhile, speed was essential. The troops with Rommel raced down the hillside, sometimes across open meadows, sometimes finding cover amid bushes and trees. (The boundaries of these woods and meadows have doubtless changed over the past eighty years.) On reaching the road at about 12.30 Rommel cut the Italian telephone lines and set up a road block where the road made two sharp turns. The 4th Company and the 3rd Machine-Gun Company were deployed on the hillside, on either side of the road, concealed in bushes and undergrowth, with good fields of view up and down the valley. Unfortunately Rommel had lost contact with his other companies, so Lieutenant Walz was sent back to bring up the other units as soon as possible, and to report Rommel's progress to Major Sproesser.¹⁶ (He later explained that the breakdown in communications had arisen because a machine-gun company commander stopped to round up some of the captured Italian pack animals.)

Very soon Italian soldiers, singly or in small groups with horses and mules, moving either up or down the road, arrived at the block and were taken prisoner. Before long sentries were guarding a hundred prisoners and fifty vehicles, and the Wurttembergers were enjoying Italian chocolate, eggs, preserves, grapes, wine and white bread. (In a characteristic aside Rommel comments that the worthy troopers on the slopes on either side were served first.) While the troops were enjoying their lunch, an Italian motor car appeared from the south at high speed, and a wagon was quickly dragged across the road. A shot was fired (against Rommel's orders), the car stopped abruptly and the driver and three officers surrendered leaving a fourth fatally wounded in the car. They were apparently staff officers from Savogna who, after the telephone line had failed, had come to find out what was happening at the front.

After Rommel had been at the road block for an hour, there was still no sign of his other companies, and he began to wonder if he had been isolated by an enemy infiltration to his rear. Shortly afterwards a long column of Italian infantry was seen marching down the road from Livek, with no sign of any advance guards, as if they thought themselves quite safe two miles behind the front. There were obviously many more of them than Rommel's 150 Wurttembergers, but he had selected a strong position with good machine-gun support.

As the head of the column reached a point about 300 yards away, Rommel sent one of his officers forward with a white arm band as an intermediary, in an attempt to avoid further bloodshed. The officer was taken prisoner, a hail of German fire swept the road, and the Italians rapidly sought cover. For the next twenty minutes there were some fierce exchanges of fire as the Italians tried to charge the German positions. However, the German fire from well-concealed positions was so effective that the Italians conceded defeat. Fifty officers and 2,000 men of the IVth Bersaglieri Brigade laid down their weapons on the road, and were sent back to Ravne in charge of a few riflemen.

For some time Rommel had been hearing sounds of violent fighting coming from the direction of Livek, so he armed a captured vehicle with a heavy machine gun and drove up the road to take stock of the situation. On the outskirts of Livek he met up with Major Spreesser, the rest of the WMB, and the 2nd Battalion of the Life Guards who had now taken Kuk. By this time Rommel had seen strong Italian units moving in fairly good order up the road from Avsa towards Mrzli vrh and Matajur, presumably to prepare defensive positions with a rear-guard blocking the road above Avsa. Therefore he suggested to Spreesser that the Rommel detachment, with all available units, should go directly from Polava to capture Hill 1096 dominating the Matajur road. This would block the only supply route to Mrzli and Matajur, and the enemy could then be attacked before he had completed his defences. (Rommel refers to Hill 1096 as Monte Cragonza, but according to his sketches and text, Hill 1096 lies close to the military road from Livek to Mrzli and Matajur, whereas the 50,000 Slovene map shows Kragnonca (sic) with a height of 1077m a mile to the west of 1096 and the road.)

Spreesser agreed to Rommel's plan, and gave him the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Companies, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Machine-Gun Companies, plus the Signal Company. Rommel rushed back to Polava with his three extra companies, and after sharing out the captured pack animals, the whole detachment started up the south-east slope of Hill 1096. The first objective was the small village of Jevsek, about half-way to the summit, and probably part of any enemy defence line. Jevsek is about three quarters of a mile from Polava and about 300 metres

higher, but there was no path to follow, and rough gullies and impenetrable hedges forced innumerable descents and deviations. The detachment had been on the move since the early morning of the previous day, and now as the sun went down found themselves on steep ground, with heavy packs, seeking the elusive Jevsek. One senses that this was the low point of the whole march. Rommel states that he 'had to demand from his exhausted troops a great deal of super-human effort, so that the attack did not get bogged down'.¹⁷

After several hours the moon was shining and the point section came up to a grassy meadow beyond which they could see a well-lit position behind high obstacles, and could hear Italian voices. The detachment was now in no position to advance further, so Rommel drew back silently about 300 yards to a bivouac site and decided on several hours of rest until midnight. At the same time, however, he sent out several officers to make a reconnaissance of the neighbourhood.

Lieutenant Aldinger returned before midnight to report that he had found a route to Jevsek which was still about half a mile away to the north-west. The village was strongly fortified and surrounded by wire, and was not yet occupied by the enemy, but he had seen enemy troops marching downhill to the west of the village. Hearing this, Rommel decided to break camp and make immediately for Jevsek to forestall any occupation by the enemy.

Led by Lieutenant Aldinger, the detachment made its way forward towards Jevsek, and despite a few shots they entered the north part of the village, and those not on sentry duty rested in the still inhabited Slovene houses. As no sounds could be heard from the south part of the village Rommel concluded that the garrison due to defend the village had not yet arrived, so there was probably a gap in the Italian line of defences. He therefore sent 2nd Lieutenant Leuze to reconnoitre, while the bulk of the unit sat about before the hearths in the solidly built houses consuming coffee and dried fruit provided by friendly Slovenes.

5.4 Matajur (26 October)

(a) Hill 1096

Rommel states that on the night of 25 October 'I knew very little about our neighbours. I knew nothing of where they were, or what actions they planned to take. . . . But it was clear to me, that all must be risked, and that on 26 October the assault must again be under way'.¹⁸ Hence, when Lieutenant Leuze returned from his reconnaissance at 04.30, Rommel quickly decided on his plans, and at 05.30 the detachment moved off to attack Hill 1096, while it was still dark.

Not surprisingly, Rommel's account of the capture of 1096 is not as clear and precise as his descriptions of other actions. The only identifiable points on the ground appear to have been the village of Jevscek and the summit of 1096 (which Rommel incorrectly refers to as Kragonza (Section 5.3)). All other positions are described in terms of distances and directions from these two landmarks. Yet the picture he draws is somewhat confused. For example, he refers to directing an attack from a point 'six hundred yards north-west of Jevscek',¹⁹ which locates Rommel at the summit of 1096. Yet it is clear from his account that Hill 1096 was then still in enemy hands. However, these points of detail do not obscure the main broad features of the action.

On the previous night the detachment had encountered defence positions and heard troop movements close to Jevscek, and Rommel thought it likely that he was near an enemy defence line, probably running from the Cepletschis – Livek road to Jevscek, and then on to 1096, Mrzi and Matajur. Therefore, eager to reach Matajur, he ordered the 2nd and 4th Rifle and the 1st and 2nd Machine-Gun Companies to capture Hill 1096, while the 3rd Rifle Company and the 3rd Machine-Gun Company under Lieutenant Grau gave supporting fire and acted as a rearguard against any enemy units near Jevscek.

As it became light, the main force was crossing rough ground on the slopes of 1096, and Rommel saw that it would be dangerously exposed to any fire from enemy positions higher up. He hurried forward and sent out runners with orders to the companies to spread out and find cover. Very soon the Italians opened fire, and despite fire support from the rear company, losses mounted and Lieutenant Ludwig commanding the 2nd Company was seriously wounded.

At this point, much concerned for the security of his main force now pinned down by the enemy fire, Rommel heard the noise of battle behind him from the direction of Jevscek. (In fact an Italian force facing into the village was engaged with Lieutenant Grau's force in the village). Rommel quickly gathered three light machine-gun squads from his front-line companies and led them down to the rear of the unsuspecting Italians, who were so surprised that a force 'about three companies strong'²⁰ surrendered without a shot being fired.

Meanwhile the 2nd and 4th Companies were still engaged in an exchange of fire higher up on the broad south-west slope of Hill 1096, so Rommel with the greater part of the 3rd Company and the 3rd Machine-Gun Company hurried to their support. He quickly decided that there was no possibility of turning the enemy's flanks, and ordered a frontal assault with the 4th, 2nd and 3rd Companies widely spread out on the bare slopes of 1096. He himself moved up with the 2nd Company in the centre of the line, making directly towards the summit. The assault was supported by fire from the machine-gun companies,

but this did not seem to produce much effect on the fierce enemy fire. Lieutenant Aldinger who had replaced Lieutenant Ludwig as commander of the 2nd Company was severely wounded. It was a tough fight, 'but as our losses increased so did the battle fury of the mountain troops'.²¹ The Wurtembergers worked their way up, trench by trench, machine-gun post by machine-gun post, and by 07.15 were in possession of Hill 1096.

Rommel also states that after the capture of the three companies at Jevscek, but before returning to the fighting on 1096, he took the surrender of 'an Italian regiment of 37 officers and 1,600 men . . . with full equipment and armament' in a hollow north of Jevscek.²² Rommel gives no further details of this remarkable episode, except to say that he had difficulty in finding enough men to supervise the prisoners. He does not state which enemy units were involved or where they had come from, presumably because his attention was fully occupied in reaching Hill 1096. However, some details may be inferred from the Italian Official History.

The ridge from Kuk to Matajur was garrisoned by the IVth Bersaglieri and the Salerno Brigades of the Italian 62nd Division, which had only begun to arrive in the early hours of 24 October (Section 2.6). During the morning the IVth Bersaglieri were deployed on either side of Livek, with the 14th Regiment on the left and the 20th on the right. After the enemy advances on 24 October, Cadorna issued an order at 23.00 setting out new lines of defence should the 2nd Army be forced to withdraw still further (Section 3.2). On receipt of this order, the 62nd Division issued various instructions. The Salerno Brigade was to hold its positions on Matajur 'at all cost'. The units around Livek were to 'defend tenaciously to gain time', and 'some battalions' on the rest of the front were 'to draft a deployment (*abbozzare un schieramento*) on the line Matajur – Cepletschis – Monte San Martino' (Maps 7 and 5).²³

There seems little doubt that the 2,000 men of the Bersaglieri Brigade captured on 25 October were the greater part of the 20th Regiment which had been forced back from Kuk and Livek by the 12th German Division and the Alpine Corps (Section 3.3), and was marching down to occupy new positions on the next defence line. The IOH does not mention any encounter with the WMB, but the next reference to the Regiment occurs only some days later when it is described as *resti* (remnants).²⁴

The IOH makes no mention either of the 14th Regiment to the left of the 20th, after its arrival at Livek until several days later when it too is described as *resti*.²⁵ Hence, it was probably part of this Regiment which Rommel encountered between Jevscek and Hill 1096, as it was retiring to join the 20th Regiment on the new defence line. Marching

down the road these units found themselves in the middle of a fire-fight, assumed that they were completely cut-off, and surrendered.

(b) Hill 1192 and Mrzli vrh

The Wurttembergers were now urged on along the broad ridge leading first to Glava (1192m) and then to Mrzli vrh (1358m). During the fight for 1096 the detachment had spread over the hillside and was now 'badly mixed'. All the officers of the 2nd Company had become casualties, the Company was now commanded by Technical-Sergeant Hügel, and some men had still to arrive at 1096. However, rather than pausing to regroup, Rommel sent the still incomplete 2nd Company along the ridge towards 1192. At the same time he sent back runners with orders to the rest of the detachment to hurry up the Matajur road to join the 2nd Company.

Rommel does not give much detail of the advance to Hill 1192, but the enemy appears to have been holding the quite broad ridge with a series of outposts to protect the main positions on Mrzli. The 2nd Company under Sergeant Hügel worked its way steadily forward, employing the usual W/MB tactics of attacking from the flank and rear, and 1192 was captured by 08.30.

The next objective, Mrzli, was now in sight, about a mile further along the ridge, but Rommel was forced to pause. Enemy troops could be seen deployed in strength on the south-east slopes of Mrzli, and heavy machine-gun fire was striking the summit of 1192. Moreover, during the fighting for 1192, the 2nd Company had become so spread out over the slopes of the hill, that Rommel and Sergeant Hügel arrived on the summit leading only a platoon. In addition, sounds of fighting from the right and rear suggested that the other companies, and other units of the Alpine Corps, were still engaged with enemy forces probably trying to retreat to the Savogna road.

Rommel realized that he would need at least two rifle and a machine-gun company to advance further, and went back down the road to contact the liaison officer of the rear companies. He found no liaison officer, but was nearly shot himself, so he returned to Hill 1192 and sent out a 'strong assault detachment'²⁶ to contact the other units with orders to close up on 1192. Eventually, by 10.00, a force equivalent to two rifle and one machine-gun company was assembled on 1192, and Rommel was ready for the next move forward.

The attack began by Rommel sending a light signal asking for artillery support, which was quickly followed by the 'surprising result of German shells falling on the south-east slope of Mrzli.'²⁷ Then, under covering fire from the machine-gun company, the two rifle companies advanced along the Matajur road, perhaps 30 metres or so below the

edge of the ridge on its south-west side. Near the col between 1192 and Mrzli the two companies, led by Rommel, came into close combat with enemy positions near the road, which were attacked from front, flank and rear. A few dozen prisoners were taken while the remainder retreated towards the east slope of Mrzli.

Rommel continued along the ridge road and brought up his machine-gun company. By now it was clear that something very unusual was happening on the broad col about 20 metres below the twin summits of Mrzli, now about 1,000 yards away. Hundreds of Italian soldiers could be seen standing about, seemingly 'irresolute and inactive', apparently just watching the German advance.²⁸ Bearing in mind his experiences during the previous two days, Rommel extended his column behind him in considerable depth, and walked in front waving a white handkerchief. Nothing happened at first, and Rommel wondered if the mass of troops would bear a retreat or descend in force on his small detachment.

About 700 yards from the col, the road on the south-east face of Mrzli ran into a dense wood. Rommel was uneasy. He could no longer see the enemy, and was aware that a very much larger force might well descend through the wood and fall on the detachment from above. The shortest way through the wood was by going straight up the slope rather than following the zig-zag road. Therefore, leaving the detachment with their heavy loads to proceed along the road Rommel, with only Lieutenant Streicher, Dr Lenz, and a few soldiers climbed straight up through the wood on a broad front with a hundred yards between each man. Emerging from the wood they saw a huge mass of men, on the far side of the Matajur road, shouting and gesticulating.

All the Italians had weapons in their hands, and there seemed to be a group of officers in front. Rommel realized that he had to maintain the initiative, and walked steadily forward waving his handkerchief, and calling for the men to lay down their arms and surrender. He was now a hundred yards from the wood and felt he could neither return nor stand still. He kept walking. Then suddenly there was a movement in the mass of troops. Most threw their weapons away, and hundreds hurried towards him, sweeping any resisting officers aside. Almost immediately he was surrounded and carried shoulder high amid cries of 'Viva Germania' (Long live Germany).²⁹ An Italian officer who hesitated to surrender was shot down by his own troops. Thus Rommel had now captured a further 43 officers and 1,500 men, almost the entire 89th Regiment of the Salerno Brigade.³⁰ (Rommel refers to the 89th and 90th Regiments only as the 1st and 2nd Regiments of the Brigade.)

By now the main Rommel detachment was emerging from the

wood, and was ordered to march straight on along the Matajur road, except for an officer and three men detailed to marshal the prisoners. The 43 officers were separated from the men and guarded by Sergeant Goppinger. Eventually when they realized how small the Rommel detachment had been, they became 'pugnacious' and an attempt was made to re-establish control over their men, but without effect, for 'Sergeant Goppinger carried out his duties rigorously and conscientiously'.³¹

(c) Matajur

As Rommel continued on towards Matajur, some of the prisoners told him that the 90th Regiment on Matajur was a famous one, which would certainly fire on him, and that he would need to be careful. Indeed, as soon as the road swung round towards the west slope of Mrzli, the detachment came under well-directed fire from Glava (1450m) and Point 1424, enflading the road and forcing the detachment to take cover in dense bushes below the road. The detachment was now on the east side of the valley formed by the ridge running up from Mrzli to Glava, and the ridge running up from Kruguonca to Point 1424 and then to the summit of Glava (Map 7). (Rommel's sketch of this region shows two heights labelled 1467 and 1424, but the first clearly refers to Glava (1450m) on the IGM and Slovene maps, and the second to a small unmarked knoll clearly shown on both maps south of the summit of Glava.)

The road to Matajur high up on the side of the valley was exposed to enemy fire, but Rommel saw that by descending about 200 metres down into the valley, and using thick clumps of bushes as cover, he could arrive unseen at the bend in the road to the south of 1424, and then come up behind the enemy positions. A few machine guns were set up on Mrzli to engage the enemy positions on Glava, and the main detachment made its way undetected to the road south of 1424. Then, as Rommel was preparing for the attack on this point, he received a message from Major Sproesser, who on arriving at Hill 1096 had found so many prisoners that he assumed that all resistance was over, and had sent Rommel an order to withdraw. The order was very clear, and had to be obeyed. On the other hand, Rommel was quite sure that Sproesser was unaware of the present situation, so he decided on a compromise. All the units of the detachment were ordered back to Hill 1096 except the leading hundred riflemen and six heavy machine-gun crews already with Rommel on the road south of 1424. These would go on to attack 'in spite of our ridiculously small numbers'.³²

A hundred riflemen and six heavy machine guns might well seem

'ridiculously small' to attack a regiment, but Rommel's decision was based on more than just the ambition to be first on Matajur. The ridge from Mrzli to Matajur is broad and undulating, and about a mile long. It was similar ground to that traversed already, and Rommel no doubt expected that it would be defended from positions among the hollows and hillocks, and would be vulnerable to his infiltration tactics.

Standing on the road south of 1424, Rommel sited his machine guns with fields of fire towards the rear of the enemy positions on 1424 and Glava (facing east). The Italians were surprised by fire from this direction, and by the heavy fragmentation of the rocks produced by the shots. Soon some Italians began to retire to the north side of 1424. Then Rommel's riflemen moved forward both along the road and up the west slope of 1424, and the enemy vacated his positions there.

As Rommel continued to advance along the road south of Glava, with his machine guns moving up behind in echelon, an enemy battalion tried to move away from Glava, but were halted by the machine guns close to the head of the column. The topography as described by Rommel is not entirely clear, but it appears that as the Wurtembergers moved along the road with some waving of handkerchiefs, the firing on both sides ceased, and it became very quiet. Suddenly coming round a sharp bend in the road they saw, about three hundred yards away, the greater part of the 90th Regiment of the Salerno Brigade gathered together laying down its arms. 'The Commander of the Regiment sat by the side of the road, surrounded by his officers and weeping with fury and shame at the refusal of obedience by the soldiers of his once proud Regiment.'³³ One can only surmise that the Regiment which had only recently arrived, with no prepared positions, had been mesmerized by the steady and visible progress of the enemy from Livek to Matajur.

Before the Italians could realize how small a number of the enemy had disgraced their regiment, Rommel had separated the 35 officers, and sent some 1,200 men down the road to Livek at the double. Then he hurried on towards the summit of Matajur, about a mile away and 200 metres higher, still held by the rest of the Regiment. Rommel's first move was to order an attack from below Glava directly to the summit, covered by his machine guns, but this approach was quickly abandoned in the face of very heavy enemy fire.

Rommel turned back towards Glava, and moved over on to the north-facing slopes below the ridge, apparently unobserved by the enemy. His group was now able to move along the slope out of sight, seeing as they went small squads of Italians with and without weapons moving down to where the other regiment had surrendered.

Six hundred yards short of the summit of Matajur they came up behind the rear of an Italian company facing north, which was engaged with scout squads of the 12(g) Division who had come up from Caporetto. Completely surprised by the Wurttembergers with weapons at the ready the Italians surrendered immediately.

The weather was now gloriously fine with brilliant sunshine and freshly fallen snow sparkling on the ground. Standing on the summit of Matajur, the highest peak for miles around, the Wurttembergers looked at the wide panorama around them, with Cividale at their foot to the south-west, the Adriatic beyond, and Udine also in the distance. Rommel ordered a 'well deserved rest', of one hour during which he dictated his daily combat report for Major Sproesser. Then, very wearily, they descended some 900 metres of rough slopes (taking the captured Italian officers with them), and by the early afternoon had arrived at the pleasant village of Masseris still at an altitude of 760 metres, where they spent the night. Leaving before dawn they continued down the road to join the rest of the WMB on the outskirts of Cividale.

5.5 Summary

From first light on 25 October to midday on 26 October Rommel and his detachment captured the greater part of five different Italian regiments on five different occasions. Never more than a battalion in strength, and on Matajur less than a company, the Rommel detachment had taken, in round terms, the surrender of the order of 9,000 officers and men, at a loss to themselves during the three days 24 to 26 October of 6 dead and 30 wounded.¹⁴ The IOH does not usually quote losses suffered in particular actions, but all the five regiments claimed by Rommel (the 213rd on Hill 1192, the 20th Bersaglieri at Polava, the 14th Bersaglieri at Jevsek, the 89th on Mirzi, and the 90th on Matajur) either disappear completely from the IOH after 25 October or are mentioned only as *resid* (remnants).

Rommel's progress was a remarkable achievement, but many circumstances had contributed to his success. During the war all the opposing armies had been driven to much rethinking and retraining. The German Army had been in the forefront of developing techniques of attack and defence, and the Allies had found it difficult to catch up. Even after two years of war the British on the Somme in 1916, and the Italians at Caporetto in 1917, were woefully behind German methods. Moreover the XIVth Austro-German Army had attacked a region so mountainous that since 1915 it had been a quiet sector, and seen no action. The defence systems had laid out on the line of greatest advance in 1915, and had fundamental weaknesses

which only began to receive serious attention at the beginning of October 1917, and then in an atmosphere of increasing consternation and confusion.

The German plan of attack, detailed by General Krafft, deployed some of the best German and Austrian troops against some of the weakest Italian troops in a region offering great possibilities for a breakthrough. The troops of the XIVth Army were presented with opportunities undreamt of on the Western Front, and there are many references by Krafft to other officers and their units who distinguished themselves by their rapid progress and substantial gains. Even in such company Rommel stood out in his determination to attack the enemy, in his skill in tactics and encirclement techniques, and in his ability to foresee enemy intentions and reactions.

On 25 October it was solely due to Rommel's drive and foresight, backed by the support of Major Sproesser, that the Rommel detachment of two rifle and one machine-gun company set off along the Kolovrat, while the main body of the Alpine Corps was held up at Na Gradu and Monte Piatto. By 09.15, after some anxious moments overcome by Rommel's personal leadership, the Wurttembergers had captured the Italian 213th Regiment, and gained possession of half a mile of the Kolovrat and Hill 1192. This, in itself a striking feat, opened up the way forward towards Monte Kuk and Livek as soon as reinforcements arrived.

Following the arrival of Major Sproesser at 10.30, Rommel's detachment was increased to two rifle and three machine-gun companies for an attack to take Monte Kuk. Rommel soon realized that the enemy were not very resolute, and in typical Rommel fashion, decided to enlarge the scope of the attack. Leading his two forward rifle companies and one machine-gun company, he raced along the road on the south side of the Kolovrat, in order to outflank and encircle any enemy positions beyond the summit of Kuk on its west-facing slopes. However, after surprising and putting to flight the unsuspecting Italians at Ravne, Rommel saw that the western slopes of Kuk appeared deserted, but that there was much traffic around Livek and on the Livek-Savogna road.

Rommel reviewed the situation and decided that, irrespective of any action by his detachment, Kuk would soon fall to the remainder of the WMB and the Life Guards, and that the detachment would now be better employed by blocking the Livek-Savogna road in order to cut off any enemy troops retreating from Livek. Racing downhill at full speed and arriving with only one rifle company and one machine-gun company, he next ambushed an entire regiment marching down in good order to take up new defence positions in the rear. Finally during the afternoon he met up with Major Sproesser near Livek, and was

given three rifle companies and a signal company for an assault on Matajur the next day.

In recording the events of 25 October the IOH states that the Arno Brigade on the Kolovrat, facing north, was taken from the flank so that 'one by one' its battalions were surprised by attacks from unexpected directions.³⁵ As described above, the Rommel detachment continued the next day in similar fashion, starting with the capture of the 14th Regiment Bersaglieri, retiring like the 20th Regiment in good order. Then followed the advance to the summits of Mirzi and Matajur, arriving at the latter by midday with only one company, and receiving en route the surrender of two further regiments, which appear to have been mesmerized by the steady and rapid progress of the XIVth Army along the ridge from Livek to Matajur.

To set Rommel's achievements in perspective one must remember that all the units of the XIVth Army had been selected to overwhelm the Italian defences and to move fast, and move fast they did. Krafft repeatedly praises the different units involved, as for example the 12(g) Division for its march up the valley to Livek and Caporetto, and the 22(a) Schutzen for its occupation of Monte Stoi. The advance of the XIVth Army during the first three days of the offensive was made all along its front by all the front-line divisions, and would have surely been made had Rommel and the WMB not been present.

The Rommel detachment was but a small part of a much greater whole, but there remain at least three very striking aspects of Rommel's performance. First, his extraordinary capacity to assess the possibility of a situation, to devise the most suitable plan of attack, and to carry it out with skill, courage and determination. Second, the attack on the Kolovrat and Matajur was made by two of the best German mountain divisions, the Alpine Corps and the 12(g) Division, and it was Rommel who made the fastest progress, always in the lead of the advance, out-distancing no doubt equally ambitious officers in other units. Third, Rommel's capture of the 20th Regiment Bersaglieri is particularly worthy of note. Most of the prisoners taken by Rommel would probably have been rounded up by other units of the Alpine Corps and the 12(g) Divisions, but this is not the case with the 20th Bersaglieri. It appears quite certain that but for Rommel's speed, judgement and audacity, a whole regiment in good order would have marched down the road towards Savogna, ready to carry on the fight the next day.

Rommel's arrival on Matajur had been a great moment for him. When Krafft and von Below had planned the opening stage of the offensive, it was clear that Na Gradu (1114m) opposite Tolmin, and Matajur (1461m) commanding the road from Caporetto to Cividale, were critical initial objectives which must be taken with all possible

speed. Therefore, von Below had obtained authorization to announce that a *Pour le Mérite*, the highest German decoration open to junior officers, would be awarded for the capture of Hill 1114, and another for the capture of Matajur. Not only would this encourage some already very competitive officers, but by enabling the awards to be made immediately in the field, would encourage further great efforts. Hence when Rommel stood on the summit of Matajur on 26 October after capturing its garrison, the Salerno Brigade, he must surely have felt that he had won the coveted *Pour le Mérite*. Therefore Rommel, and the WMB, were much surprised by the German High Command Bulletin for 27 October signed by Ludendorff which stated, inter alia, that the well-fortified summit of Matajur had been taken at 07.00 on 25 October by 2nd Lieutenant Schnieber with four companies of the 63rd Regiment of the 12(g) Division.³⁶

Krafft's account of Schnieber's visit to Matajur states no more than that Lieutenant Schnieber with his 4th Company (not four companies) had been sent out on the north side of Matajur, and had brought back a report saying only that he had reached a point 100 metres north of the summit.³⁷

Presumably, his company had been sent as a strong scout squad to make a reconnaissance of the enemy positions, but why had he stopped 100 metres short of the ridge? To make any sort of a reconnaissance it would have been necessary to go right up to the ridge and the summit, for only then would it have been possible to obtain a clear view over all the possible enemy positions. It is sometimes suggested that Schnieber had reached a subsidiary outlier of Matajur, Monte Colonna, about half a mile north of the summit and about 200 metres lower,³⁸ but if the weather was clear at that time it is difficult to imagine how one could confuse the two summits. If the weather was cloudy and the visibility poor then his reconnaissance was of very limited value. Even so, the 12(g) Division reported to XIVth Army that Matajur had been reached, and shortly afterwards Schnieber received the coveted *Pour le Mérite*.³⁹

Despite various discussions of this episode there is no evidence that Schnieber's walk up Matajur made any significant contribution to the XIVth Army. Indeed on the evidence presented, Schnieber might well have faced a charge of failing in his duty to make a proper reconnaissance. Krafft makes no mention of the *Mérite*, but comments that from a tactical point of view, Schnieber thought that he had done all that was necessary, and had decided not to engage with the Salerno Brigade in the conviction that it would be difficult to do so with any probability of success.⁴⁰ This remark is immediately followed by a fulsome tribute to the Rommel detachment for its powers of endurance, its clear sense of duty, its ability and independence.

When von Below promised a *Pour le Mérite* for the capture of Matajur, he had certainly not foreseen such an outcome, but the award was now made. According to Fadini, von Below asked General Baron Lynckner, the Kaiser's Military Secretary, for a further 'Mérite', but his request was firmly refused.⁴¹ However, this episode might well have spurred Rommel on to even greater efforts.

6

The Advance to the Tagliamento

6.1 The Tagliamento and its Bridges

The Tagliamento presents a substantial barrier to an invading army, as was once stressed by Napoleon. For much of its course, from above Tolmezzo to above Latisana (Map 8), the Tagliamento runs in channels in a wide gravelly bed, in places over a mile across and sometimes partially covered with scrub, which forms a most prominent feature of the plain when viewed from the mountains to the north. The width of the bed is greatest at the junction of the Tagliamento with its main tributary, the Fella, about four miles below Tolmezzo, where the beds of the two rivers spread out to produce a triangular-shaped stony waste with sides about two miles in length. In most places the flow of the water is confined to one, two, or several relatively narrow channels, but after heavy rainfall in the mountains the flow may rapidly increase and spill out across the whole bed.

When the river reaches Pinzano it finally emerges from the mountains into the plain, where the wide and stony bed continues until a few miles above Latisana, where the river assumes a more normal form, completely filling its bed, about 100 to 200 yards wide with green fields or woods on either side. Finally in the last five or six miles to the sea, the land on both sides is very low and intersected by drainage channels, which make any military operations very difficult, especially if flooded.

On the whole of its course below Pinzano the bed of the river is bounded by high dykes rising 6m or more above the bed to contain the waters when it floods. The river thus provided a considerable military obstacle. The high dykes gave excellent positions for machine-gun and other posts which could sweep fire across any troops attempting to cross the wide bed of bare sand and pebbles. The water in the main channel or channels is generally deep enough to require serious bridging techniques, particularly as the speed of the river can greatly increase after rainfall and be capable of damaging any temporary structure. Indeed with heavy flows the river becomes a raging torrent totally impassable except at the bridges.

Rommel at Longarone

8.1 The New Assignment (26 October – 6 November)

After the capture of Matajur, the Rommel detachment descended about 900 metres along narrow paths to the small village of Masseris (760m), where the tired troops were billeted among the few farms for at least part of a good night's rest. Next day (27 October) they were up before dawn to continue their descent and join the rest of the WMB in the neighbourhood of Cividale.

The Alpine Corps had now reached the edge of the mountains, and for the next six days took part in the general pursuit of the Italians across the plain towards the Tagliamento. The day of 28 October was cloudy and extremely wet, and on reaching the River Torre at Primulacco, about seven miles north of Udine, the WMB found that the river was swollen to a width of 600 yards, and was under fire from a determined Italian rearguard on the far bank. The Rommel detachment discovered dry clothes in an Italian laundry depot, and went to sleep, hopefully for the night. However, at 23.00 they were woken up by an order from Major Sproesser saying that the river must be crossed during the night, or at least before dawn. By daybreak (29 October) a passage had been constructed across most of the width, using all the available carts and lorries as bridges over the several branches of the main channel. The Italians had now withdrawn, and the detachment was able to cross by negotiating the last unbridged hundred yards aided by a strong safety rope stretched across the fast-flowing river. The next evening (30 October) the WMB reached the Tagliamento, and this also was very swollen, and presented a more considerable barrier.

During the next two days other units of the XIVth Army were arriving at the Tagliamento and were also unable to cross. However, as described in Section 7.1, by the night of 2 November the 55(a) Division and the 12(g) Division had secured bridgeheads on the far bank at Cornino and Pontalba, and on 3 November the XIVth Army began to cross in strength.¹ Both Krafft and von Below were very conscious that further successes would depend on the speed of the advance, and had

been concerned at the sometimes slower rate of progress achieved by the Krauss Corps, and particularly by the adjoining Austrian Xth Army.

Major Sproesser states that he met General Krafft at XIVth Army HQ in Udine on 3 November, but gives no account of their conversation, other than that Krafft greeted him by saying 'I congratulate the Mountain Battalion on its prodigious success.'² After this conversation Sproesser talked with Krafft's Director of Operations, Major Willisen, who told him that the WMB was to be transferred from the Alpine Corps either to the German Jäger Division or to the Austrian 22nd Division in the Krauss Corps, in order to act as the advance guard in a thrust through the mountains to reach the Piave at Longarone. Moreover, he was told: 'to allow no power on earth to stop you before you arrive at Longarone.'³ A verbal order confirmed by an entry in von Below's diary which reads that the WMB 'were to be put in front to lead the way'.⁴

The next day, 4 November, the WMB left the Alpine Corps to join the Jäger Division, and marched to within about four miles of Cornino. The following day the WMB crossed the river as dawn was breaking, and received orders from General Krauss attaching the Battalion to the Jäger Division 'to lead the way on the march to Longarone by **Chievolis, Forcella Clautana, Claur and Cimolais**' (Map 11).⁵ The WMB then marched on to spend the night at **Travesio**, about five miles short of Meduno. Meanwhile the Jäger Division was still engaged in operations against the Italian 36th and 63rd Divisions in the Arzino valley, ten miles to the east of the Meduna valley (Section 7.2).

The WMB left Travesio before dawn on 6 November, and marched first to Meduno, and then up the Meduna valley towards Chievolis at the entrance to the Silesia valley. At Redona just south of Chievolis they encountered the rearguard of the Danise column (Section 7.2), and after a brief fight captured 85 prisoners. The remainder of the rearguard took flight and were pursued by a WMB squad on bicycles, acquired near the Tagliamento, and another 230 prisoners were captured near Chievolis.⁶ Meanwhile, the main body of the WMB continued westwards up the Silesia valley and by the evening had reached Pecolat at the foot of the Clautana Pass.

Also on 6 November, the Austrian 22 Division (General Müller) arrived at Meduno, and it was then decided that it should substitute for the still distant Jäger Division and lead the thrust to the Piave (Section 7.4). Therefore the WMB, already on its way to Chievolis, was transferred from the Jäger to the 22(a) Division, and allocated to the XLIII Brigade (General Merten). The Brigade set off on the road to Chievolis, en route to Longarone. However, before arriving at Chievolis, General Merten received news of an enemy force further north beyond Tramonti, so most of the Brigade marched past Chievolis and after a

brief encounter towards evening captured an Italian general and 1200 men,⁷ presumably all part of the Danise column. The Brigade then resumed its march to arrive back at Chievols during the night, by which time the advance scouts of the WMB were making a reconnaissance up the Clautana Pass.

8.2 The Clautana Pass (7, 8 November)

The WMB were now in the mountainous area lying between the rivers Meduna and Piave (Maps 11 and 14), which is divided by the river Cellina and its tributary the Cimoliana into two lines of summits, each running approximately north – south, one passing between Chievols and Claut, and the other between Claut and Longarone. Thus the route from Chievols to Longarone falls naturally into two stages, over the Clautana Pass to the villages of Claut and Cimolais, and then over the San Osvaldo Pass to Longarone. The lower slopes of the mountains are well wooded but the main summits, which rise to between 1500 to 2300m, often present steep and broken rock faces, particularly on east-facing slopes (Plate 23).

On 6 November the WMB marched 15 miles or so from Travesio, four miles east of Meduno, to the huts of Pecoliar and Tronconere at the foot of the Clautana Pass. The Battalion was then about two miles from the top of the pass, but 900 metres lower down. In addition, Major Sproesser had been informed that the 1st Battalion of the 26 Schützen of XLIII Brigade, and the 377 Mountain Howitzer detachment, would come under his command for the operation, and were on their way.

During the evening Major Sproesser, conscious of his orders to move with all speed, considered his plans for the next day. It is not clear how good a picture Sproesser had of the ground to be covered. The day had been sunny,⁸ but it is doubtful if Sproesser would have had any view of the pass as he came along the road to Pecoliar. (Today the final stretch of the road lies above the south side of the man-made lake of Selva, but in 1917 there was no lake and the road kept mainly on the north side of the stream,⁹ and the view would have been more limited.) Nor would his maps have been of the quality of the 25,000 maps available today. Even so, it was no doubt clear that the top of the pass, at 1432m, was the lowest crossing of a ridge which on either side rose steadily to heights of over 2000m.

During the evening, two advance scout squads from the 4th Company made 'excellent'¹⁰ reports that the summit of the pass was occupied by about two Italian companies with several machine guns and three mountain guns. Moreover, the track to the pass soon turned into a side valley which eventually opened out into a highcombe, with its base at an altitude of about 800m, encircled by a length of the main

ridge between the summits 1715m and Monte Gialina (1634m) on either side of the pass. The track kept high up on the right-hand side of thecombe (as viewed looking up), and an enemy deployed near and under the pass would have a commanding view of any troops moving towards them, so it appeared impractical to attempt any direct advance up the track. In addition the pass was guarded on either side by steep cliffs on the main ridge.

It was clear that the pass could only be captured by some encircling manoeuvre, and that the expert in encirclement was Rommel.¹¹ Sproesser now issued his orders for the next day. Rommel with the 1st and 2nd Companies and the 1st Machine-Gun Company would carry out an encirclement by crossing the ridge to the south of the pass and attacking the enemy from the rear. To the north of the pass, part of the 6th Company would climb the steep slopes of Monte Gialina and attack from that side. The 4th Company with the 3rd Machine-Gun Company would make a frontal attack. Captain Gossler with the 5th and 6th Companies would follow behind the forward troops. The attack would be supported by the Austrian mountain battery sited above Pecoliar. The 1st Battalion of the 26 Regiment would remain at Pecoliar.¹²

(Both Sproesser's and Rommel's accounts contain some minor contradictions. Sproesser states that the Rommel detachment consisted of the 1st and 2nd Companies and the 1st MG Company, whereas Rommel states that he had four companies, the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 1st MG,¹³ but gives no information at all on the part played by the 2nd Company. Sproesser's text makes no mention of the 3rd Rifle Company, whereas his accompanying map shows it to the left of the 4th Company in a position below and facing the pass. Even so, the general run of events can be sufficiently well described without going into uncertain details.)

Sproesser states that during the day of 8 November 'there was no success with the 4th and 6th Companies attempt to take possession of the pass with a frontal attack.'¹⁴ The Rommel detachment also had a difficult time. It was soon harassed by machine-gun and artillery fire, and was forced to move in bounds from rock cover to rock cover. Eventually it reached dead ground in the fold of a lateral side valley, and was able to move up and obtain a good view of the main ridge south of the pass, high above them and protected by a line of cliffs covered in snow and ice.

Rommel gives little detail of how his detachment spent the day, but it seems likely that they paused for some time while reconnaissance squads sought and failed to find a route through or around the cliffs. Therefore he decided that the attack would have to be made frontally, and the detachment traversed across the mountain side towards the

pass. The men were carrying very heavy loads, including the machine guns, over very rough ground, and when they arrived near the pass they were 'wellig erschöpft' (utterly exhausted).¹⁵

As night came on the detachment took up positions on some snow-covered knolls a few hundred yards from the pass. While the men rested, Rommel began to plan a surprise attack on the enemy positions. Accompanied by Lieutenant Streicher and some scout squads he went out into the night to reconnoitre the ground immediately below the pass. (Rommel's account describes the night as dark but leaves us wondering how dark was dark.) The noise of Württemberg boots breaking through the frozen snow alerted the enemy, who responded with fire thus revealing some of their positions. In all several hours of hard effort were spent reconnoitring positions for his machine guns and for the start positions for the 1st and 3rd Rifle Companies.

The attack was launched at midnight with the machine guns concentrating their fire for two minutes on the enemy positions immediately about the pass. Then, as this fire shifted to the enemy positions on either side of the pass, the two rifle companies should have taken the pass by surprise and storm, but there was no immediate response. Rommel had indicated that he would lead the assault, but he had misjudged the time, and was still some distance from the companies at the moment the fire lifted from the pass. He rushed up to them and found to his dismay that they were still waiting to move. The attack was then made, but the effect of accurate timing had been lost. The Italians responded stoutly and, after some close fighting with hand grenades, Rommel broke off the attack.

It was now about midnight and the Rommel detachment was still close to the pass, and with the coming of daylight would be in a hopelessly exposed position. They were also sorely in need of food and rest, and there was no possibility of either in their present position, so Rommel had little choice but to order a return to Pecolat. The detachment made its way down in the dark, leaving the Gössler detachment to keep watch on the pass. About half-way down Rommel made his report at Major Sproesser's command post among the rocks. The detachment arrived at Pecolat before dawn and the cooks provided plenty of hot coffee.

The outcome of any night action is always somewhat uncertain, but for Rommel the night was a great disappointment. He writes that this was the first time he had failed since the beginning of the war, and he was very angry. The WMB had been selected to spearhead the march on Longarone, and their first action on the march had failed, probably as the result of his ambiguous orders to his two rifle companies. Yet the attack was by no means a complete failure. Two hours later, as the sun

began to rise, news was received from Major Sproesser that a patrol from the 5th Company had found that the Italian rearguard had now gone from the pass (having received orders to withdraw and block the roads leading out of the Cimolais basin).¹⁶

Very soon Major Sproesser issued orders for the march to be continued to Claut and Cimolais, with the Gössler Detachment as advance guard, followed by the staff, the bicycle company and the Rommel Detachment, plus the 1st Battalion of the Austrian Schützen and the 377 Howitzer Detachment, which had now arrived to join his command.¹⁷ A detachment under Captain Gössler was soon on their way up the pass, followed by the Rommel Detachment. The latter, despite their heavy loads and having to face the 900m climb for a second time, were apparently invigorated by the news that the enemy had given up such good positions, and they caught up with the Gössler Detachment before reaching Claut at the foot of the pass.

Arriving at Claut at about 14.00, the column paused for a short rest and a welcome from the local population. Major Sproesser then issued orders for the pursuit to continue as would have been expected. However, in a subsequent account he states that these orders disobeyed XLIII Brigade orders which had laid down that the WMB should spend the night at Claut, yield their position as advance guard to the 1st Battalion Schützen, and then follow on with the main body of the Brigade.¹⁸ When and how these orders were received by Sproesser is not clear, but the WMB was now setting the pace of the advance. Hence Sproesser, bearing in mind his meeting with Major Willisen, took it upon himself to ignore the order, and instructed his column to continue its march towards Cimolais.

Captain Gössler with the 5th Company and the 3rd MG Company was sent ahead to secure the road junction two miles further on, where a road led off to Barcis. Here they encountered, and attacked, some of the enemy who thereupon withdrew towards Cimolais at the foot of the San Osvado Pass leading to Longarone. The main body of the WBM marched on to Cimolais with the Rommel detachment as the advance guard, preceded by Lieutenant Schoffel and a few cyclists and mounted staff acting as a scout group in front. Behind them followed the 1st Battalion, 26 Schützen.

Arriving at Cimolais as it was becoming dark, the WMB again received a friendly reception, as at Claut. They found food and billets, and then a few hours sleep to recover from their thirty-two hours of marching and fighting since first leaving Pecolat. Meanwhile Lieutenant Schoffel's mounted scout group, which had gone forward along the road to Longarone, reported that the enemy was taking up positions on both sides of the road no more than half a mile west of Cimolais.

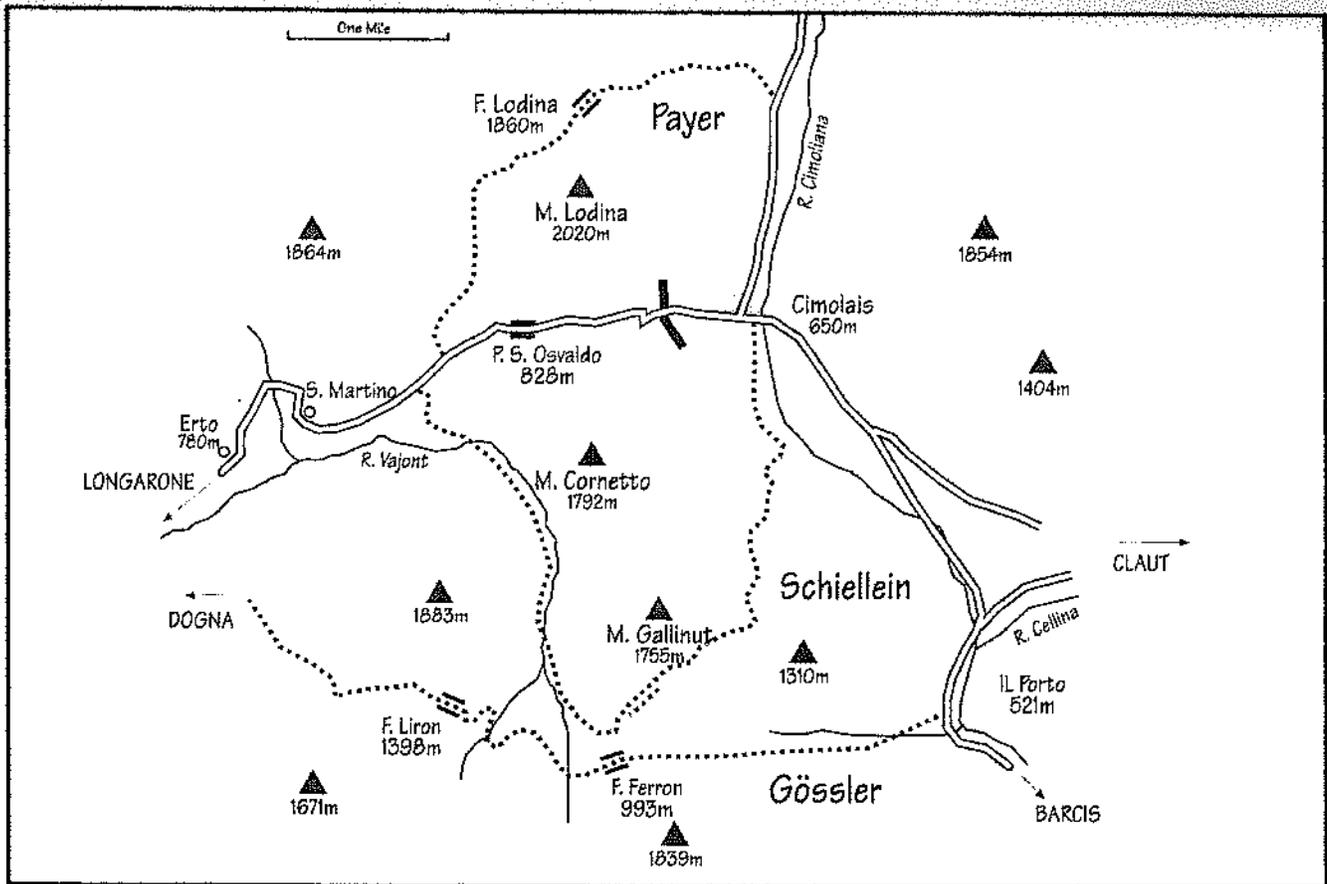
The Headquarters of XLIII Brigade now repeated its earlier order that the WMB was to halt and hand over the lead to the 1st Battalion Schützen. Major Sproesser replied that as the WMB was in close battle contact with the enemy, it was impossible to obey this order.¹⁹ General Merten, commanding XLIII Brigade, was clearly anxious that his Austrian Schützen should play a prominent part in the operation, but his orders were falling behind the flow of events, for this last order included an instruction that the WMB act as a flank guard to the Schützen in the Sliisia and Cellina valleys.²⁰ But these were the valleys on either side of the Clautana pass, through which the WMB had already marched on its way from Pecolai to Cimolais several hours previously!

8.3 Cimolais to Longarone (9 November)

The mountain range lying between Cimolais and the Piave, rising to over 2000 metres, is traversed by only one road, that from Cimolais to Erto and Longarone by the San Osvaldo Pass (Map 14). The summit of the pass is quite close to Cimolais, about two and a half miles away and only about 150 metres higher. However, immediately after leaving the village the road enters a narrow defile (Plate 24) where steep and often rocky slopes rise up to Monte Lodina (2020m) to the north, and to Monte Cornetto (1792m) to the south, and here the Italian rearguard had prepared to make a stand.

Major Sproesser, eager to reach Longarone, was determined that the San Osvaldo Pass should be crossed without the delay occasioned by the enemy defence of the Clautana Pass. About midnight, after studying his own maps, and some captured Italian maps, he issued the orders for the next day (9 November). All nine companies of the Battalion were to be involved, but only one company was to advance up the road, while the other companies developed three separate encircling movements along various tracks through the mountains. A detachment of two rifle and one machine-gun company would follow a track round Monte Lodina, probably across Forcella Lodina (1860m), and then descend to the road beyond the enemy positions. On the opposite south side of the road, a similar sized detachment would move along tracks encircling Monte Cornetto and rising almost to the summit of Monte Gallinut (1755m). Further south still, a rifle company and a machine-gun company under Captain Gössler would go west from Il Porto over Forcella Ferron (993m) and Forcella Liron (1398m) and then, keeping to the south side of the Vajont gorge, would follow tracks down to Dogna on the Piave.

Rommel was allotted the command of the northern-most group charged with encircling Monte Lodina, and for once he was



14. The attack on the San Osvaldo Pass. (After Sproesser (1933), Map 45).

disconcerted to receive his orders. His detachment had endured a very hard two days during the crossing of the Clautana Pass, and it now faced another day with heavy loads, starting in the dark along unknown tracks, with an ascent and descent of some 1200 metres. Moreover he had not seen the ground, and no doubt wished to avoid a repeat of the attempts to encircle the Ciautana Pass. On being informed of the plan Rommel protested to Sproesser saying that his men were too tired to make the arduous climb involved in the encirclement. He therefore proposed that his detachment should take a much shorter route and attack the positions frontally from Cimolais. Sproesser reluctantly agreed, and amended his orders. Only the 2nd Company under 2nd Lieutenant Payer would take the route round Monte Lodina, while Rommel with the 1st and 3rd Rifle and 1st MG Company would take the much shorter route straight up the road. On the south side of the road, the 4th and 6th Rifle and 2nd MG Company under 2nd Lieutenant Schiellein would encircle Monte Cometto and Monte Gallinut, while the 5th Rifle and 3rd MG Companies under Captain Gössler would take the tracks towards Dogra.

2nd Lieutenant Payer found a local inhabitant to act as a guide on the track round Monte Lodina, and set off on the northern encirclement about three hours before daybreak. Meanwhile 2nd Lieutenant Schöffel had been reconnoitering the enemy positions around the road west of Cimolais, and by 05.00 had reported back to Rommel that there was no sign of the enemy. Therefore Rommel decided to reconnoitre himself, together with his company commanders, as soon as it became light.²¹ At about 05.00 a visitor arrived at Major Sproesser's HQ, Colonel Pasetti, the Commander of the Austrian 26 Regiment, who brought a verbal message from XLIII Brigade, saying that the WMB must halt in Cimolais and wait for the Brigade to come up. In reply Sproesser gave the Colonel a message to the Brigade Commander, General Merten, saying that the WMB had already begun battle during the night in the direction San Osvaldo and Longarone, and it was not possible to stop them.²²

Meanwhile Rommel and his company commanders had ridden out to view the enemy positions, with a squad of cyclists as an advance guard. All was quiet as they left the village, but they soon came under rifle and machine-gun fire, and hurriedly took refuge in the roadside chapel of La Crosette, 150 yards west of Cimolais.²³ (This could hardly be the chapel at La Crosetta on the modern 25,000 map, which is at least a mile further up the road. Rommel's La Crosette was probably an unnamed chapel just beyond the village.²⁴)

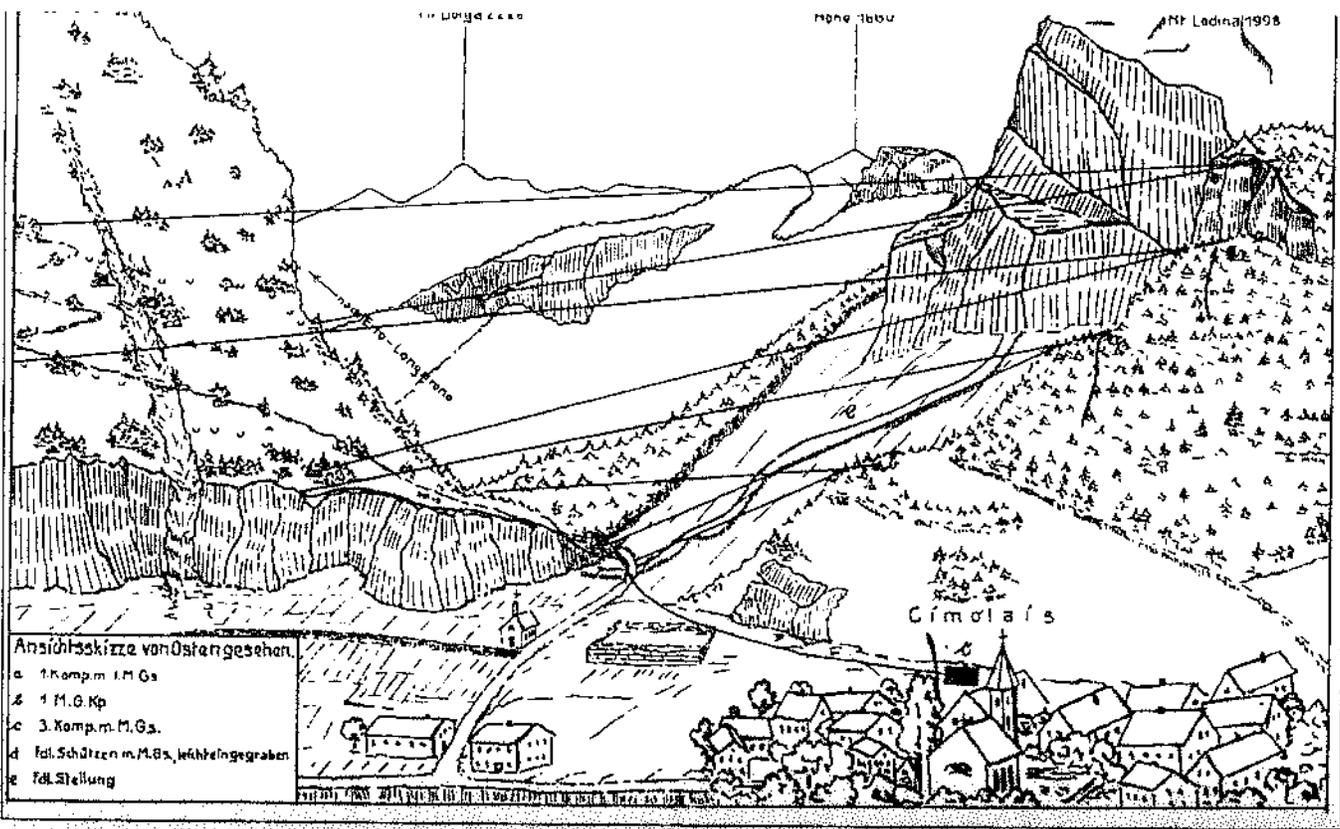
The relief felt at finding this cover was soon diminished by the strength of the fire from quite close range, which began to splinter the slates on the roof. There was no future here, particularly if the enemy

brought up any artillery. To avoid this trap, Rommel detailed the party to return individually, each man running out in a different direction to the nearest cover, and then moving off again from another part of the cover. Hence, despite heavy fire, all succeeded in reaching Cimolais unharmed. But Rommel comments that if the Italians had waited for them to advance another 100 yards they would all have been killed.

The reconnaissance had been watched by Sergeant Döbelmann and an observation squad from the tower of Cimolais church, assisted by an Italian x40 telescope captured on the Tagliamento. Döbelmann had observed the flashes from the rifles and machine guns, and was able to give Rommel an assessment of the enemy positions. The view from the church tower, shown in the sketch²⁵ on page 174 (prepared for a lecture in 1918 given by Rommel to senior officers),²⁶ was not encouraging. The Italians were holding a line running across the road about 500 yards from the outskirts of the village. To the left of the road this line ran along the top of a low but steep band of rock precluding any direct attack. Then further to the left, at about 150 yards from the road, the line continued higher up the hillside with riflemen in positions protected by piles of rocks and stones, where they could give covering fire over the lower positions. To the right of the road the ground was less favourable to the enemy, but here the line was protected by wired barricades. Moreover, any frontal attack here would come under enfilade fire from the positions to the left of the road.

Rommel had assured Major Sproesser that the attack would succeed, and he now realized that his task was more difficult than he had imagined. His book gives some insight into the thoughtful way in which he resolved the situation. It was clear that the best chance of success lay in an attack to the right of the road, supported by the heavy machine guns. But Rommel could see nowhere to site these guns in positions which would give some cover against fire from the Italians on the left of the road.

Three hours or so were spent in reconnaissance and preparations, which included the laying of telephone lines from the command post to the three companies and to a detachment of six light machine guns sited to the right of the road on the slopes about eight hundred yards north of Cimolais. The attack began at 09.00, with the six light machine guns of the 1st Rifle Company opening fire on the Italian positions to the left of the road, concentrating at first on those higher up in the more open situations on the hillside. At a range of fourteen hundred yards the fire was not particularly accurate, but was sufficiently scattered that some of the Italian riflemen could be seen in the telescope moving down to seek refuge in the better-prepared positions nearer the road. Soon an entire platoon appeared to be on the move, with some



Contemporary sketch showing view towards Passo San Osvaldo from Cimolais. The straight lines indicate the lines of fire of the German machine guns. (Hauptarchiv Stuttgart)

troops making off to the rear, and Rommel decided that it was now safe to move his machine-gun company into positions lower down and much closer to the enemy line.

As the heavy guns added their fire to that of the light guns, the Italians on the southern slope rushed to find some protection, and crowded into a narrow trench near the road, while those trying to escape to the rear were shot down. Now that the south side of the enemy line was completely pinned down, the 3rd Rifle Company began to work its way forward, widely extended, and covered by the fire of the light and heavy machine guns. With this support the company broke through wire defences and took the enemy positions astride the road, but the enemy forces higher up on the slopes to the north of the road still held out. Rommel sent back a message reporting his progress and ordering up cyclists, mounted runners and horses in order to exploit the success as rapidly as possible. He then went up the road towards the captured enemy positions, whereupon 2 officers and 200 men still in position on the slopes to the north of the road laid down their arms and surrendered.²⁷

Rommel ordered an immediate pursuit, but there was a few minutes delay as the 1st Company did not immediately realize that the 3rd Company had occupied the enemy positions, and continued to fire on them. Nevertheless, Rommel, Lieutenant Streicher, and the leading units of the 3rd Company were soon on the road moving as fast as they could go. From the top of the pass the road ran gently downhill for about three miles to the villages of San Martino and Erto (Map 14), only three miles in a direct line from the Piave. But below Erto the Vajont river has cut a steep and narrow gorge which drops down very abruptly to the Piave at Longarone. The road negotiated this ravine by a rather spectacular system of bridges and tunnels which could all too easily be demolished, or blocked by well-placed machine guns. Therefore speed was essential to prevent the Italians from taking up positions there, or carrying out demolitions.

(Today the modern road, built during the construction of the huge Vajont dam (Plate 28), keeps to the north side of the gorge. The valley behind the dam has been largely empty of water since the catastrophe of 9 October 1963,²⁸ when a quarter-mile length of the mountain side, high above the water, sheared off and fell into the lake, thus displacing its own volume of water over the dam. This tremendous mass of water rushed down the gorge with increasing velocity, and hurtled itself across the Piave against the small town of Longarone, killing 2,000 of the 4,000 inhabitants.)

At San Martino Rommel was joined by the staff, and horses and cyclists ordered up from the rear. The head of the column now moved with increased speed. Coming up to Erto the column caught up with

small parties of Italians also making down the road. A light machine gun was set up ready to fire, but this was not necessary. Rommel says that he shouted to them to surrender and disarm, and they were sent marching back towards Cimolais.

After Erto the road began to descend, and the cyclists drew away from Rommel and the other mounted staff. They soon overtook more Italians before disappearing round a bend in the road, shots were heard, and an Italian motor car was seen making down the road. As the horsemen raced through 'a pitch-black tunnel',³⁸ they were checked by the shock of a large explosion ahead of them. Emerging from the tunnel they saw that a sizeable bridge across a side stream had been destroyed, but it was still possible to climb down into the stream, over the ruins of the bridge, and up the other side.

While the sound of shots continued, Rommel's group rushed on, to arrive at the north end of a high bridge, 130 feet long, which spanned the main gorge 150 metres above the river (Plate 26). The WMB cyclists were already there, and told Rommel that they had been firing on an Italian truck which had just disappeared into a tunnel on the far side, presumably carrying the demolition squad which had blown up the previous bridge as Sergeant Fischer was attempting to pull off a smoking fuse. Ahead, at each end of the bridge, demolition charges were clearly visible in holes in the centre of the carriageway. Was the enemy about to explode the charges?

Rommel ordered Sergeant Bruckner, 'an especially brave and daring soldier',³⁹ to run across the bridge with an axe and chop through the cables which could be seen leading to the bridge. Rommel and the cyclists then raced across the bridge, pulling out the fuses as they went. Sergeant Bruckner with a few cyclists was sent ahead to ensure that no further demolitions were made on the road, and as no signs of firing were heard it seemed that all was well. Emerging from the lowest tunnel into the brilliant sunshine Rommel came upon a sight offered to only a few soldiers in the World War.⁴⁰ The Piave lay about 150 metres below, flowing in a narrow valley confined by steep mountains rising up to 1500m on either side. The road and railway ran parallel to the far side of the river, and along the road marched thousands of Italian soldiers retreating in good order unaware of the enemy presence.

Meanwhile Major Sproesser and Captain Kremling, commanding the 1st Battalion 26 Schützen, had arrived at Erto where Sproesser received yet another order from XLIII Brigade: 'The WMB stops, makes camp and spends the night at the mill at Erto; the 26 Schützen Regiment undertakes the lead.' But these orders were now well outdated, and he replied that 'The advanced units are fighting at Longarone. I need support with infantry on the pass road, and please send me the 377 Howitzer Detachment.'⁴¹

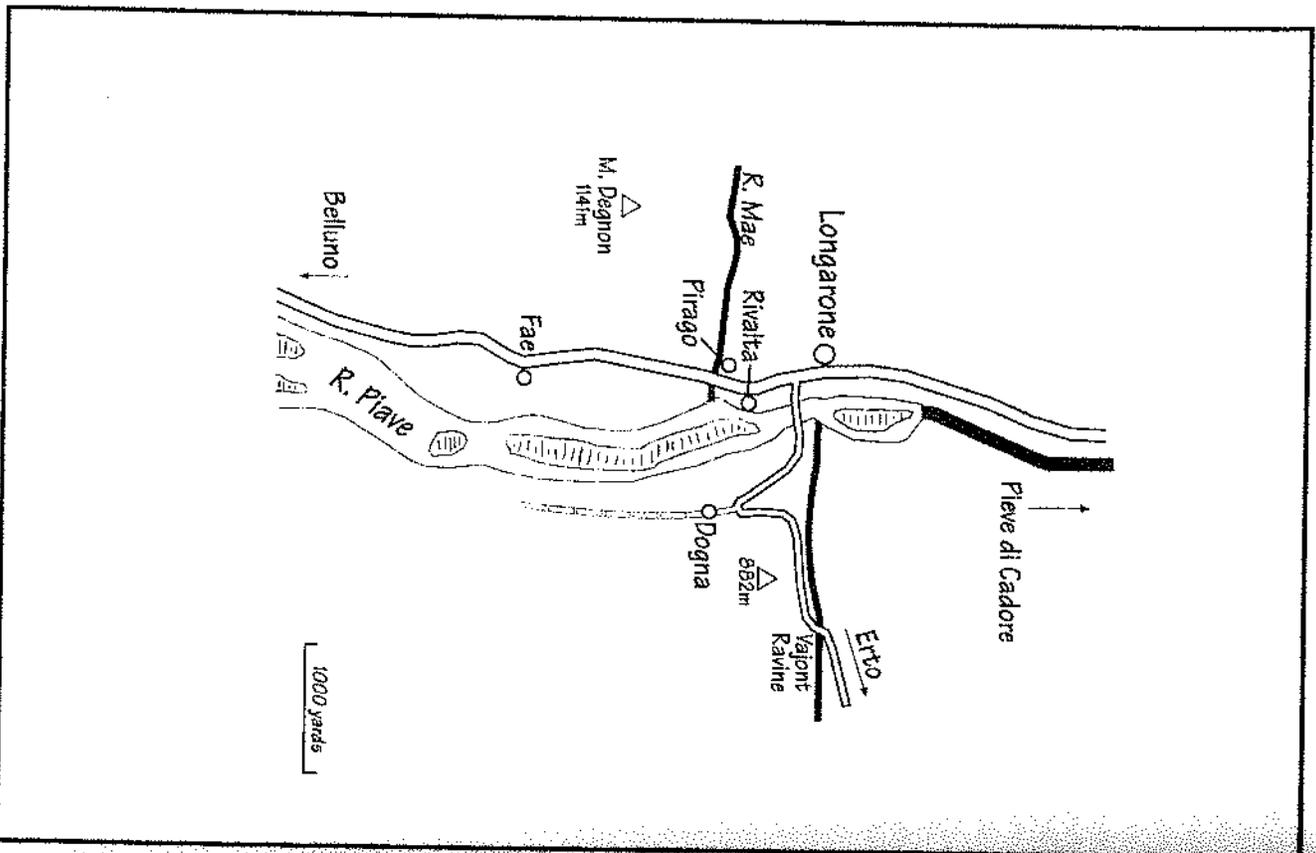
8.4 The Capture of the Ten Thousand

When he emerged from the last tunnel, Rommel was on the upper slopes of Hill 882 (Map 15) on fairly steep ground covered by scrub and trees, dropping to the valley floor about 150m below. The large village of Longarone lay on the far side of the valley, about half a mile distant from the foot of the Vajont gorge. The main channel of the Piave is hereabouts of the order of a hundred yards wide, set in a wide stony bed up to 400 yards wide, so any attempt to cut off the retreating columns would involve fording the river and crossing some very open ground.

Rommel was now in the lead position of a considerable force, the WMB and the Austrian XLIII Brigade, but these had yet to arrive. The time was still only an hour before noon, and Rommel knew that the rest of the WMB, which had been sent on three different encircling movements, had much further to travel, and could not arrive before midnight at the earliest. However, the main body of his detachment (the 1st and 3rd Companies and 1st MG Company) was spread out along the road not far behind, and was closely followed by the 1st Battalion Schützen. So he decided to press on. The events of the next twenty-four hours are described by Sproesser and Rommel in their battle reports written at the time,⁴² and in two more detailed accounts in their books published in 1933 and 1937 respectively.⁴³ All are in substantial agreement though sometimes containing different points of detail.

When Rommel first saw Longarone, columns of marching infantry and artillery were moving down the valley unaware of the threat to their flank. He immediately ordered the few riflemen and cyclists accompanying him to take up fire positions, under cover and away from the road, about a hundred yards to the south amidst trees and scrub. Their best target appeared to be a stretch of road, about half a mile away, where the Italian columns were confined on the far side by a steep rocky outcrop, and on the other by the Piave. Rapid fire caused a column to halt, and then break into two halves, that south of the defile hastened its march, while that to the north of the defile turned back to Longarone.

Italian machine-gun fire began to fall on the road and the Vajont gorge without troubling the well-sited Wurttembergers. The rest of the Rommel detachment were not far behind, and the firing party was joined by a platoon with two light machine guns. Shortly after, a company or perhaps a platoon of Italian troops, probably part of the rearguard over the pass, was seen descending a rock face above and behind the Wurttembergers. However, faced by both rifle and light machine-gun fire while still negotiating the rock face, they soon accepted Rommel's call to surrender.⁴⁴



15. The Piave at Longarone in 1917. (After IOH (IV,3, Carta), 25)

At 11.15 the bridge across the Piave on the road from the gorge to the village was blown up, and rifle and machine-gun fire began to fall around the road leading from Hill 882 down to the river near Dogna (Map 15). During the next half hour most of the 3rd Company caught up with Rommel and were ordered to take up similar firing positions.

By 11.45 Rommel's 1st Rifle Company, which had been following the 3rd, arrived on Hill 882 and was given the task of crossing the river from Dogna.³⁶ But by now, the exit from the gorge and the road down to Dogna were under heavy Italian fire from machine guns and artillery. Moreover, the fierce fire from the far bank appeared to preclude any attack in company strength across the bare bed of the Piave, so Rommel decided to send out carefully selected squads from the 1st Company with orders to cross the river, block the main road, and send back a sufficient number of prisoners to act as a screen for the passage of all the Wurttembergers.

At first all these squads appear to have been held up by the heavy enemy fire except for an eighteen-man squad led by Acting Officer Huber and Sergeant Hohnacker. This group, spread out widely, descended to Dogna, and made their way across the river bed in the direction of Fae, south of the main enemy fire. Then after fording and swimming the Piave, these troops reached the far bank, and went on to achieve a considerable success, as we describe below.

Shortly after midday, Major Spreßer arrived on Hill 882 with his staff and the Signals Company of the WMB, and with the staff of the 1st Battalion Schützen (which had now come under his command), and set up his command post at a point he refers to as height 830.³⁷ Covered by the fire of a section of the 1st Machine-Gun Company of the 26 Schützen, the whole of the Rommel detachment was now able to descend cautiously to Dogna, arriving there by 14.00, but attempts to move across the river bed were frustrated by the intense enemy fire.

Meanwhile Huber's party, now on the west bank of the Piave, was making good progress. Huber's own account, quoted by Spreßer,³⁸ describes how the whole party, soaking wet after swimming the river, contrived to arrive unseen below a low stone wall bordering the edge of the main road. Then, at the appropriate moment, with the head of an approaching Italian column only a few yards away, they suddenly confronted the column with guns firing, and produced such confusion that the group halted and allowed themselves to be taken prisoner. Moreover, Huber's squad not only captured these prisoners, but kept secret how very small their own numbers were, and continued to capture subsequent groups still moving south down the road.

By 16.00 two groups of the 1st Company of the WMB, one under Huber and the other under 2nd Lieutenant Schöffel, had succeeded in completely blocking the main road, and by 18.00 the Wurttembergers

had captured 50 officers and 780 men, the officers being separated from the men and guarded by two troopers on the top floor of Fae Castle. Finally, as darkness fell, the intensity of the Italian fire declined, so Rommel ordered his 3rd Company and half of his 1st MG Company, and the 3rd Company and the 1st MG Company of the 26 Schützen to follow him across the river in the direction of Fae, while at the same time Huber's prisoners were sent back to the east bank.³⁹

On arriving at Fae, Rommel learnt of the successes obtained by Huber's squad, and was also informed that the scout squads had cut all the telephone lines from Longarone to Belluno. However, a hostile battery on Hill 1141 above and to the west of Fae must have observed what was happening, so it seemed probable that some force would be on its way to relieve the trapped Italians. Therefore Rommel's first decision was to deploy the 3rd Company of the 1st Battalion Schützen and half of the 1st MG Company WMB to block the road from Belluno in the neighbourhood of Fae, with outposts about half a mile further south.⁴⁰

Having set up his rearguard, Rommel's next reaction was that he should advance to Longarone, but the enemy was there in great numbers, and Rommel's resources were rather limited. Apart from the rearguard at Fae, he had at his disposal on the west bank only the 1st and 3rd Companies and half the 1st MG Company of the WMB, and the 1st MG Company of the 26 Schützen.⁴¹ Meanwhile, on the far side of the Piave, the 1st and 2nd Companies of the 1st Battalion, 26 Schützen, were due to arrive at Major Sproesser's HQ on the east bank, together with the 377 Mountain Howitzer Detachment. (The other companies of the WMB, four rifle and two MG, were also on their way, but were not expected to reach Major Sproesser before midnight at the earliest.)

Many commanders would have thought it prudent to maintain blocking positions against enemy attacks during the night, from both the north and the south, and await the arrival of reinforcements, but Rommel thought otherwise. The enemy might attempt to break out during the night, and he decided to forestall any such move by an attack with his two WMB companies and the 1st Machine-Gun Company of the Schützen.⁴²

At 21.00 when it was quite dark Rommel ordered the machine guns at Dogna to cease all firing across the river and led his detachment in extended line along the road towards the village of Longarone. He himself was with the leading squad, and they crossed the bridge over the Mae stream at Pirago almost unchallenged. Then only a hundred yards or so short of the first houses in Longarone they encountered a road block and Rommel gave orders for heavy machine guns to be set up to cover an attack. Almost immediately the detachment came under

fire, both from their own machine guns in Dogna who had not received the orders to cease fire, and from the road block where several machine guns opened fire at 80 yards range. Rommel's machine guns were not yet assembled, and the squad lay for minutes in a very poor position. The barricade of the road block was too far away to throw grenades, and the Company Commander of the MG Company, 26 Schützen, lay severely wounded in a ditch.

The attack had failed completely, and could only be aborted. But the detachment was now widely extended, spread out along the road; the night was 'pitch black',⁴³ and Rommel himself was pinned down at the head of the column in a position where death stands right next to one.⁴⁴ Somehow, he sent back a verbal order for the detachment to retire to the bridge at Pirago. The troops further from the road block managed to disengage, but Rommel's forward squad had to wait for any breaks in the firing and then dash back a few yards at a time. Eventually Rommel reached a bend in the road and was then able to hurry back to Pirago, overtaking some of his troops as he went. But on arriving at Pirago he found no one there.⁴⁵ Apparently his order had not been received. Nor did he know where his men were, though he suspected that some had yet to get back as far as Pirago.

After a time the enemy ceased firing and Rommel heard the sound of many Italians, shouting and yelling, approaching down the road from Longarone, and was uncertain whether they were going to attack or surrender. The night was still very dark, so he fired flares and saw a close-packed mass of Italians waving handkerchiefs with the head of the group only a hundred yards away. They did not fire and Rommel was uncertain of their intentions, but it was clear that the four or five riflemen with Rommel would not be able to stop that mass of men. So Rommel ran back towards Fae hoping to catch up with the other members of his detachment and organize a more effective resistance.⁴⁶

A few minutes later Rommel had gathered about fifty men to bar the road about 600 yards south of Pirago, between a cliff on one side and a house on the other. Lieutenant Streicher occupied the house with half the men and the rest lined up across the road. When the mob was about 50 yards away Rommel shouted 'Halt' and demanded surrender. There came an answering roar of obscure significance but no one fired. Rommel repeated the call with the same result, and then when only 10 yards away the Italians opened fire. The WMB fired a salvo but had no machine guns available and were overwhelmed, killed, wounded, routed, before they were able to reload.⁴⁷ Many were captured, including 2nd Lieutenant Schöffel, but some of the garrison in the house escaped in the dark across the Piave as the Italians continued down the road to the south. 2nd Lieutenant Streicher avoided capture

and tried to swim the Piave, but was swept down stream and washed ashore unconscious.⁴⁸

Rommel managed to escape at the last moment by jumping over the wall by the side of the road. Then tearing across ploughed land, small brooks, hedges and fences, he made desperate speed to warn the 3rd Company Schützen and the WMB MG platoon at Fae, to turn around and face the impending danger. 'The thought of losing the final remnants of my troops gave me enormous strength.'⁴⁹ Rommel arrived at Fae before the Italians, and set up a new front with the 3rd Company Schützen holding a line of 700 yards across the road, from a sawmill on the Piave to the cliffs at the foot of Hill 1141.

Almost as soon as the Schützen were in position the Italians came down the road, and Rommel opened fire when they were about 200 yards away. They slowed down, their machine guns began to rattle, and masses of infantry yelling 'Avanti, Avanti' appeared to be attacking on either side of the road, but rapid fire from the Schützen and WMB troops caused them to stop and take cover. This was a very critical time for Rommel and his now very much reduced 1st and 3rd Companies. He states that his only officers were the CO of the 3rd Company Schützen and Acting Officer Huber. 'All the others appeared to have fallen into the hands of the enemy.'⁵⁰ Moreover, the fifty Italian officers still on an upper floor of Fae Castle were guarded by only two soldiers. As Rommel had no telephone communication with Sproesser, his orderly Private Unger offered to swim the river to summon reinforcements from the east bank.

The fighting continued for two or three hours, as the Italians made several attempts to break through the enemy line. Rommel sent out squads to start fires in houses and barns to light up the scene and avoid encirclement. New fires were started as old ones began to go out. Much ammunition was required for this type of fighting in the dark, and supplies would have been short but for the abundant supplies of weapons and ammunition which had been found in Fae Castle. Fortunately Rommel's skilful dispositions prevented the Italians from realizing how few his numbers were. Then about midnight the enemy fire slackened, and the Italians began to draw back from their positions. Rommel sent out patrols to maintain contact. One lost its able leader from close-range fire, but another returned at 01.00 with 600 prisoners who had surrendered, and it now seemed that most of the enemy had withdrawn to Longarone.

Reinforcements were now on their way. At 23.00 Captain Krenling, commanding the 1st Battalion 26 Schützen, received orders from Major Sproesser to cross the Piave with his 2nd Company and move against Belluno, while the Rommel detachment undertook the capture of Longarone.⁵¹ On arriving at Fae, Krenling ordered his 2nd Company

to join the 3rd Company of Schützen to strengthen the defence against attack from the south. Between 23.00 and 24.00, 2nd Lieutenant Payer arrived on Height 830 with the 2nd Company WMB after its traverse round Monte Lodina, and was ordered to follow Krenling's Battalion over the Piave, to join Rommel's attack on Longarone. Payer also brought the good news that the 1st and 11th Battalions of the 26 Schützen were now on their way to place themselves at Major Sproesser's disposal.

Meanwhile, those WMB troopers scattered by the fight at Pirago had been returning to the 1st and 3rd Companies; and the half of the 1st MG Company still on the east bank crossed over with an abundant supply of ammunition. In addition, the 1st Company Schützen arrived at Height 830, and was then sent across the river to join the 3rd Company blocking the main road to the south. About midnight 2nd Lieutenant Schelein arrived with the 4th and 6th Rifle Companies and the MG Company which had taken the long route from Cimolais round Monte Cornetto, and they were held in reserve on the east side of the river.⁵² The fifty captured Italian officers were transferred to the east bank making their way through the ice-cold Piave encouraged by their escort.

At 03.00, after fierce artillery preparation, Italian attempts to storm Rommel's positions led to hand-to-hand fighting, but Rommel was able to direct his forces to the most threatened positions, and maintain his front despite artillery fire from quite close range. The Italians suffered considerable losses, and after a quarter of an hour or so broke off the engagement, and withdrew towards Longarone. The WMB, wet and shivering, drank Chianti with the Schützen, and waited for the morning (10 November).

Also during the night, the ammunition for the Austrian 377 Mountain Howitzer Company of eight howitzers arrived at Height 830, and Sproesser inspected their fields of fire, and saw that they were well entrenched in positions dominating Longarone.⁵³ Between 04.00 and 05.00 the commanders of the 11th and 11th Battalions of the 26 Schützen arrived at Sproesser's command post, and II Battalion crossed the Piave at daybreak, while III Battalion remained at Dogna.⁵⁴ At 05.00 Sproesser ordered the 11th Battalion to strengthen the defences to the south, and ordered the Rommel detachment to advance towards Longarone, and take the road and railway bridge across the Maa stream before they were blown up by the Italians. In fact the bridges were destroyed as the Wurttembergers approached, but the stream was passed with no great difficulty.

The Italians at Longarone were now trapped, with units of the Austrian 94 Division coming up behind them, and their line of retreat blocked by the WMB and the 26 Schützen. Meanwhile, Sproesser had

sent an Italian prisoner back to Longarone with a message in Italian saying that the village was surrounded by an Austro-German Division, and that all resistance was useless. Hence, as the Rommel detachment (now the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Companies and the 1st MG company) advanced beyond the bridges, they were met by Lieutenant Schöffel, captured during the night, with a message from the Italian Commander in Longarone. His troops were in no condition to continue fighting and he placed them at the disposal of Major Spreesser.⁵⁵ The Rommel detachment now advanced without opposition, and on entering Longarone were greeted by their comrades who had been captured during the night's fighting.

The village was crowded with thousands of Italians cut off from their line of retreat. (Some of these troops tried to escape by traversing the mountains to the west, but most were eventually captured.) The 4th Army had paid dearly for its delay in starting its withdrawal. About 10,000 men, 200 machine guns, 18 mountain guns, 600 pack animals and 250 loaded vehicles were captured at Longarone. Yet the losses in Rommel's detachment from Cimolais onwards were no more than 6 dead, 2 severely wounded, 19 slightly wounded and 1 missing.⁵⁶

(A further casualty was Captain Gössler, the senior company commander in the WMB and an expert mountaineer, who died leading the detachment of the 6th Rifle Company and the 3rd Machine-Gun Company directly towards Dogna over the high pass of Forcella Liron (1398m, Map 14). High up near the pass the ground was icy, no one had crampons, and Gössler slipped to his death while prospecting a route over a steep grass slope. The route was obviously impractical. The detachment, profoundly shaken by the death of the much-respected Gössler, made their way to the Vajont road, and arrived at Longarone about midday on 10 November, bringing with them the body of their dead leader.⁵⁷)

8.5 The Victory at Longarone

The Austro-German success at Longarone was announced in the Austrian Bulletin of 10 November which claimed a total of 10,000 prisoners. This is obviously an approximate round number, but one which has been generally accepted (Krafft, Spreesser, Faidetta, Rommel, Falls, Piets) and never seriously challenged. In fact the Report of the Italian Commission of Enquiry in 1919 prints the Austrian Bulletin of the Day without comment,⁵⁸ and subsequently refers to 'about 10,000 captured near Longarone'.⁵⁹ Moreover, besides the capture of a large part of the Italian 1st Division, the road was now open for the XIVth Army to march down the Piave to Belluno and the Brenta.

Although the Austrian Bulletin appears to be correct in its claim for 10,000 prisoners, the same cannot be said of its account of how this number came to be captured. The taking of Longarone was the finale of an extensive joint operation which began with Krafft and von Below's decision that speed was essential for success, followed by their choice of the WMB to spearhead the attack of the 22(a) Division Schützen. The WMB lead by Spreesser and Rommel then proceeded to set the pace of the whole operation to reach Longarone. Finally, in the fighting of 9/10 November they were joined by battalions of the Austrian 26 Regiment Schützen. In addition the Austrian 94 Division had been following the retreating Italian 1st Division down the Piave valley bringing some pressure to bear. Yet, despite this extensive effort, the Austrian Bulletin credited the success to only the 94(a) Division,⁶⁰ which had been following the Italians and was able to take prisoners at Longarone only because the road out had already been blocked. (The Austrian Official History, written later, describes the part played by the Austrian 22 Division, but without any reference to the WMB.⁶¹)

The capture of Longarone was a remarkable achievement for Rommel, all the more so coming only two weeks after the capture of 9,000 prisoners on the Kolovrat and Matajur. Of course, there is no suggestion that Rommel himself, alone, captured these thousands of prisoners. He was always part of the WMB, supported by his troops and by his superiors, and the WMB was itself part of a large operation involving many battalions. Even without Rommel, or even without the WMB, the Kolovrat and Matajur and their defenders would surely have been captured either by the Alpine Corps or the 12(g) Division within a few hours.

Likewise the capture of Longarone was part of a much larger operation, initiated by Krafft and von Below involving the whole of the WMB, particularly Major Spreesser and Acting Officer Huber, as well as the 22(a) Division Schützen. Yet the decisive factor was the determination and speed shown by the WMB. Its advance guard reached the foot of the Clautana Pass on the evening of 7 November, after a march of some 15 miles from Travesio, and a skirmish en route which took some 300 prisoners. Early the next morning the WMB set off to climb to the pass 900 metres above. Rommel's detachment weighed down with heavy loads, including the machine guns, spent the day high up on the mountain ridge, vainly seeking a route to encircle the Italian rearguard on and around the summit of the pass. As already described, they finally delivered an attack at midnight, were resolutely rebuffed, and obliged to descend to Pecolar. The next morning the detachment again climbed the 900 metres to the now undefended pass, marched on to Claut and Cimolais, and by the evening had sent out scouts towards the San Osvaldo Pass. Then, on leaving Cimolais early next morning,

they set out on what was to be thirty hours of unrelenting effort ending in the capture of Longarone. It is hard to believe that this speed would have been achieved without Rommel.

Major Sproesser also played an essential role in the capture of Longarone, just as his determination and seniority had authorized Rommel to lead his detachment along the Kolovrat to Matajur. As already described, Sproesser during the march to Longarone received at least four orders from his Brigade Commander, General von Merten, to halt his column and allow the Austrian 26 Schützen to take the lead. Each time he replied that his forward troops were in combat with the enemy, and it was not possible to withdraw them. Sproesser had doubtless been encouraged to take such a firm line by Major Willisen, Krafft's Chief of Operations, who had told him in conversation that nothing must prevent him from arriving at Longarone with all speed (Section 8.1). He certainly appears to have had the support of his Divisional Commander, General Müller, whose order of 8 November issued at 20.15 at Claut to XLIII Brigade stressed the importance of arriving at Longarone the next day,⁶² while an order from 22(a) Division to the Edelweiss Division sought to expedite the supply of 270,000 rounds of ammunition for the WMB.⁶³ (We also note that when General Müller issued orders at Claut, he appears to have been much further forward than the Brigade Commander at Tronconere near Pocolat.⁶⁴)

Despite such encouragement, Sproesser was aware that military discipline could make any disregard of orders rather dangerous, especially if not accompanied by success. On crossing the bridge at Vajont he must have realized, perhaps for the first time, how critically his success had depended on the Italians failing to explode the charges already laid in the bridge. For if the bridge had been broken there was just no way the WMB could have arrived at Longarone in time to halt the Italian columns.⁶⁵ He later wrote of his disgust on the night of 9 November after the arrival of a rumour from the far side of the Piave that Rommel and his whole detachment had been overrun by the enemy. 'Once again he [Sproesser] was submerged by the spectre of having to justify himself in not following Brigade orders.'⁶⁶ Although this false news was soon corrected, Sproesser was shortly after visited by the General Staff Officer of XLIII Brigade who 'talked about the court-martialing of officers who disobey their leaders, and who have then to surrender their swords'.⁶⁷

Following the capture of Longarone the part played by the WMB was widely and speedily acknowledged. A message from General Krafft on 11 November read: 'The Battalion has achieved a brilliant performance of the first order, which as an old mountaineer I well appreciate.' This was followed by warm congratulations to the 22nd

Division from both Corps and the Edelweiss Division, and to Major Sproesser and the WMB from the Württemberg Ministry of War, and from King Wilhelm of Württemberg.⁶⁸

The following month, on 13 December, the orders of the day for the Jäger Division announced that Rommel and Sproesser had each been awarded a '*Pour le Mérite*', and the next day the Commander of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion received a message of congratulation from the Kaiser. The award was announced to the WMB in Sproesser's orders for 13 December, which stated that:

His Majesty the Kaiser thus wishes to give the highest recognition to the Württemberg Mountain Battalion for its support, achievement and success on the Isorzo, the Tagliamento and Piave. Comrades, the Imperial Kaiser's thanks apply to yourselves, the officers, under-officers and men, whose incomparable energy attained all that was humanly possible. It is an honour to belong to the Battalion. The highest honour is to be its Commander.⁶⁹

The award of two '*Pour le Mérite*' in one battalion was most unusual, but Sproesser had played an essential role in the campaign. In particular his stand against Major Bothner of the Bavarian Life Guards at Passo Zagrardan, and against General Merten of the Austrian XLIII Brigade on the road to Longarone had been indispensable. Hence, the remark made to Sproesser by Captain Kremling commanding the Austrian 1st Battalion 26 Schützen at Longarone: 'I do not know which to admire most, Herr Major, your courage before the enemy or your courage against your superiors.'⁷⁰

(It was unfortunate, but hardly surprising, that Major Sproesser continued to look back to the exploits of the WMB with a mixture of pride and umbrage. No doubt some contribution to his dissatisfaction arose from the traditional rivalry between the Kingdoms of Württemberg and Bavaria, and not least together in the WMB and the Bavarian Life Guards which had served together in the Alpine Corps in Rumania in January 1917. Both units had been engaged in a successful operation to take Rumanian positions on and around the summit of Magura Odobesti (1001m), with the Life Guards immediately to the right of the WMB. Even so, Rommel's account of the success makes no mention of the Life Guards,⁷¹ even though Sproesser later complained that the Life Guards claimed all the credit.⁷²

Eventually Sproesser's irritation erupted in 1926 on the publication of the first volume of Krafft's official monograph *Der Durchbruch am Isorzo* which covered the capture of the Kolovrat and Matajur. It was unfortunate that this admirable account, which in general is careful to

make reference to any officer worthy of special note, made no reference to Major Sproesser at all. This omission was soon followed by a very intemperate pamphlet by Sproesser claiming that the WAMB had not been given sufficient credit for the capture of Na Gradu (1114m), a claim that is hard to follow. Its capture was an operation by the Alpine Corps in which several units were involved, and in which the Life Guards captured the summit, as is clearly set out by Krafft. Nevertheless the pamphlet declared that Krafft's volume was 'biased, erroneous and injudicious' and after other remarks in a similar vein, concluded that 'it is expected that Volume II [of Krafft] and all further writings and publications of the Reichsarchiv must include a serious history of the war. We know that the Combatants demand this.'

Volume II of the *Durchbruch am Isonzo*, published later in 1926, contained eight pages of corrections to Volume I, nearly all of a quite minor nature including spelling mistakes. Two paragraphs relating to Sproesser's pamphlet stated that Krafft did not accept Sproesser's views, and that the issues would have to be decided by later historians, and a footnote rebuked Sproesser for his intemperate language. It would seem that Krafft's rejection of Sproesser's claim was not unreasonable, as Rommel's 1937 account provides no support at all.)

The Last Battles of the Offensive

9.1 Italian Reorganization

By about 12 November the Italian armies were established on their new line (Map 12) which ran from Asiago across the Brenta valley, over the massif of Monte Grappa, down to the right bank of the Piave at Pederobba, and then along the right bank of the river to the sea. The map also shows that the line of the Italian 1st Army had been drawn back from its previous positions on the east side of the Asiago plateau so as to maintain contact with the 4th Army on Grappa, and that the Austrians had still to reach this line. The Italian armies had now to prepare for the final stage of the Austro-German offensive. *La battaglia di arnesio*.

The total Italian losses from the start of the battle to the retirement behind the Piave are given by the IOH as 10,000 dead, 30,000 wounded, and about 300,000 taken prisoner, together with 3,152 pieces of artillery, 1,732 mortars and 3,000 machine guns.¹ In addition some 300,000 *sbandati* (stragglers) were still to be reorganized into either their own or new units. The bulk of the losses had fallen primarily on the 2nd Army and the Carnia Group; of the 35 or so divisions in the 2nd Army and Carnia Group on 24 October only 3 were to be found in the front line on 12 November, the 8th and 44th Divisions of II Corps, now the right-hand Corps of the 4th Army, and the 48th Division, originally in VIII Corps, which now formed part of a reconstituted VIII Corps on the left of the 3rd Army line.²

The outlook for Italy would have been very bleak but for the fact that the length of the front line between Asiago and the sea, previously about 180 miles, was now only about 70 miles. Hence, despite his enormous losses Cadorna still had about enough troops to defend his new and shorter line, but there were virtually no efficient reserves in the rear should the enemy penetrate the new line. However, six French and five British divisions from France had been assigned to Italy, four French had already arrived and the rest were on their way.³

The Italians had now to deny the enemy any further progress, and reorganize the vast numbers of disordered 2nd Army troops. When