ATTACKS

Field Marshal
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The battles for Mount Cosna exacted a terrific toll from the young troops. We had five hundred casualties inside of two weeks and sixty brave mountain soldiers lay in Rumanian soil. In spite of the fact that the major mission was not achieved and that we failed to destroy the enemy's southern flank, yet the mountain troops executed every assigned mission in a masterful way in the face of a hard-fighting, tenacious, and well-equipped enemy. I still look back on the days as commander of such troops with intense pride and joy.

After the arduous days on Mount Cosna, a few week's leave spent on the shores of the Baltic Sea restored me to tip-top form.

Observations: In the defense on August 20, 1917, the main line of resistance was shifted to densely wooded terrain on the forward slope in order to nullify the anticipated action of the Rumanian artillery. This was completely justified, for in the course of the fighting the enemy did not succeed in covering this concealed main battle line with artillery fire. The main defense positions were being prepared while the combat outposts withdrew fighting and the reserve companies were employed to dig well concealed communication trenches for the forward line. These trenches proved to be important for moving supplies of all kinds and evacuating the wounded under fire without losses, or at least with only slight ones. Afterward the reserves dug themselves in at designated locations.

The defensive fighting on August 20 required using the reserves at the frequently changing danger spots. Where danger threatened, the reserves had to occupy the main battlefield in depth. Reinforcing the front line proper with reserves was avoided as far as possible.

Chapter V

The Tolmein Offensive 1917

*Deployment And Dispositions For The 12th Battle Of The Isonzo**

It was early October in the magnificent countryside of Carinthia —where the Württemberg Mountain Infantry Battalion had been sent by the roundabout way of Macedonia — when I again assumed command of my detachment. The casualties suffered on Mount Cosna had now been made good by replacements; moreover, the fire-power of the rifle companies had been significantly increased by the introduction of a new light machine gun. Our short time in this rest camp was given over to thorough training in the use of this new weapon.

We had no idea what the Army High Command had in store for us. The Isonzo front?

Since Italy's entry into the war in May of 1915, the chief operational objective of the Italian army had been the capture of Trieste. In the course of two years of warfare, ten battles had taken place along the lower course of the Isonzo, during which the Austrian forces had slowly but persistently been pushed backwards. In the sixth battle the Italians had gained a foothold on the east bank of the river near Gorizia and had taken the city itself. (Sketch 36)

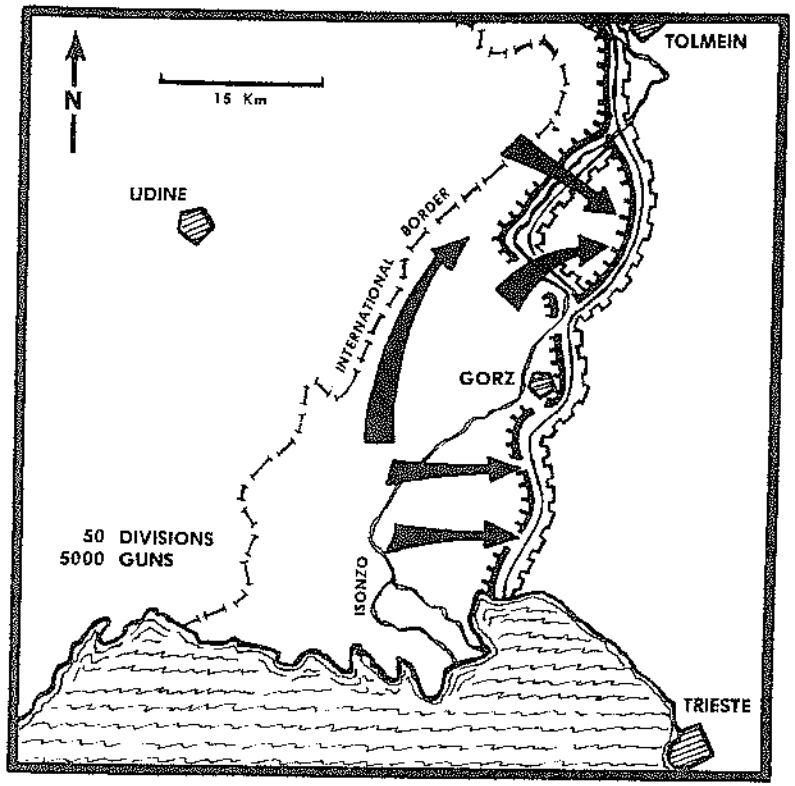
* Known as the battle of Caporetto in the United States. (Pub)

For the eleventh Isonzo battle, which began in August, 1917, General Luigi Cadorna patterned his offensive on the Western Front model. Supported by 500 guns, 50 divisions attacked on the narrow front between Gorizia and the sea. By fine fighting the worthy Austrian troops nullified the Italians' initial success, but in the second part of the battle the Italians crossed the middle reaches of the Isonzo and took the high plateau of Bainsizza where, by exerting their supreme efforts, our allies succeeded in halting the attack. This all-out attack lasted until the beginning of September when things quieted down and Cadorna began to get ready for the Twelfth Isonzo Battle. The newly won territory east of the middle reaches of the Isonzo materially improved the Italian prospects for the next battle and their objective, Trieste, was finally within reach. The Austrians did not feel equal to meeting this new attack and they were obliged to ask for German help. In spite of the tremendous expenditure of forces in the battles in the west (Flanders and Verdun), the German High Command sent an army consisting of seven battle-tried divisions. A combined German and Austrian offensive on the upper Isonzo front was to effect the desired relief. The objective was to throw the Italians back across the imperial boundary, and, if possible, across the Tagliamento. (Sketch 37)

The Württemberg Mountain Battalion joined the newly created Fourteenth Army and was attached to the Alpine Corps. On October 18 we began our approach march to the front from assembly areas in the vicinity of Krainburg. In pitch-dark nights, often in streaming rains, Major Sproesser's Group (Württemberg Mountain Battalion and the Württemberg Mountain Howitzer Detachment No. 4) moved via Bischoflak, Salilog, and Podbordo to Kneza, which was reached on October 21. Because of enemy aerial reconnaissance each prescribed march objective had to be reached before daybreak, at which time all men and animals had to be concealed in the most uncomfortable and inadequate accommodations imaginable. These night marches made great demands on the poorly fed troops.

My detachment consisted of three mountain companies and a machine-gun company, and I usually marched on foot with my staff at the head of the long column. Kneza was about five miles east of the battlefront near Tolmein. In the afternoon of October 21, Major Sproesser and his detachment commanders reconnoitered the assigned assembly area for the attack. This area was on the north slope of the Buzenika mountain (509) a mile south of Tolmein. The slope itself dropped sharply down to the Isonzo.

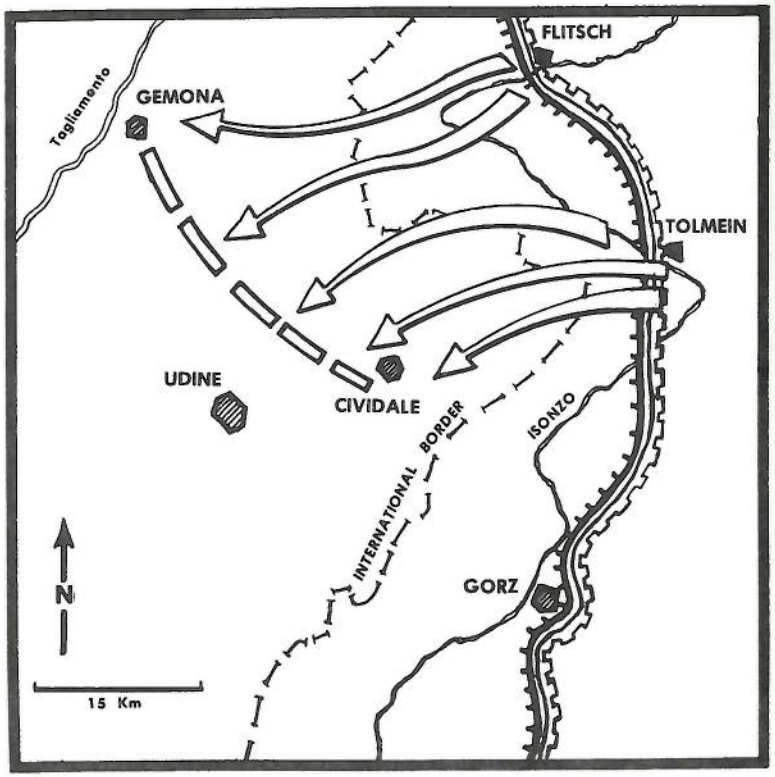
A very strong and lively harassing fire from several Italian batteries situated in elevated and commanding positions was ranging far and wide behind our front. It appeared that the Italians had



Sketch 36
11th Battle of the Isonzo, August, 1917.

ammunition to spare. The deployment of the battalion — now eleven companies strong — in this rugged, nearly impassable terrain alloted to us, would be extremely difficult. Only the scree-covered talus slopes and a few gullies falling off precipitously to the Isonzo offered any possibilities for troop concentrations. It was disquieting to note that the enemy, from his commanding position on Mrzli peak northwest of Tolmein, could observe the entire

northern slope of the Buzenika nearly straight-on. Also, we had to reckon with rocks cascading down the slope from artillery hits. The battalion would have to remain deployed in this area for some thirty hours. Would this be inviting trouble?



Sketch 37
Strategic Attack Plan of the 14th Army.

We would have to put up with these unfavorable conditions—there was no alternative — since the mass of troops now concentrating in the Tolmein basin was simply too great. We turned back toward battalion headquarters from this dismal reconnaissance — skirting some lively Italian artillery fire directed principally on the ravines near St. Luzia and Baza di Medreja. Our knowledge of the overall operational plan was considerably less than that of a Czech

traitor who deserted to the enemy on this day, taking with him a collection of maps and orders pertaining to the Tolmein offensive.

The battalion moved into this final assembly area during the night of October 22-23. Huge searchlights from the Italian positions on the heights of the Kolovrat and Jeza illuminated our way. Heavy artillery fire frequently struck among us and the powerful and dazzling searchlight beams forced us to lie motionless for minutes at a time. As soon as they swept past, we hurried through the endangered area. During this advance we all received the impression of having come into the effective range of an exceptionally active and well equipped enemy.

The pack animals had to be left behind on the east slope of Buzenika mountain. It was shortly after midnight that my detachment, heavily laden with machine guns and ammunition, reached its assembly area on the scree slope. It had been an exhausting climb. We dropped our loads and everyone rejoiced in having come through unscathed. Rest was out of the question for the remaining hours of darkness had to be used in digging and finding concealment. I assigned the companies their sectors. The staff and two rifle companies dug in on the western edge of the twenty to forty yard wide scree slope which was bisected by a narrow path and had some defilade from the northwest. The two remaining companies occupied a narrow gully a hundred yards to the east. Everyone, officers and men, worked feverishly and dawn presented a lifeless slope. The soldiers tried to make up lost sleep in foxholes covered with shrubbery and branches.

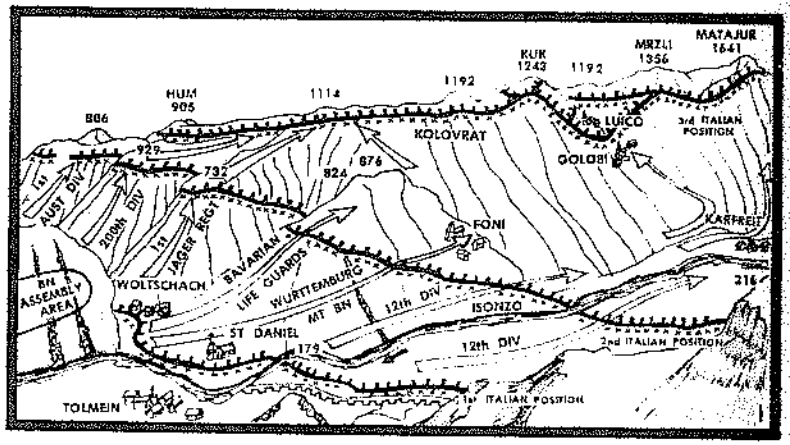
But this peaceful quiet did not last long. The Italian heavy artillery soon paid us a visit and sent rocks rumbling past us on their way to the Isonzo. Sleep was again out of the question and we began to wonder if the enemy had perceived our preparation and was adjusting his fire. Heavy artillery fire on this roof-steep slope would have had a devastating effect.

The fire lasted a few minutes and then quieted down only to come to life fifteen minutes later in a different place. Then we had quiet for a while.

The Italian artillery shifted its main activity to the Isonzo valley. In the course of the day we observed the powerful effect of heavy caliber guns against the installations and approach roads near Tolmein. In contrast to the Italians, our artillery fired at rare intervals. I was much concerned regarding the welfare of the men entrusted to me and the day passed very slowly.

A few steps to the west, off the sheltered path that ran through our position, we had an excellent view of the enemy front line in the valley. It crossed the Isonzo a mile and a half west of Tolmein and then ran south of the river just east of St. Daniel to the easternmost edge of Woltschach. The line, and particularly the wire entanglements, appeared to be well constructed. The murky weather precluded our studying the other hostile positions.

The second Italian line supposedly crossed the Isonzo in the region of Selisce—six miles northwest of Tolmein—and ran south of the river across the Hevnik height toward Jeza. The third and probably the strongest enemy line had been established upon the heights south of the Isonzo following the line Matajur (1641), Mrzli (1356), Golobi, Kuk (1243), Hill 1192, Hill 1114, then bending sharply southwest over Clabuzzaro toward Mount Hum. These positions were known from aerial photographs. On the terrain between these defensive lines, there were said to be isolated strong points. (Sketches 38 and 39)

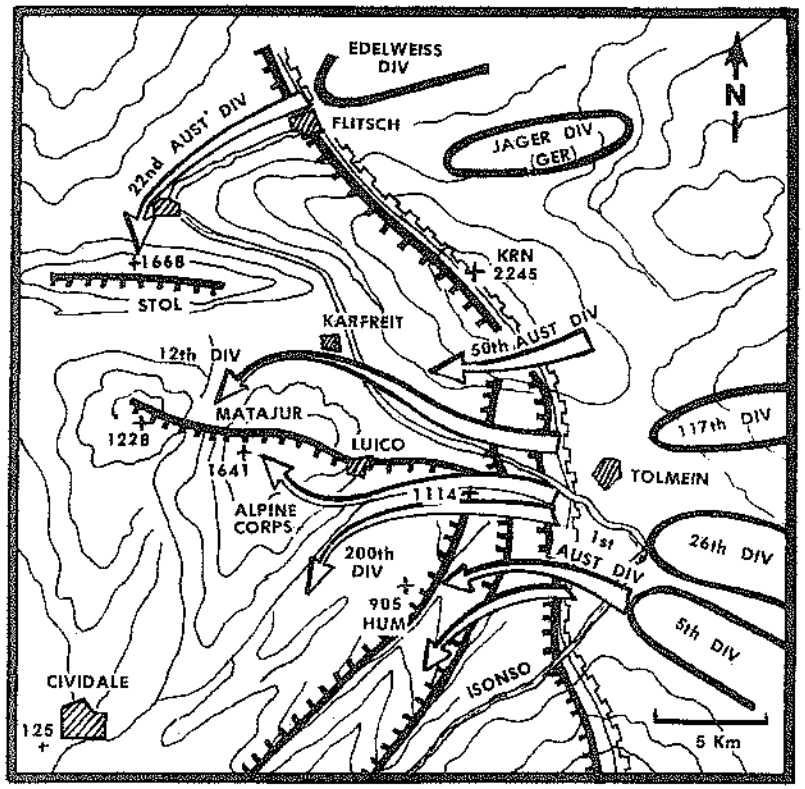


Sketch 38
Attack of the 14th Army. View from the northeast.

The forces of the Fourteenth Army were disposed as follows:

The Kraus Group ready at Flitsch (22d Imperial and Royal Infantry Division; Edelweiss Division; 55th Imperial and Royal Division; and the German Jäger Division) with the thrust point above Saga on the Stol.

The Stein Group near Tolmein and in the bridgehead position south of Tolmein (12th Infantry Division; Alpine Corps; 117th Infantry Division) was to execute the main attack. The 12th Division was to break through to Karfreit in the valley on both sides



Sketch 39
Attack objectives of the 14th Army in the Tolmein Sector.

of the Isonzo; the Alpine Corps was to capture the positions on the heights south of the Isonzo—especially Hill 1114, Kuk, and Matajur.

Adjoining on the south, the Berrer group (200th and 26th Infantry Divisions) was disposed against Cividale via Jeza and St. Martino.

Still farther south the Scotti group (1st Imperial and Royal Divi-

sion and 5th Infantry Division) was to take the positions south of Jeza, and later Globocak and Mount Hum.

In the Alpine Corps sector in the bridgehead position north of the Isonzo, the Bavarian Infantry Life Guards and the 1st Jäger Regiment had relieved the Austrians in the front line.

The attack objective of the Life Guards: The road leading to Golobi, Luico and Matajur via Kovak, Hevnik, Hill 1114 and Kolovrat Ridge.

Attack objective of the 1st Jäger Regiment: Heights west of Woltschach, Knoll 732, Hill 1114 from the southeast.

The Württemberg Mountain Battalion had the mission of protecting the right flank of the Life Guards, of taking the hostile batteries near Foni, and of following the Life Guards to the Matajur.

Towards evening on October 23, the weather became overcast and hazy. As soon as darkness fell, the pack animals brought up rations to the assembly area. When we had eaten our fill, everyone retired to the foxholes and sought to store up some sleep for the coming days on the attack. A fine rain set in after midnight and forced us to draw our shelter halves over our heads. Attack weather!

Observations: Even the approach march and the preparation for the attack at Tolmein made great demands on the troops. In strenuous night marches, usually in pouring rain, the Karawanken mountains were traversed, a total air line distance of sixty-three miles. By day the troops lay concealed from hostile aviation in very restricted shelter. Rations were scanty and monotonous, but despite all that, morale was high. In three years of war the troops had learned to endure hardships without losing their resiliency.

In the advance to the assembly area in the night of October 22-23, a reserve of machine-gun ammunition in belts was carried by the machine-gun company and units of the mountain companies. The Mount Cosna fighting had made the difficulty of ammunition supply in the mountains very clear.

Since strong enemy fire attacks had to be coped with in the assembly area, the troops dug in during the night and camouflaged the new installations carefully before daybreak.

It was impossible to supply the troops in the assembly area by day and hot food was brought up after dark.

Attack Of The First Day: Hevnik And Hill 1114

Our hitherto silent artillery began its preparation at 0200, October 24, 1917. It was a dark and rainy night and in no time a thousand gun muzzles were flashing on both sides of Tolmein. In the enemy territory an uninterrupted bursting and banging thundered and reechcoed from the mountains as powerfully as the severest thunderstorm. We saw and heard this tremendous activity with amazement. The Italian searchlights tried vainly to pierce the rain, and the expected enemy interdiction fire on the area around Tolmein did not materialize as only a few hostile batteries answered the German fire. That was very reassuring and, half asleep, we retired to our cover and listened to the dying away of our own artillery fire.

At daybreak our fire increased in volume. Down by St. Daniel heavy shells were smashing positions and obstacles and occasionally their smoke obscured the hostile installations. The fire of our artillery and mortars became more and more violent. The hostile counterfire seemed to be rather weak.

Shortly after daybreak the Württemberg Mountain Battalion got under way and headed forward in a heavy rain which had greatly reduced the visibility. Following Sproesser's staff, which hurried ahead, the Rommel detachment descended the boulder strewn slope toward the Isonzo. Once below, we moved up behind the right wing of the Bavarian Infantry Life Guards just above the steep bank of the Isonzo.

A few shells struck on both sides of the long column of files without doing any damage. The column halted close to the front line. We were frozen and soaked to the skin and everyone hoped the jump-off would not be delayed. But the minutes passed slowly.

In the last quarter hour before the attack the fire increased to terrific violence. A profusion of bursting shells veiled the hostile positions a few hundred yards ahead of us in vapor and a gray pall of smoke. Low-hanging rainclouds covered the mountain tops of the Hevnik and the Kolovrat.

Shortly before 0800, the assault squad ahead of us left its positions and headed toward the enemy. The defenders, in the turmoil of fire, did not see or resist them and we took advantage of the newly won area in order to prepare for the attack.

0800! The artillery and mortar fire still rained down upon the enemy. In front of us the Life Guards rose to the attack. Following closely behind their right flank, we moved to the right front and gained the hostile positions around St. Daniel. The remnants of the garrison emerged from the ruins and hurried toward us with hands raised and faces distorted with fear. We hastened forward over the broad plain still separating us from the north slope of the Hevnik. To be sure, machine-gun fire from the eastern spurs of the Hevnik hampered our advance here and there; but our attack across the open surface kept moving.

While the Life Guards moved toward the east slope of the Hevnik, our objective was the northeast slope to which Major Sproesser and his staff hurried ahead of the soldiers who, hampered with heavy packs, machine guns, or ammunition, did not move forward so rapidly.

After reaching the vicinity of Elevation 179, the wooded slope of the Hevnik protected our left flank from fire from the heights. (Sketch 39)

The whole Rommel detachment reached the protecting slope. On orders from Major Sproesser, it moved up the footpath leading to Foni as advance guard of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion on the north slope of the Hevnik. Elements of the 1st Company under Technical Sergeant Seitzer formed the point. The remainder of the detachment followed with 150-yard intervals between units. A platoon of the 1st Machine-Gun Company followed the point, then the detachment staff, 1st Company, 2d Company, and the rest of the 1st Machine-Gun Company. With Lieutenant Streicher, my new adjutant, I took my place in the column a few yards behind the point.

The footpath on which we climbed toward Foni was narrow and overgrown with bushes and gave little evidence of having been used by the enemy. The slope on both sides of the path was very steep and densely wooded. Autumn foliage was still on the trees. We had only a few yards visibility through the dense underbrush and seldom got a glimpse of the valley. A few deep rills led to the Isonzo. The impact of heavy German shells resounded dully up from the valley and also from the left rear where we supposed the Life Guards to be. The slope before us was unnaturally quiet and we expected to meet the enemy at any moment. None of our artillery was in position to help us in the mountain wood; we were completely on our own.

The point advanced with extreme care, stopping frequently and listening carefully for any sound from the woods ahead, then moving forward again. But all this caution was to be of no avail for the enemy lay in ambush. When we had advanced to a point a thousand yards east of Hill 824, we were suddenly fired on by machine guns at close range. I received the report: "Enemy in front of us in developed positions behind wire entanglements. Five men of the point are wounded." (Sketch 40)

Without artillery support an attack on both sides of the path along the roof-steep slope through dense underbrush and across obstacles against the very attentive and well dug in enemy appeared hopeless to me, or only possible with heavy losses. Therefore I decided to try my luck elsewhere.

The existing point remained in contact with the enemy and I ordered another group of the 1st Company to act as the new point and to climb up the slope to the south through a stony draw about two hundred yards in front of the hostile position. My intention was to outflank the enemy from the left and from above. I informed Major Sproesser.

The ascent proved to be very difficult. Lieutenant Streicher and I followed forty yards behind the new point. Close behind us came the crew of a heavy machine gun carrying their disassembled gun on their shoulders.

At this moment a hundred-pound block of stone tumbled down on top of us. The draw was only ten feet wide and dodging was difficult and escape impossible. In a split second we knew that anyone hit by the boulder would be pulverized. We all pressed against the left wall of the draw. The rock zigzagged between us and on downhill, without even scratching a single man.

Happily, the supposition that the Italians were rolling stones down on us was false for the point had disloged the stone.

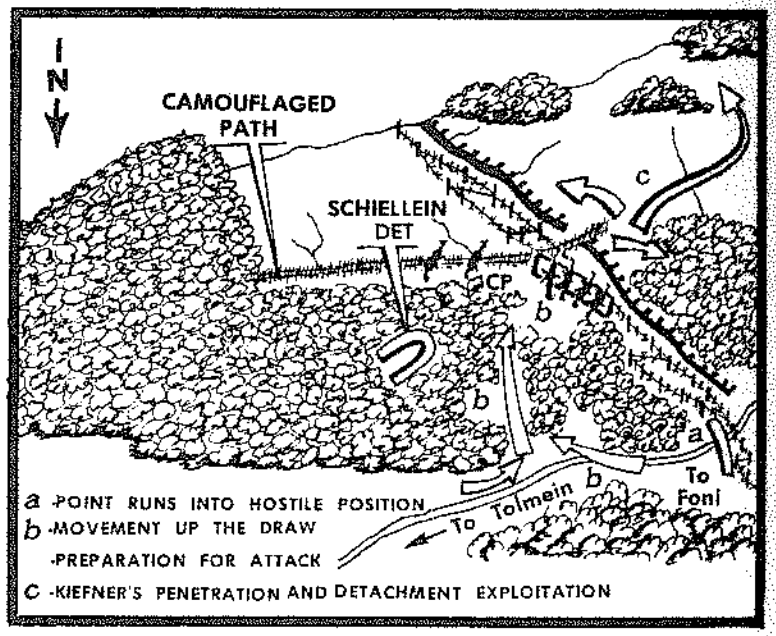
Farther up the slope a rolling stone tore the heel strap off my right boot and crushed my foot so badly that I required the help of two men to proceed during the next half hour. I was in agony.

Finally the steep draw was behind us. In pouring rain, wet to the skin, we climbed the slope through dense undergrowth, looking and listening intently in all directions.

The wood in front of us thinned out. My map showed that we must be half a mile east of Hill 824. We worked our way cautiously to the edge of the wood where we discovered a camouflaged path leading down the slope to the east. Beyond it, on the bare rising slope, we made out a continuous, well-wired position running uphill in the direction of Leihze peak. This hostile position appeared unmanned and no German artillery fire had come to bear

on it. My decision was: A surprise attack after a brief heavy machine-gun preparation with our left flank along the edge of the wood. The situation was very reminiscent of the situations prior to the attacks on Mount Cosna on August 12 to 19, 1917.

Under the protection of a heavy machine-gun platoon disposed in concealed positions in the bushes, I prepared the detachment for



Sketch 40
Penetration of the 2d Italian position, October 24, 1917. View from the north.

the attack in a small hollow in the woods sixty yards in front of the hostile obstacles. Thanks to the splendid combat discipline of the mountain troops, the movement was accomplished in the pouring rain without a sound. Far off the noise of battle resounded in the Isonzo valley, and somewhat nearer to the left rear on the ridge the Lifers seemed to be fighting hard. Peace prevailed around us and on the surface of the meadow.

Now and then we saw a few men moving about in and to the rear of the hostile position—a sign that the enemy in front of us

had no suspicion of our presence. A few German shells began to hit six hundred yards to our left rear. The hostile position in front of us must, to judge from its direction, connect with that position on both sides of the path to Foni which we had encountered forty-five minutes before. My guess was that it was part of the second Italian position. Further soundless approach was impossible in the dense underbrush. The detachment stood ready—should I give the order to attack? Sixty yards of underbrush—then the wire! If the enemy was even reasonably on the alert, I could not expect an easy victory.

The well camouflaged path along the wood's edge gave me an idea. This path probably constituted the means of communication with the forward Italian line near St. Daniel or with the garrisons on the east slope of the Hevnik or the artillery observation outposts located there. Since our arrival it had not been used by the Italians. The path was winding and the camouflage on the south side gave such good concealment toward the upslope and in the direction of the Italian positions that it would be difficult to identify friend or foe using it. Without enemy interference we could move over the path and be in the enemy positions inside of thirty seconds. If we moved rapidly then we might capture the hostile garrison without firing a shot. A task for a valiant man! If the enemy resisted, then I would have to launch my prepared attack under the fire protection of the machine-gun company.

I singled out Lance Corporal Kiefner of the 2d Company, a veritable giant, gave him eight men, and told him to move up the path as if he and his men were Italians returning from the front, to penetrate into the hostile position and capture the garrison on both sides of the path. They were to do this with a minimum of shooting and hand grenade throwing. In case a battle developed they were assured of fire protection and support by the entire detachment. Kiefner understood, and selected his companions. A few minutes later Kiefner led his patrol up the camouflaged path. Their rhythmical steps died away—would it work? We listened tensely, ready to attack or to furnish steady fire. One shot would send three companies off to the attack. Again long, anxious minutes passed and we heard nothing but the steady rain on the trees. Then steps approached, and a soldier reported in a low voice: "The Kiefner scout squad has captured a hostile dugout and taken seventeen Italians and a machine gun. The garrison suspects nothing."

Thereupon I led the whole Rommel detachment (2d and 1st Companies, and 1st Machine-Gun Company) up the path and into the hostile position. The Schiellein detachment (3d and 6th Com-

panies and 2d Machine-Gun Company), which had joined me shortly before Kiefner's successful breakthrough, followed us. Assault teams noiselessly widened the breach until we had fifty yards on either side of the path. Several dozen Italians, who had sought shelter in their dugouts from the streaming rain, were thus captured by the skillful mountain troops. Thanks to the heavy cover the enemy farther up the slope did not perceive the movement of the six companies.

I then had to decide whether I should roll up the hostile position or break through in the direction of Hevnik peak. I chose the latter. The elimination of the Italian positions was easy once we had possession of the peak. The farther we penetrated into the hostile zone of defense, the less prepared were the garrisons for our arrival, and the easier the fighting. I did not worry about contact to right and left. Six companies of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were able to protect their own flanks. The attack order stated: "Without limiting the day's activities in space or time, continue the advance to the west, knowing that we have strong reserves near and behind us."

The 1st Machine-Gun Company was echeloned farther forward, for in case of a struggle I wanted to have a strong fire force right at hand. The heavy machine gunners, carrying loads of ninety pounds, determined the speed of ascent. This gigantic accomplishment can only be understood by one who has climbed around in the high mountains with a similar load and under similar weather conditions.

Our thousand-yard column worked its way forward in the pouring rain, moving from bush to bush, climbing up concealed hollows and draws, and seizing one position after another. There was no organized resistance and we usually took a hostile position from the rear. Those who did not surrender upon our surprise appearance, fled head over heels into the lower woods, leaving their weapons behind. We did not fire on this fleeing enemy for fear of alarming the garrisons of positions located still higher up.

During the advance we were repeatedly endangered by our own strong artillery fire. We did not give light signals to shift the fire forward, since they would have alerted the hostile garrisons. One man of the detachment was wounded by a rock dislodged by a heavy German shell.

Our booty included a 210mm battery which had been under gas bombardment and whose crew had disappeared without leaving a trace. Mountains of shells were piled by the giant guns and the

dugouts and ammunition dumps blasted in the rock were undamaged. Three hundred feet up hill we came upon a medium battery whose guns were located in absolutely shellproof rock casements equipped with small loopholes. Here, too, the crews had vanished.

At 1100 we reached the ridge running from Hevnik peak toward the east where we made contact with units of the 3d Battalion of the Life Guards and accompanied them for a way along the ridge toward Hevnik peak, which was under heavy German fire. While the Lifers rested and waited for the artillery to shift its fire, I turned off with my companies toward the north slope of the Hevnik and reached the peak at noon without encountering any resistance. We saw numerous groups of scattered Italians and took a number of them prisoner.

The rain had stopped and the clouds hanging low overhead began to move so that we had occasional glimpses of Hill 1114 and the Kolovrat Ridge from whence heavy artillery fire was being directed at the Hevnik. Apparently we had been detected by Italian observers in front of Hill 1114. To avoid needless losses, I moved both detachments out of the endangered area in a northerly direction and, in accordance with our mission, let them clean up hostile artillery nests between the Hevnik and Foni. Reconnaissance detachments secured the southern slope of the Hevnik and the Nahrad Saddle which lay three hundred yards southwest of the peak. We marked all our booty with chalk. The bag had risen to seventeen pieces including twelve heavy caliber guns. Italian preserves and a prepared meal appeased our great hunger.

Elements of the Life Guards arrived in the Nahrad Saddle around 1530 and I joined them with my two assembled detachments. A half hour later the 3d Battalion of the Life Guards (3 rifle companies) began to climb the camouflaged main track leading to Hill 1114 via 1066. Bearing in mind the fact that our mission was to protect their right flank, I followed them with my six mountain companies. Rommel detachment led, followed by Schiellein's.

Lieutenant Streicher and I marched at the head of my column. The weather had cleared and the Kolovrat Ridge, Hill 1114, and the ridge running from Hill 1114 to Jeza were sharply outlined. For the moment no enemy hindered our ascent. Around 1700 the leading Life Guard company was fired on as it approached the rock outcrop of Hill 1066, and two of the companies took cover under the cliffs to the east of the path.

I ordered the Rommel detachment to march up under cover on the right of the path to the level of the 3d Battalion companies'

second line, and then Lieutenant Streicher and I reconnoitered the area in vicinity of Hill 1066. (Sketch 41)

Here we met elements of the 12th Life Guards engaged in a fire fight with a strong enemy located in a series of closely-linked positions on the hill six hundred yards northwest of Hill 1114 and on Hill 1114 itself. These positions dominated the area and appeared to be well wired. The Italians were also in position to the right of the path running past the 12th Company's right flank.

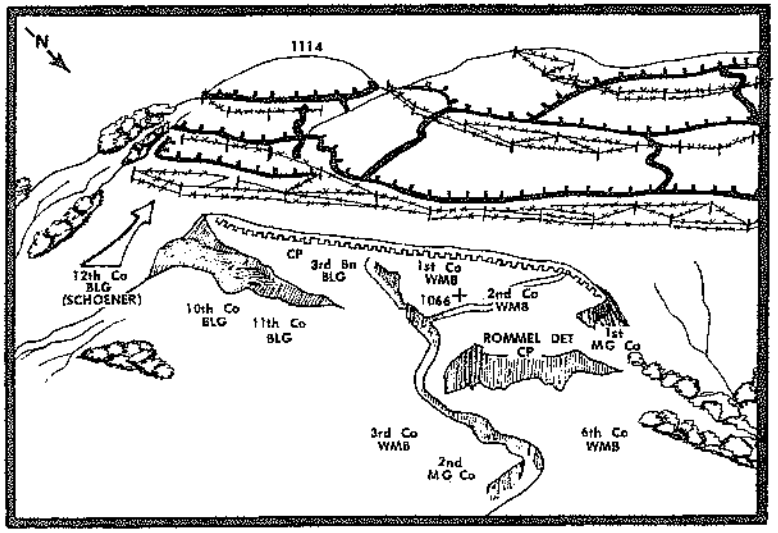
I quickly moved the 1st Company under Lieutenant Triebig forward and ordered it to clear the enemy from the positions on the right of the path in the area southwest of Hill 1066. The company executed this mission with neatness and dispatch, and we managed to take the positions at no cost to ourselves. Our prisoner bag showed seven officers and 150 men.

Meanwhile in accordance with my orders, the 2d Company and 1st Machine-Gun Company cleared up the trenches, dugouts, and observation posts west of Hill 1066. The Schiellein detachment came up and went into reserve a hundred yards northwest of Hill 1066 and just below the rocky crest which we had finished clearing.

Lieutenant Streicher and I headed for the right wing of the 12th Life Guard Company. We thought their positions superior to ours for close observation of Hill 1114, and we also wanted to establish closer liaison with the 3d Life Guard Battalion. There, in the forward line, some fifty yards short of Hill 1066, we met several 3d Battalion officers who pointed out a scout squad attempting to creep up to the nearest hostile position by moving through the draw leading toward the saddle between Hill 1114 and the hill six hundred yards northwest of Hill 1114. The scouts did not enjoy favorable prospects; for the enemy, obviously unshaken, was from time to time traversing the bare grassy slopes in front of his wire with bursts of machine gun fire in various directions. This local enemy garrison appeared to be on its toes and was not inclined to surrender ground at any price.

The officers of the 3d Life Guards Battalion, Lieutenant Streicher and I were all of the opinion that the commanding upper positions on Hill 1114 and on the hill six hundred yards to the northwest defended by a strong and resolute enemy could only be taken in cooperation with the artillery. Up to that time neither hill had been subjected to artillery fire. Using my field glasses, I made a careful study of the details of the hostile positions, although a machine gun emplaced somewhere on Hill 1114 frequently obliged me to dive for cover.

Darkness fell slowly and all attempts of the 1st Company to take additional sectors of the hostile positions on the hill six hundred yards northwest of Hill 1114 were unsuccessful. My elements of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion made ready for the night,



Sketch 41
In front of Hill 1114. View from the northeast.

and the 1st and 2d Companies were detailed to furnish combat reconnaissance during the night. A former Italian artillery observation post located behind the 1st Company served as command post for the Rommel detachment. Lieutenant Streicher, various 3d Life Guards Battalion officers and I discussed our plans for the attack against Hill 1114 and the Kolovrat Ridge. At that time the 10th and 11th Life Guards Companies had not been committed and nothing was known of the success of the 12th Life Guards Company against Hill 1114.

At 1900 I was called to the 3d Life Guards Battalion command post by Major Count Bothmer, the Life Guards commander, who had just arrived on the scene. His command post was near Hill 1066 in a dugout a hundred yards from mine. I reported the disposition of my six mountain companies and he then demanded that

my units be attached to his command. I took the liberty of remarking that I took my orders from Major Sproesser, who, as far as I knew, was senior to the commander of the Life Guards, and that I expected Major Sproesser to arrive at my command post at any moment. Count Bothmer replied by forbidding me to move any part of my detachment to the west or against Hill 1114, saying that this was work for the Life Guards only. Then, as a sop to us, he allowed that the units of the Württemberg Mountain Infantry Battalion would be permitted to occupy and secure Hill 1114 after the Life Guards had captured the position on October 25; or we could follow the Guards Regiment in the second line behind their thrust to the west. I told him that I would inform my commander of his actions. Then I was dismissed.*

I was none too happy on my return to the command post. Fighting in second line did not appeal to us mountain troops at all, and I searched for ways and means of achieving complete freedom of action for my force. My final conclusion was that I would have to wait until Major Sproesser arrived.

At 2100, Lieutenant Autenrieth, the battalion quartermaster, arrived at our command post. He had been directed to us from the 12th Life Guards Company via the 3d Life Guards Battalion command post, where he had been present at a discussion of the attack planned for October 25. This attack was to be made against Kolovrat Ridge and included artillery support. He told me that Major Sproesser had continued the attack on Foni with Wahrenberger's detachment and had broken in there just prior to dark. Lieutenant Autenrieth also reported that the 12th Infantry Division had made excellent progress in the Isonzo valley. I described the situation at Hill 1114 and our relationship with the Life Guards, urged him to report this to Major Sproesser as soon as possible, and to ask him to come to Hill 1066 with or without the Wahrenberger detachment before daybreak and thus restore my detachment's freedom of movement. Lieutenant Autenrieth gladly accepted this job, which was very difficult in the pitch-black night through terrain not completely cleared of the enemy, and started off for the Group command post.

Wet clothes and cold wind made the night of October 24-25 most unpleasant for the elements of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion on Hill 1066. Night patrols of the front line companies brought in a few dozen more prisoners, who were captured in front

* See the reports in the government archives contained in Vols. 1 and 2 of the Isonzo Campaign published in the Spring of 1930.

of the hostile obstacles. However, no patrols succeeded in getting through the obstacles into the foremost hostile position. The Italian sentries were extremely watchful and were quick to use hand grenades and machine-gun fire.

Late in the evening the 3d Battalion of Life Guards informed us that the reserve companies located north of Hill 1066 had been committed against the left of the northeast slope but that they had failed to establish contact with the 1st Jäger Regiment which was attacking across Hill 732. We were not told that Lieutenant Schoerner's company (12th Life Guard Company) had taken Hill 1114.*

Half asleep on a plank bed, I pondered over the possibilities of resuming the attack. A frontal assault? It seemed to me that a continuation of this operation from our newly-won positions — against such a strong enemy defensive system on the Kolovrat — would require a thorough artillery preparation which would not be possible before the morning hours of October 25. Moreover, there was the problem of the Life Guards not wishing to share the front line in the attack with the Württemberg Mountain Battalion.

If one did not wish to wait on time-consuming artillery preparation, the question of a surprise penetration of sectors of the 3d Italian line not yet under attack came to mind. Perhaps the one on the west or the one on the southeast — both of which were little more than a thousand yards from the focal point of Hill 1114. On the west, the 3d Italian line commanded the terrace-like ledges which rose toward Mount Kuk on the spine of the Kolovrat ridge. A successful attack in this quarter would certainly have an effect on the position lower down at Hill 1114 and would appeal to the aggressive officers and men of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion. On the southeast, where the enemy positions were downslope from Hill 1114, a breakthrough would probably have little effect on conditions at the summit. In any case, an attack to the southeast was out of the question since we were on the right flank of the Life Guards. As for an attack to the west — had not the

* Ferdinand Schoerner, who became a field marshal during the last days of World War II, was awarded the *Pour Le Merit* for his capture of Hill 1114. He was an extremely hard man, and during the attack on the hill drove his troops to the point that one soldier fell dead from exhaustion. In World War II he earned a reputation for brutality. While commanding Mountain Corps Norway in northern Finland he admonished his troops to live by the slogan "The Arctic Does Not Exist." Later on the eastern front his draconian discipline earned him the enmity of his countrymen. When he died in 1974 the West German government quietly forbid any tokens of respect. (Pub)

Guards Commanding Officer forbidden the Württemberg Mountain Battalion any movement in that direction?

The night passed quietly broken only by a short hand grenade skirmish.

The scout squads sent out in the early morning hours against the hostile positions fared no better than the night patrols and were repulsed by alert Italian sentries. The 3d Battalion of Life Guards gave us no indication that the situation had changed during the night. It was still pitch-black at 0500 when Major Sproesser arrived at my command post. The rest of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion (4th Company, 3d Machine-Gun Company) followed close behind him. I described the situation on Hill 1114, our relationship with the Life Guards, and my plan of attack. I requested the use of four rifle and two machine-gun companies.

Major Sproesser agreed to my plan of operation against the third Italian position, but only gave me two rifle companies and one machine-gun company, though promising additional support in case of success. While I made the arrangements for the departure of my new formation, Major Sproesser reached an understanding with the Life Guards' commander, who arrived at my command post.

Observations: The first Italian position at St. Daniel consisted of a continuous trench in the front line with numerous dugouts, shelters, and strong wire entanglements. Individual machine-gun nests and strong points were located in the zone between the first and second positions. Front-line camouflage was deficient, while the installations between the first and second lines were barely perceptible.

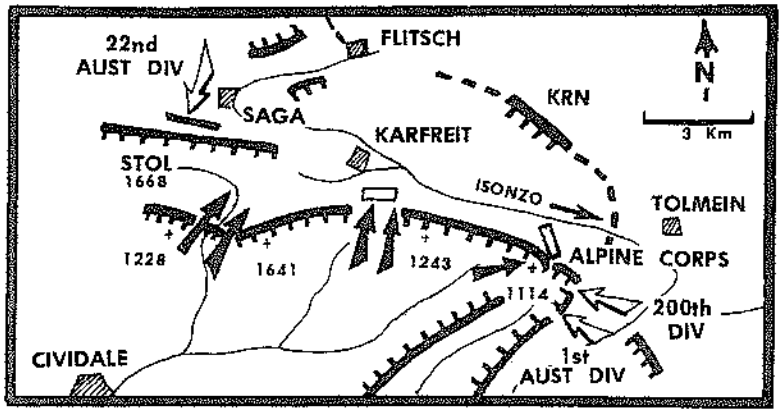
The German artillery preparation demolished the front line and all but annihilated its garrison. The few machine-gun nests in the zone between lines which were not destroyed by the preparatory fire were unable to stop the attack which was launched on a broad front. If the Italians had had numerous machine-gun nests in the zone between the first and second positions, then the German attack would probably have been stopped. Gargantuan artillery preparation is required to demolish a modern defensive position which is laid out in great depth.

My detachment's point lost five men upon encountering the second Italian position on a narrow path along a steep and wooded slope. An increased interval between men would have reduced losses. In Rumania the Cossack points rode at intervals of more than two hundred yards when moving over open terrain. If something happened to the first man, the next one reported it. An infantry point must do likewise and the point commander must combat the herd instinct to close up.

While the Italian garrison of the second position on the way to Foni proved to be very wary, the garrison of the same position half a mile southeast was not sufficiently on the alert. It is not enough to have watchful sentries in the main position; the forward area must be constantly surveyed by patrols, especially in bad weather and in irregular and covered terrain.

Order of battle at daybreak October 25: The Kraus Group attacking in the Flitsch basin reached Saga on the evening of October 24 in the drive down the valley. It began to attack the Stol (1668) on the morning of October 25.

In the Isonzo valley the 12th Division—favored by the rainy, murky weather, which nullified hostile fire effect from the moun-



Sketch 42
The situation at daybreak, October 25, 1917.

tains into the valley—had advanced on October 24 through Idersko and Karfreit to the Natisone valley near Creda and Robic. The

Eichholz Group (2 battalions, 1 artillery platoon) had branched off toward the Luico Pass. On the morning of October 25, weak units of the 12th Division (Schnieber's company) climbed the northern spurs of the Matajur massif and Eichholz's Group was engaged in hard fighting against greatly superior Italian forces.

In the Alpine Corps, the Bavarian Infantry Life Guards and the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were fighting at the cornerstone of the third Italian position on Hill 1114. Schoerner's company (12th Life Guards) held the peak proper, but the Italians held their surrounding positions and were attempting to regain their lost positions by counterattacks. The 1st Jäger Regiment of the 200th Division was still fighting for the second Italian position in the region of Hill 732.

The 3d Jäger Regiment of the 200th Division had taken Jeza, and the 4th Jäger Regiment was fighting for the second Italian position west of Hill 497.

The Scotti Group had, with the 1st Imperial and Royal Division, taken the first and second Italian positions and reached the line of Ostry-Kras-Pusno-Srednje-Avska.

Summary: The third Italian position on the powerful heights south of the Isonzo (Matajur, Mrzli, Golobi, Kuk, Hill 1192, Hill 1114, La Cime, Mt. Hum) remained, with the exception of a small segment on Hill 1114, in Italian hands. Their garrison was fresh, and they had ample reserves. The position had not suffered from German artillery fire.

Assault On The Second Day, October 25, 1917
Surprise Breakthrough In The Kolovrat Position

At first light on October 25, 1917, I moved out from the western part of the rocky crest near Hill 1066 with the 2d Rifle and 1st Machine-Gun Company. We clambered down a narrow, steep defile in a northwesterly direction toward a stand of dense shrubbery lying some one hundred and fifty feet below. An alert foe spotted this movement at once and we had a few men slightly wounded by machine-gun fire. In a rush, we all managed to reach the safety of the bushes where we were joined by the 3d Company of the Rommel detachment. Above us — near Hill 1114 — we could hear a violent fire-fight beginning.

Prior to our leaving, I had briefed all company commanders on the details of our intended undertaking. I would move westward along the steep north slope of the ridge until I was some 200 to 400 yards directly below the Kolovrat position, which would put me about a mile and a quarter from the skirmishing around Hill 1114. Then, according to the terrain, I would select a likely spot, and await an opportunity to launch a surprise assault on the 3d Italian line. It was especially important that no one in the enemy position observe our movements.

The 2nd Company, under Lieutenant Ludwig, sent out its point, which I myself directed by means of hand signals. Some thirty yards behind the point came the staff; adjutant, runners and the telephone detail, which laid wire along the route of our advance to keep us in touch with the command post of Major Sproesser on Hill 1066. Another fifty yards behind, in column of files, came the remainder of the 2nd Rifle Company, the 1st Machine-gun Company and the 3d Rifle Company.

Our morning coffee had given way to Italian preserves, and being on the move was uncommonly pleasant after the cold night spent in wet clothes. The sounds of battle from the vicinity of Hills 1066 and 1114 to our left rear seemed to increase in proportion as the day grew brighter. However, we left these sounds behind as the detachment crept along silently and furtively from bush to bush and slope to slope. At first, the nature of the terrain and the undergrowth allowed us to keep about six hundred feet below the enemy positions; then hostile obstacles with a good field of view, situated on the bare knolls of the twisting Kolovrat ridge, forced us into time and energy-consuming detours toward the valley. Up above among the enemy obstacles, perhaps even in front of them, many watchful eyes of the sentries surveyed the slopes which we were traversing. If just one of them saw us, the success of my enterprise would be in question, if not rendered impossible.

From time to time, I called a halt so that I could personally survey the possibilities of a closer approach to the enemy lines. So much depended on finding the right place. We crossed several deeply-cut ravines with the greatest caution before continuing the advance on a grass-covered slope. Not only was it necessary for the column to avoid detection from the left and above, but also from the front and the rear which was difficult since we could only guess how these slopes appeared from the bare heights above. As far as we ourselves could see, the continuous, high obstacles above indicated a very formidable position. The higher we climbed now, the scarcer the bushes became, until our stealthy approach could

only be concealed in the narrow rills which crossed the slope in many places.

We had been underway for over an hour and had now reached a point about a mile and a half as the crow flies from Hill 1066. At no time since the start had we been fired upon, but we could now hear very lively machine-gun fire from the direction of Hill 1114. Were the Life Guards on the attack?

Above us in the morning sun which promised a bright warm autumn day lay the fortified knolls of the Kolovrat ridge. Deep silence prevailed around us. The point was creeping its way past a clump of brush and into a hollow some two hundred yards below the enemy obstacles. At the same time, I was considering whether and where I could cross a bare, sharp ridge lying about a hundred yards ahead of us when I heard a slight bustle behind me. Looking back, I saw a few riflemen of the 2nd Company diving into a large group of bushes below the path just traversed by the point. (Sketch 43)

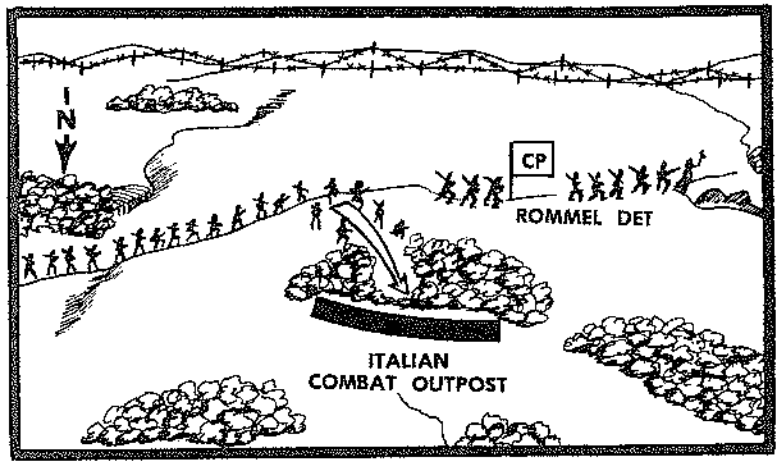
What was going on? The soldiers at the head of the 2d Company had discovered some Italians asleep in a clump of bushes down the slope. Inside of a few minutes they had routed out an Italian combat outpost of forty men and two machine guns. Not a shot, not a loud word was heard. To be sure, a few hostile sentries fled downhill as fast as their legs could carry them; but fortunately in their excitement they forgot to warn the garrison of the positions above by shots or shouts. I made certain that no one tried to shoot them as they fled.

This enemy combat outpost apparently had the mission of securing the positions on the Kolovrat Ridge from surprise from the direction of the Isonzo valley. There were probably additional outposts three hundred feet or so below us, but they evidently had their attention fixed on the valley and it never occurred to them that we might advance westward from Hill 1066.

Since the main security force protecting the enemy positions had been snapped-up in silence, it seemed that right at this spot, my planned surprise breakthrough of the Kolovrat position had every prospect of success. Furthermore, the possibility of a close approach to the obstacles above seemed favorable and — best of all — the deepest part of the hollow, where the point was now halted, could not be seen from any positions on the ridge. I decided to gamble.

The prisoners were sent to the rear of the column and the point was ordered to climb the far side of the hollow to within one hundred yards of the enemy obstacles. It was just possible to see the

tops of the wire stakes. The point would act as security while the detachment assembled for the breakthrough. With extreme caution, I brought up my companies — one after another — into the hollow and deployed them side by side under good cover from the enemy



Sketch 43
Surprising the Italian Combat Outpost, October 25, 1917. View from the north.

positions. The area was small and the crowding considerable. Quickly I informed the commanders of my intentions. This being done, we moved forward to our ready positions close behind the point. The slopes were steep and considerably arched.

Nothing stirred in the enemy positions before us, but from away to the left came the ever-louder sounds of battle.

My adjutant, Lieutenant Streicher, offered to reconnoiter the obstacles in front of us to assess their strength and locate any passages and, if necessary, to cut gaps. I gave him five men of the 2d Company and a light machine gun, instructing him to use his firearms as weapons of last resort. Streicher crept forward with his men. Lieutenant Ludwig maintained contact with him by means of a few riflemen.

Meanwhile the telephone squad had established contact with Major Sproesser's command post (near Hill 1066), and I reported

the course of events and gave him my decision to break into the hostile Kolovrat position immediately at a point half a mile east of Hill 1192. I also requested, and was promised, the speedy dispatch of support in case of success. Major Sproesser had followed our entire progress with his glasses from his command post. He told me that the situation in front of Hill 1114 had changed only to the extent that strong Italian forces were attacking the Life Guards. An attack by the Life Guards with artillery support had thus been pre-empted.

I had just put down the telephone and was biting into an Italian white roll when a brief report came from Streicher: "Scout squad broke through, took guns and prisoners." Complete silence reigned in the enemy position and not a shot had been fired. With maximum speed I proceeded with the execution of my breakthrough plan and got my entire detachment underway. A second's delay might snatch away the victory which lay in our grasp.

It required all our strength to climb up out of the hollow and across the steep slope. In a few moments the hostile obstacles were reached and passed and then we moved across the hostile position. The long barrels of a heavy Italian battery loomed before us and in its vicinity Streicher's men were cleaning out some dugouts. A few dozen Italian prisoners stood near the guns. Lieutenant Streicher reported that he surprised the gun crews while they were washing themselves.

We were in a narrow saddle. The bare knolls of the Kolovrat Ridge were covered with numerous earthworks, and communication trenches leading to the strongly developed position along the north slope were also visible. The main road leading to Crai through Luico—Kuk—Hill 1114 was only a hundred yards south of our position. The road itself was well camouflaged against ground and air observation.

A third of Rommel detachment had reached the saddle. The men were gasping from the effects of running up the steep slope. The Kolovrat garrison was still unaware of our entry into their positions. Was it still asleep? To judge from the number of prisoners already captured in the fifty-yard-wide saddle, the position was heavily occupied. Seconds separated us from our fate.

I ordered:

"Rommel detachment blocks to the east and extends to the west."

"Technical Sergeant Spadlinger with 1 machine-gun squad from the 2d Company blocks the eastern shoulder of the hostile position

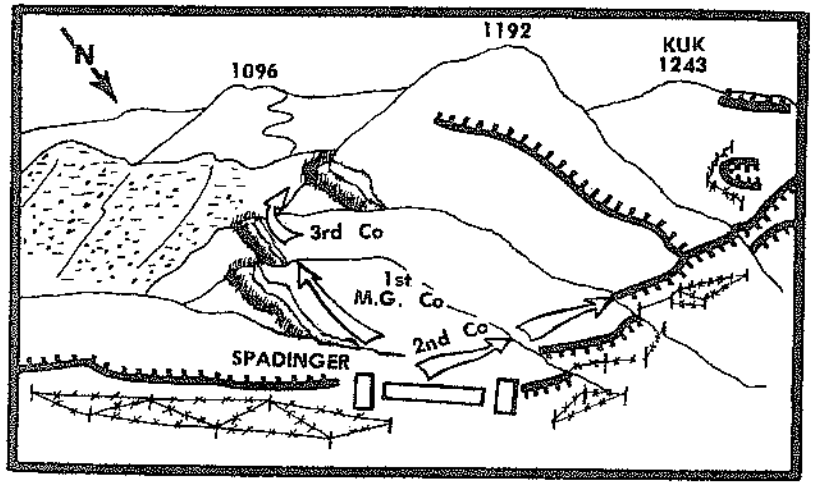
on the north slope and the ridge road, and covers the rear of the Rommel detachment advancing to the west."

"Lieutenant Ludwig and the 2d Company break open the hostile position on the western part of the north slope. Shooting is to be avoided as long as possible."

"3d rifle and 1st Machine-Gun Companies accompany me down the ridge road to the west. Lieutenant Streicher and his detachment assume responsibility for the security of the advance." (Sketch 44)

"Advance as rapidly as possible!"

All units of the detachment set about their tasks with energy and



Sketch 44
Penetration of the position on Kolovrat Ridge.
October 25, 1917. View from the northeast.

a good deal of wariness. Under the efficient Lieutenant Ludwig, assault squads of the 2d Company raced from dugout to dugout and from sentry post to sentry post. Most of the hostile garrison was encountered in the dugouts. One mountain soldier was enough to supervise the evacuation, disarming and falling in of a hostile dugout garrison. In the sentry posts the observers were still watching the valley, where the Isonzo, with a range of towering 6000-foot peaks in the background, presented a picture of bewitching beauty in the early morning sunlight.

The sudden apparition of a 2d Company soldier behind the sentries was enough to paralyze them with fear, and they came no nearer to giving the alarm than did their brethren of the combat outpost who we had taken just before the attack. The number of prisoners grew rapidly and soon reached into the hundreds.

The bulk of the detachment also made good progress down the ridge road. It was fortunate that the camouflage concealed us from the enemy on the heights to the east and west. We captured several gun positions which had been blasted right into the rock wall. Our sudden appearance in the quiet of the morning, far from the noise of battle near Hill 1114, completely disconcerted the garrison. My initial objective was to surprise any massed reserve formations, and I also wanted to reach a position from which I could break the back of any opposition encountered by the 2d Company on the north slope.

Events took a different turn.

About ten to fifteen minutes had elapsed since our penetration of the Kolovrat position, and the 3d Company's point moved over the ridge road and was approaching the saddle 300 yards east of Hill 1192 when it was fired on from all sides.

The Streicher scout squad, which had already reached this saddle, was subjected to machine-gun fire from the southern slope of Hill 1192 and was soon hard pressed by Italian infantry advancing from the southeast slope of Hill 1192, trying to push north across the ridge road. The scout squad gave way on the northeast slope of Hill 1192.

The advance of the 3d Rifle and the 1st Machine-Gun Companies down the ridge road was stopped by heavy machine-gun fire from Hill 1192. The machine-gun units were hurriedly emplaced but they were unable to obtain any fire advantage. Machine-gun fire was striking through the camouflage and down along the left side of the road. This made an attack up one side of the road extremely difficult, for we would have moved across the steep and unprotected southern slopes of Kolovrat Ridge. Shortly after this I heard increased sounds of combat from the right front where I imagined the 2d Company to be. Hand grenades burst, followed by the lively carbine fire of the mountain troops. Every man seemed to be in the firing line.

I saw nothing and it was impossible to go to the bare knoll to the right of the road without drawing heavy machine-gun fire from Hill 1192. Could the 2d Company hold? It had only 80 carbines and 6 light machine guns! If the 2nd Company was overrun, then the enemy would have little trouble regaining his lost positions on the north slope and would have cut off the remaining units of the detachment and released the prisoners. The volume of fire told me that we were opposed by strong enemy forces. A few minutes had sufficed to change the situation completely in our disfavor and to make it very serious. It became a question of holding against a superior enemy the parts of the Kolovrat position won during our rapid advance. The most urgent need was to block the road to the west and rush to the help of the threatened 2d Company.

Numerous enemy machine guns to the east and west swept the bare prominences which lay on the shortest route to the 2d Company. An attack astride the road toward the west against Hill 1192 would have been covered by the same enemy fire and would have small chance of succeeding. I arrived at a different solution.

A machine-gun platoon already engaged in fire against Hill 1192 and some riflemen of the 3d Company were given the mission of blocking the ridge road to the west. With the rest of the 3d Rifle Company, and the Machine-Gun Company I hurried east on the road back to the saddle half a mile east of Hill 1192 where we had first breached the Italian line. The heavy camouflage prevented the enemy in the east and west from observing this movement and subjecting it to aimed fire. The occasional sweeping of the camouflage with searching fire did little to hamper our movement, and we managed to reach the saddle.

Here the capable Spadinger and his eight men were holding the Italian garrison of the position to the east in check. In moving past I reinforced him with two additional squads. We moved at the double toward the west through the Italian positions which had previously been mopped up by the 2d Company. A hundred and sixty yards farther on we came upon two mountain soldiers who were guarding about a thousand prisoners in the area between the position and wire entanglements. I ordered them to immediately move the prisoners down the slope below the wire entanglements and left the details to them. They carried out their job! The Italian machine-gun fire from the east and west grazing the heights accelerated the movement of the prisoners.

Some hundred yards ahead of us the noise of battle rose to great violence near the 2d Company. Hand grenades burst, machine guns fired steadily and carbines were delivering rapid fire. I demanded the utmost speed of the two companies following me. I surveyed the situation from a knoll four hundred yards east of Hill 1192.

The 2d Company held some sections of trench on the northeast

slope and was encircled from the west, south and east by fivefold superiority — an entire Italian reserve battalion. The foremost enemy units were massed a scant fifty yards away. The wide and high Italian obstacles lay in rear of the 2d Company making retreat to the north slope impossible. The troops defended themselves desperately against the powerful enemy mass; only their unbroken rapid fire prevented an enemy attack. If the enemy chose to attack in spite of the fire, the little group would have been crushed. Should I open fire piecemeal with the riflemen just now coming up? No!

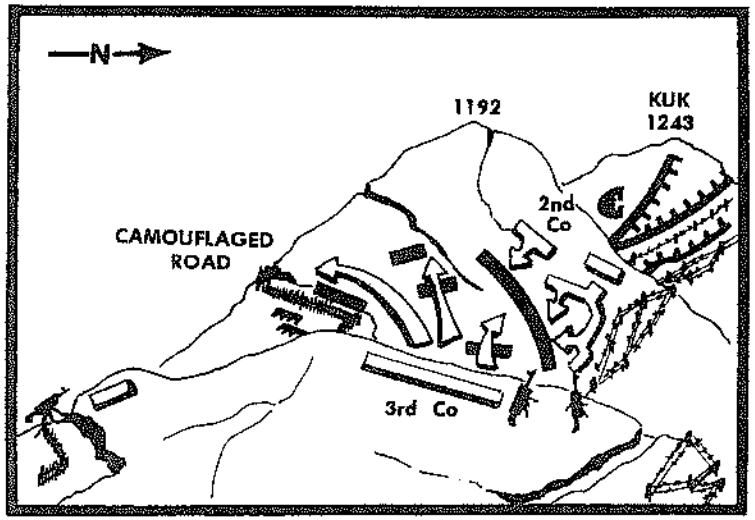
It was immediately clear to me that nothing short of a surprise assault on the enemy flank and rear by the entire detachment would suffice to relieve the 2nd Company. Then the issue of victory or defeat would be decided in close combat between the enemy and our out-numbered mountain soldiers.

The first units rushed breathlessly through the deep trenches, followed by the leading soldiers of the machine-gun company with disassembled weapons. Only a few words were necessary to give the commanders the situation and their missions. We assembled the 3d Company in a shallow draw to the left of the trench. A heavy machine-gun crew hurriedly set up its weapon in a hollow on the right and reported itself ready for combat. The crew of another heavy machine-gun came up panting and the 3d Company was in the draw ready to attack. (Sketch 45)

I could not wait for the second heavy machine gun to be set up. The dense enemy masses, urged on by their officers, were rising out of their trenches a hundred yards away and advancing on the cornered 2d Company. I gave the attack signal to the 3d Rifle and the 1st Machine-Gun Companies. While the first heavy machine gun opened up a steady fire on the enemy from its concealed position on the right, where it was soon joined by the second, the mountain troops on the left stormed the enemy flank and rear with savage resolution. Loud shouts resounded. The surprise blow on the flank and rear hit home. The Italians halted their attack against the 2d Company and tried to turn and face the 3d Company. But the 2d Company came out of its trench and assailed the right. Attacked on two sides and pressed into a narrow space, the enemy laid down his arms. Not until we were within a few yards did the Italian officers defend themselves with pistols. Then they, too, were overpowered. I had to intervene to save them from the fury of the mountain soldiers. An entire battalion with 12 officers and over 500 men surrendered in the saddle three hundred yards northeast of Hill 1192. This increased our prisoner bag on the Kolovrat position to 1,500.

We took the peak and south slope of Hill 1192 and captured another heavy Italian battery.

Our great joy over our success was saddened by our heavy losses. Aside from several wounded, two particularly valiant fighters, Lance Corporal Kiefner (2d Company), who distinguished himself so gallantly the day before on the Hevnik, and Technical Sergeant



Sketch 45
Attack against Hill 1192, October 25, 1917.
View from the east.

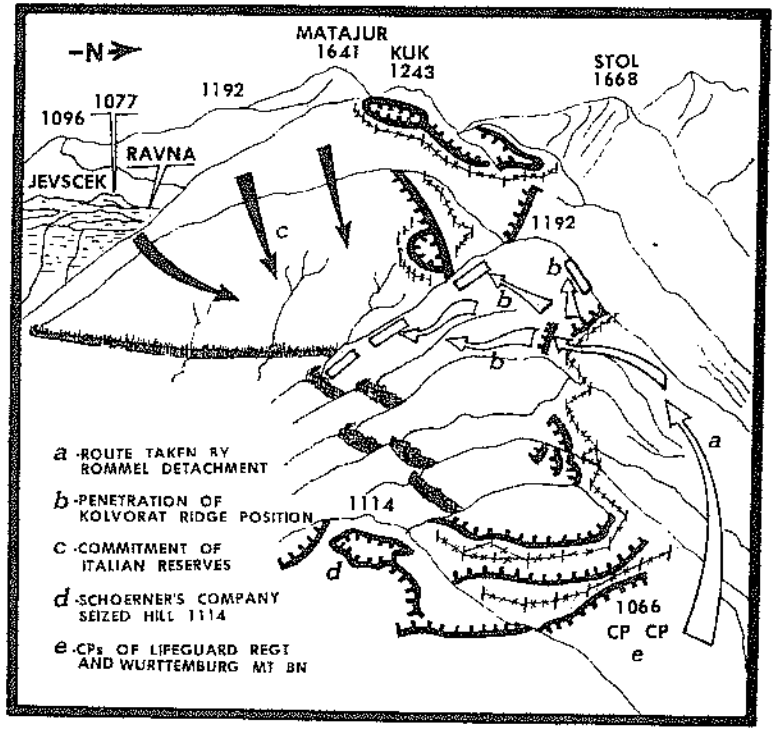
Kneule (3d Company), sacrificed their young lives in close combat.

By 0915 the Rommel detachment was in undisputed possession of a half mile sector of the Kolovrat position including Hill 1192 and extending to the east. Thus a wide breach had been driven into the main hostile position. The first hostile counterattack of local reserves resulted in their elimination. I had to reckon on further attempts by the enemy to regain what he had lost. Let the Italians come! We mountain troops were not in the habit of surrendering what we had gained by hard fighting.

From the west, southeast, and east the enemy covered the heights held by us with machine-gun fire. Also, Italian artillery groups on Mt. Hum and to the west had not missed the breakthrough on the

Kolovrat and the battle of Hill 1192. Their heavy shells forced us to the north slope, which offered some cover.

My available reserves were insufficient to permit an immediate continuation of the attack. We had to hold our gains until support



Sketch 46
Enemy reserves in position on Mount Kuk.
View from the east.

arrived. The 2d Company and half the Machine-Gun Company occupied Hill 1192 with their fronts to the west. Spadinger, with a platoon, blocked the penetration's shoulder half a mile to the east. I kept the 3d Company and half the Machine-Gun Company in reserve in the newly won positions on the northeast slope of Hill 1192.

Then I studied the situation round about from the summit of

Hill 1192. At first glance the western front in the direction of Kuk appeared to be the most dangerous one. Apart from dozens of machine guns, which fired on us from the terrace-like and, for the most part, commanding positions on the northeast slope of Kuk, strong reserves were visible on the highest part and on the southeast slope. Soon several waves of skirmish lines began to move toward us across the broad east slopes of Kuk. I estimated their strength at one or two battalions. In the south, Mount Hum teemed like an ant hill and strong enemy artillery was firing. Lively automotive traffic in both directions was moving over the ridge road leading from Cividale over Mount Hum. On both sides of the road closed enemy formations were moving toward the battlefront. In the east, we overlooked the whole Kolovrat Ridge, which descended gradually to Hill 1114. Strong hostile masses were distinguishable on the south and southwest slopes of Hill 1114 where the Italians appeared to be attacking. Long motor columns were bringing Italian reserves up from Crai and were detrucking them on the west slope of Hill 1114. Also, enemy forces were soon moving along the ridge road and across the hills. They were moving up against us from the east. By all appearances the enemy intended to attack us simultaneously from two sides. (Sketch 46)

Observations: The surprise breakthrough into the Kolovrat position on October 25, 1917, was successful because the Italians did not watch the area in front of their third position sharply enough, a mistake which the Rumanians made time and again on Mount Cosna.

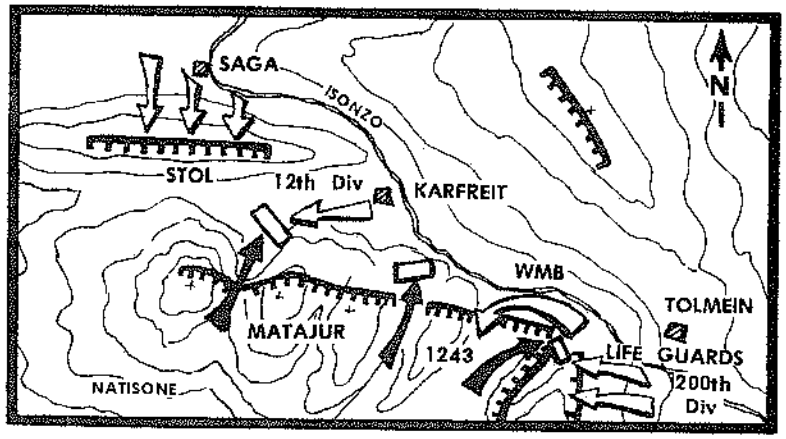
Also, the garrison of the position itself was not prepared for action. Everyone thought it was safe from all danger, being a mile and a half from the current combat zone on Hill 1114. Thus initially the mountain troops had an easy time of it.

The counterattack of the Italian reserve battalion, undertaken with great energy, was stopped by the fire of the weak 2d Company, but it would probably have led to the annihilatoin of the 2d Company had we not succeeded in attacking the strongly massed Italian battalion in the flank and rear at the decisive moment. It would have been a mistake to conduct this attack with too small a force or to limit it only to a fire attack from the flank.

After a successful breakthrough into the Kolovrat position (0915, October 25, 1917,) the order of battle was as follows: (Sketch 47)

The Kraus Group with the 1st Imperial Regiment was attacking in three columns from Saga. Their objective was the line Stol (1668)—Hill 1450.

In the Stein Group, the 12th Division with the 63d Infantry



Sketch 47
The situation in the Tolmein Sector, October 25, 1917.

Regiment was near Robic and Creda as on the previous evening, and had repulsed hostile advance guards. The Schnieber detachment reported that it was a hundred yards north of the summit of Mount Matajur.* The Eichholtz Group had been attacked by superior Italian forces from the Luico pass and was defending itself in tenacious fighting with this enemy. It held positions north of Golobi.

In the Alpine Corps, the Rommel detachment had succeeded in breaking into the Kolovrat position. The penetration extended half a mile east of Hill 1192. The bulk of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion was marching from Hill 1066 to Hill 1192. The Life Guards held the position near Hill 1114 reached in the evening of October 24 against violent Italian attacks. The 1st Jäger Regiment had taken Hill 732 and was advancing against Slemen Chapel.

*Lt. Schnieber mistook Mt. Della Colonna for Mt. Matajur.

In the 200th Division, the 3d Jäger Regiment had taken Hill 942 west of Jeza.

The Scotti Group: In the 1st Imperial and Royal Division, the 7th Mountain Brigade was attacking the Globocak.

Attack Against Kuk, Blocking The Luico-Savogna Valley And Opening The Luico Pass

Contrary to my expectations, the enemy suspended his advance, which had been carried forward in several waves across the east slopes of Kuk. Did he intend only to block us off, or was he making additional attack preparations? The former proved to be the case, for the hostile riflemen began to dig in on three lines, one above the other, on the east slopes of the Kuk in conjunction with the north slope positions. An attack by these forces, supported by numerous machine guns in superior positions, would have worried me considerably. The enemy's adoption of defense and the consequent cessation of fighting was most welcome to me, for I knew that Major Sproesser was on the way toward Hill 1192 with the bulk of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion.

As soon as more forces arrived on Hill 1192, I intended to attack the enemy on Kuk. He was to be given as little time as possible for digging in, for it would be increasingly difficult to dislodge him if he were permitted to anchor himself firmly. It was essential to use the time for thorough preparation of the planned attack.

In order to maintain surprise I refrained from hampering his entrenchment with fire. The rocky ground made digging difficult. Since the battalion staff was on the march, I made my report to Alpine Corps Headquarters via the switchboard on Hill 1066 and gave them the results of our operations and told them I intended to continue the attack upon arrival of reinforcements on Hill 1192. Furthermore, I explained my plan of attack against Kuk to Captain Meyr, the General Staff Officer of the Alpine Corps, and requested the support of two heavy batteries for the attack. My request was granted and, in a few minutes, I was connected with the fire-control officer of an artillery unit near Tolmein. We agreed that a preparation would be fired by the heavy batteries between 1115 and 1145 against the broad east slope of Kuk and the positions on the northeast slope. With artillery support for the attack assured, I

counted a great deal on the effect of heavy shells in the rocky terrain starting avalanches of stone.

Now it was necessary to prepare the infantry fire support. For this purpose I emplaced the light machine guns of the 2d Company and the whole 1st Machine-Gun Company on the north and south slopes of Hill 1192. Their positions were concealed from the enemy on Kuk. I planned to use weak assault teams in the attack and the automatic weapons had the mission of pinning down the enemy force on Kuk. Targets were designated for each gun.

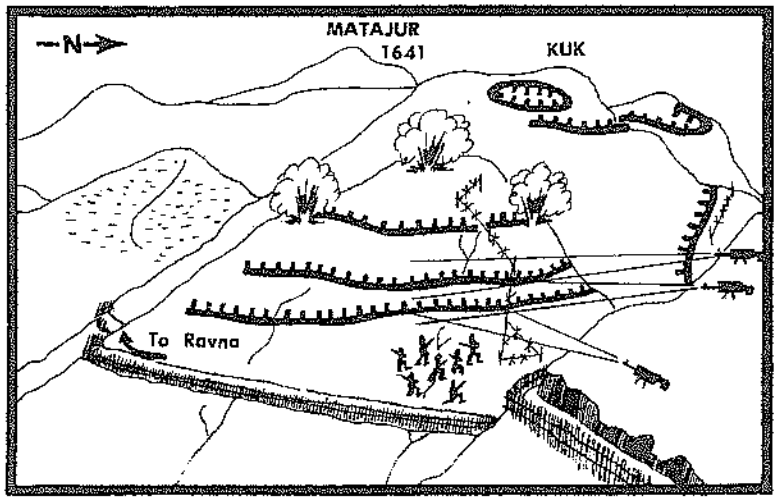
Major Sproesser arrived in the saddle just east of Hill 1192 at 1030, bringing with him the 4th and 6th Rifle Companies, and the 2d and 3d Machine-Gun Companies. I brought him up to date as to the situation and the preparations already made for the attack against Kuk, and requested the attachment of the forces necessary for the attack. After studying the hostile positions, Major Sproesser gave the 6th Company under Lieutenant Hohl the job of rolling up the hostile positions on the Kolovrat Ridge in the direction of Hill 1114. My plan of attack against Kuk was approved and I was given the 4th Rifle and 2d and 3d Machine-Gun Companies in addition to the 2d and 3d Rifle and 1st Machine-Gun Companies. I soon completed my attack preparations.

By 1100 the whole fire detachment (six light machine guns, 2d Company, and 1st Machine-Gun Company) under Lieutenant Ludwig, was in concealed position on the north and south slopes of Hill 1192, ready to open fire on the Kuk garrison. An assault team of the 2d Company consisting of two squads, was in position on the north slope of Hill 1192 and an assault team of the 3d Company, of equal strength, was on the south slope ready to advance. As soon as firing commenced, the task of these assault squads was to take the saddle between Kuk and Hill 1192, and then, under strong support from artillery and machine guns, to advance against the Kuk garrison along the position on the north slope or through the draw on the southeast slope. I wanted to feel out the hostile position with these assault teams. The 3d and 4th Rifle Companies and 2d and 3d Machine-Gun Companies were in concealed reserve positions in the saddle just east of Hill 1192. I intended to commit them on the north or south slope depending on the success of the initial assault teams.

Just before the beginning of the attack the leading elements of the Life Guards arrived in the saddle east of Hill 1192. Previously the 2d Life Guards Battalion had tried, after a vain wait for artillery support, to attack the positions on the Kolovrat Ridge from

Hill 1114 but their attack had been stopped by heavy defensive fire from Italian positions five hundred yards northwest of Hill 1114. Then the Life Guards moved along the path taken by the Württemberg Mountain Battalion on the north slopes of the Kolovrat Ridge below the still tenaciously held positions between Hill 1114 and the saddle half a mile east of Hill 1192. Here they met the 1,500 prisoners taken by the Rommel detachment, who were being moved off by a few mountain soldiers.

Punctually at 1115 the first heavy shells from the Tolmein basin roared up and burst in the midst of the newly constructed Italian lines on the east slope of Kuk. Falling stone rumbled downhill. A fitting prelude to the attack! Now the machine-gun fire units on Hill 1192 went into action and the assault teams on the north and south slopes of the height got under way. Under great tension I followed their progress with my field glasses. (Sketch 48)



Sketch 48
Attack against Kuk, October 25, 1917. View from the east.

The enemy on Kuk answered our machine-gun fire and a regular machine-gun duel took place between our garrison on Hill 1192 and the Italians on Kuk. An ear-splitting uproar! Shell after shell struck the enemy positions. The resulting splinter effect

and the avalanches of stone would test the nerves of the garrison. The hostile artillery units on Mount Hum chimed in from the left flank but failed to find remunerative targets on the south slope of Hill 1192, for the machine guns were well dug in and the artillery fire bothered them but little. Down on the right, on the north slope, hand grenades burst as the assault team from Ludwig's company fought its way along the hostile position. The Italian garrison clung tenaciously to every nook and cranny, and our troops made slow progress even though they were attacking downhill.

It was a different story on the south slope of Hill 1192, where the assault team from the 3d Company vaulted out of the gun emplacements along the camouflaged road and quickly disappeared from view. Friendly and hostile machine-gun fire whistled over its head but, by hugging the camouflage, the team managed to reach the saddle between Hill 1192 and Kuk without being subjected to aimed fire. From this location the assault team of the 3d Company, disregarding our own artillery fire and the resulting stone avalanches, began to climb toward the enemy on the summit. My observer team followed its movements closely.

Our artillery fire was well placed and shell after shell smashed into the Italian lines. Our volume of machine-gun fire increased where the assault squad of the 3d Company was closest to the enemy. Soon the assault team was within hand-grenade range of the enemy front line, and some of our men began to wave their handkerchiefs at the enemy who was exposed to our fire almost without any cover. The trick worked and we saw the first deserters run down from their position.

This was the moment to launch my main attack. I had four companies available. My orders to the assembled company commanders were:

"The south assault team is climbing Kuk, and taking prisoners. The Rommel detachment attacks with its four companies up the southeast slope of Kuk. The 3d Machine-Gun Company, 4th and 3d Rifle Companies, and 2d Machine-Gun Company follow the detachment staff down the camouflaged ridge road on the double."

"The fire support element on Hill 1192 gives maximum fire support and follows as soon as the situation permits."

We rushed forward down the camouflaged road. Had the enemy on Kuk been attentive, he should have observed our movement. To all appearances, however, his entire attention was riveted on our machine guns on Hill 1192 and on the local hand-grenade fight.

The expenditure of ammunition on both sides was heavy but only a few shots strayed toward the ridge road. Under these circumstances it did not take us long to reach the saddle between Hill 1192 and Kuk which was defiladed from the Italians on Kuk. The entire detachment followed at the double in column of files.

While this maneuver was in progress the assault team had increased its prisoner bag to one hundred. A report from the rear stated that elements of the Life Guards would join us in our advance down the ridge road. This addition gave me command of a force which exceeded a regiment in strength and which was strung out behind me for a distance of two miles. Under the circumstances should I not set my sights a little higher?

For the next quarter of an hour our artillery and machine-gun fire pinned the enemy to his position on the east of Kuk. The 3d Company assault team gathered in all Italians pried loose by our fire. Did not the camouflaged ridge road, swinging around the south slope of Kuk and its garrison, offer an attractive and far-reaching advance? I had visions of cutting off the Kuk garrison. To be sure, I had to figure on fighting additional strong reserves on the south slope and on the fact that the defender could use considerable forces and charge down the steep slope. But on the other hand, I knew that no task was too difficult for my mountain troops who had been thoroughly tested on many fields, and I did not hesitate to advance. The attack continued.

My objective was in the vicinity of Ravna, a small mountain village on the southwest slope of Kuk. I tore down the road with the head of my detachment. The few riflemen of the point were followed by Grau's machine-gun company. The men, gasping for breath and dripping with sweat, carried their heavy machine guns on their shoulders. It was tough going and they had been carrying their guns since the opening attack, but they all knew that they must exact their last ounce of physical strength.

The ridge road, still very well camouflaged, ran down in the direction of Ravna. It had been blasted into the almost-bare, steep slope of Kuk, and the hostile garrison on the slopes above was unable to see what was going on along the road. Their entire attention was still focused on the battle with Hill 1192. On the other hand, we had a small field of vision on the road and the numerous turns never gave fields of view greater than a hundred yards in depth. Vertical stone walls blocked our vision on the right and the camouflage on the left restricted our view in that direction. This narrow field of view acted to our advantage.

At frequent intervals, sometimes only a few yards apart, we ran into an unsuspecting enemy standing or marching down the road. He never had an opportunity to use his arms before being taken. A sign to disarm and a gesture toward the east were enough to start

Enemy troops taken by surprise on the camouflaged road.

the weaponless Italians marching down our column toward Hill 1192. They were all paralyzed by our sudden appearance.

We rushed on past battery positions, supply trains, closed, hostile infantry formations without being stopped or even fired on. To the right rear and up the slope the fire fight between Hill 1192 and the Kuk garrison was still in progress and a few stray shots hummed past us high overhead. The Italians on Kuk were still waiting for the Germans to start the usual infantry attack on a broad front across the slopes of Hill 1192.

The camouflage along the left side of the road ended just short of Ravna, widening our field of view. Up to the right we could now see rows of bushes standing on the otherwise bare slope. Would we find Italian reserves in or behind these bushes? The first houses of Ravna were about three hundred yards ahead of us. To the left, down the steep slope, were several farms, and behind them the wooded Knoll 1077. Once more we increased our pace to the utmost and reached Ravna without being fired on.

It was noon and the hot sun beat down on the south slope. No wonder that the Ravna garrison, thinking itself to be far from the front, failed to discover us until we were storming through the few houses and barns. The terrified Italians scattered and fled head over heels down into the Luico and Topolo valleys; their pack animals stampeded. To our great amazement, not a shot was fired and the southern slope of Kuk appeared to be lifeless. Apparently the reserves that we had imagined to be up there had already been committed to the defense against the assault from Hill 1192.

The last of the Ravna garrison, probably some pack-animal detachments, disappeared beyond the small knoll just west of the village in the direction of Luico. We followed right on their heels. I reached the knoll with the foremost soldiers of my detachment and found a splendid view, particularly to the west. (Sketch 49)

Down to the right was the mountain village of Luico in the saddle between Kuk and Mrzli. The town and the fairly-large neighboring cantonment were full of Italian troops. The usual peaceful rear area activity was going on in and around Luico. The Luico-Savogna road was crowded with two-way vehicular traffic. Among other things, a heavy horse-drawn battery was moving at a walk from Luico to the south. The sound of heavy fighting came from north of the town, and I imagined them to come from the attack of the 12th Infantry Division*

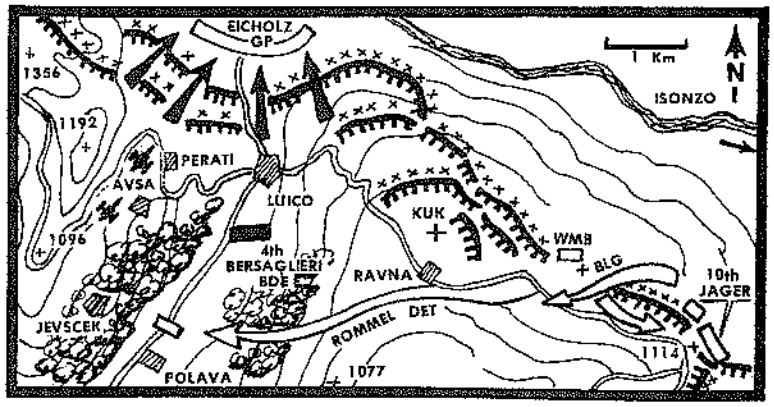
On the other side of Luico the winding Matajur road ran up and over the partially-wooded eastern slopes of Mrzli and Mount Cragonza. Little traffic was observed there. Italian artillery units were in position near Avsa and Perai and were firing on units of the 12th Division near Golobi.

The remaining units of my detachment followed me at top speed, for I did not wish to lose momentum in Ravna but wanted to act rapidly and in a decisive direction. There was no time for lengthy

* This was the Eichholz Group—three battalions strong—holding against strong Italian forces attempting to envelop the flank and rear of the 12th Division by an assault on its position in the valley north of Mount Matajur by way of Idersko and Karfreit.

deliberations. I rapidly weighed the three lines of action open to me.

We could climb the south slope of the Kuk and capture its garrison, the bulk of which was engaged with other Württemberg Mountain Battalion units to the east. The remainder of the garrison was engaged with the 12th Division elements to the north. I did not consider this garrison a danger, and I left it to rearward units



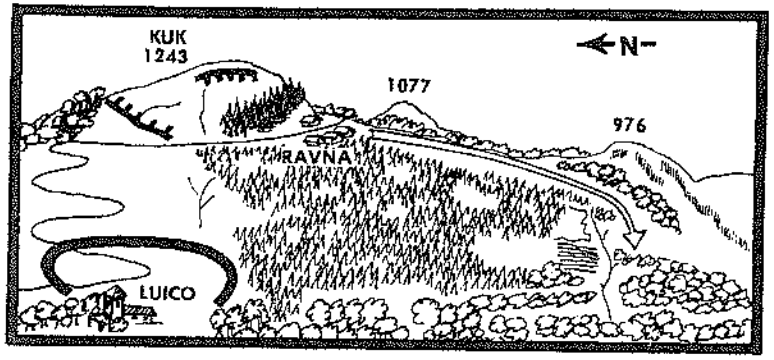
Sketch 49
The situation along Kolovrat Ridge, noon, October 25, 1917.

of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion or the Life Guards. In my opinion its fate was sealed.

To attack the hostile forces near Luico and open the Luico Pass for the 12th Division was an attractive line of action. My two machine-gun companies could give excellent fire support from superior positions. The possibilities of approaching the massed hostile forces around Luico were excellent and the attack would come as a surprise. However, it failed to insure the annihilation or capture of the enemy around Luico, because the rugged and wooded terrain on the east slope of Mrzli offered the enemy the possibility of evacuating the pass without suffering excessive losses. I rejected this line of action and decided to cut off the hostile forces around Luico by blocking the Luico-Savogna valley and the Matajur road on Mount Cragonza (1096). The wooded slopes on both sides of the Luico-Savogna valley favored this line of action for they per-

mitted our reaching the valley near Polava, before the hostile forces around Luico suspected our presence. With the valley and the road blocked and the Alpine Corps at Luico, the encircled enemy could not avoid annihilation or capture. (Sketch 50)

Was the detachment too dispersed? I had been unable to keep all units in sight along the camouflaged road along the southern



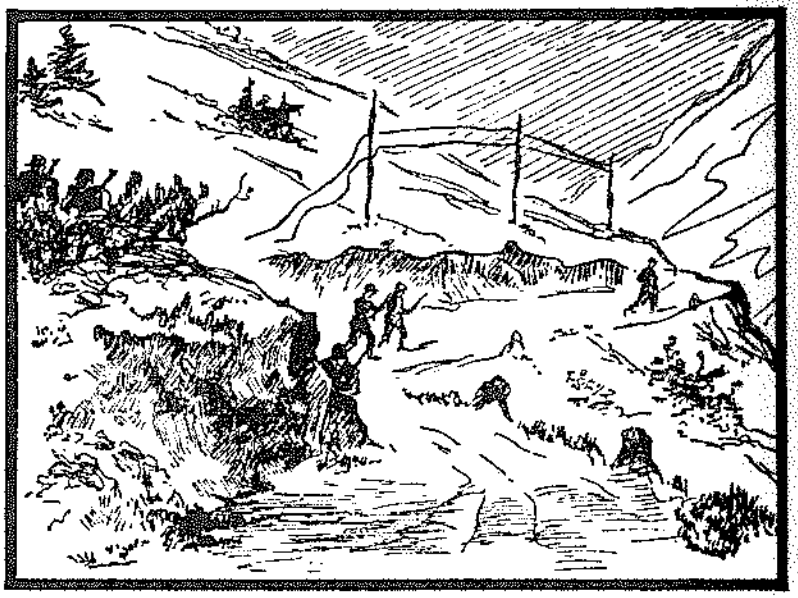
Sketch 50
The drive to reach the Luico-Savogna Road. View from the west.

slope of Kuk and it was more than likely that the rapid pace of the advance had extended the column more than was desirable. I simply could not wait—even seconds could be costly and decisive!

From Ravna I turned sharply to the southwest with the foremost units of the detachment and moved toward the Luico-Savogna valley in the vicinity of Polava on the wooded west slope of Hill 1077. I sent runners back to Ravna with instructions to send all companies of the detachment in the direction of Polava.

As we hurried by, we snatched eggs and grapes from the baskets of the captured pack animals. We moved on at the double! I cautiously bypassed Hill 976 up on the left, for I was unable to determine whether or not it was occupied by hostile forces. I did not want to be stalled. As on the Kolovrat Ridge a few hours before, I chose the way through clumps of bushes and small woods, for we had to move unobserved by the enemy in Luico and on Hill 976. Movement downhill was easy across the soft meadows. We wanted to capture the heavy battery that we had seen leaving Luico in the direction of Savogna. We quickly neared the valley floor.

The head of my detachment reached the valley a mile and a half southwest of Luico at 1230. The sudden apparition of the leading soldiers, among them Lieutenants Grau, Streicher, Wahrenberger and myself, who suddenly rose from the bushes a hundred yards



Moving down slope at the double.

east of the road, petrified a group of Italian soldiers who were moving unsuspectingly along, partly on foot and partly awheel. They were totally unprepared to encounter the enemy two miles behind the front at Golobi and they fled at top speed into the bushes to the side of the road, probably expecting to be fired on at any moment. But nothing was farther from our minds than that.

We reached the road and began to dig in at a point where the road made two sharp turns. All enemy wire lines were cut immediately. The 4th Company and 3d Machine-Gun Company, which had arrived, were disposed in the bushes and undergrowth on the slopes on both sides of the valley so that, though invisible, they commanded the valley by fire far to the north and south.

Unfortunately it turned out that we had lost contact with the remaining companies shortly after passing through Ravna, that is,

while we were on the west slope of Hill 1077. That was a hard blow for I needed at least two or three more companies to execute my planned advance against Mount Cragonza and to block off the Matajur road. I sent Lieutenant Walz back with the mission of bringing up the remaining companies as soon as possible and of informing Major Sproesser of our accomplishments and of our future plans.

Meanwhile, to our great astonishment, Italian traffic started up again on the Luico-Savogna road. From north and south single soldiers and vehicles came unsuspectingly toward us. They were politely received at the sharp curves of the road by a few mountain soldiers and taken prisoner. Everyone was having fun and there was no shooting. Great care was taken that the movement of the vehicles did not slacken on the curves thereby alerting any that might be following. While a few mountain troops took care of the drivers and escorts, others seized the reins of the horses or mules and drove the teams to a previously designated parking place. Soon we were having trouble handling all the traffic that came from both directions. In order to make room, the vehicles had to be unhitched and moved close together. The captured horses and mules were put in a small ravine immediately behind our barricade. Soon we had more than a hundred prisoners and fifty vehicles. Business was booming.

The contents of the various vehicles offered us starved warriors unexpected delicacies. Chocolate, eggs, preserves, grapes, wine and white bread were unpacked and distributed. The worthy troopers on the slopes on either side were served first. Soon all efforts and battles of the past hours were forgotten. Morale two miles behind the enemy front was wonderful!

This happy state of affairs was disturbed by a sentry's warning. An Italian automobile was approaching at high speed from the south. A wagon was quickly dragged across the road, but a machine gunner who fancied the victim already escaping, fired from fifty yards, against my express command. The automobile stopped suddenly in a cloud of dust; the driver and three officers jumped out and surrendered. We captured everyone in the vehicle with the exception of one officer who reached the bushes below the road and escaped. A fourth soldier lay mortally wounded in the car. They were officers of a higher staff in Savogna who, perturbed by the interruption of telephone connections with the front, wanted to personally find out what was happening on the ridge. The automobile proved to be undamaged; its former driver drove it to the parking place.

About an hour had passed since we blocked the road and there was still no trace of the remainder of the detachment. We did not hear sounds of heavy combat either in the direction of Luico or Kuk. We hoped the hostile front had not closed behind us. In this case we would have been obliged to cut our way through to our own lines.

A new report of the sentry on the east side of the valley focused our attention to the north. A very long column of Italian infantry was approaching from Luico. Under the impression that they were far behind the front, the head of the column came marching up to us in a most peaceful manner. It had no security.

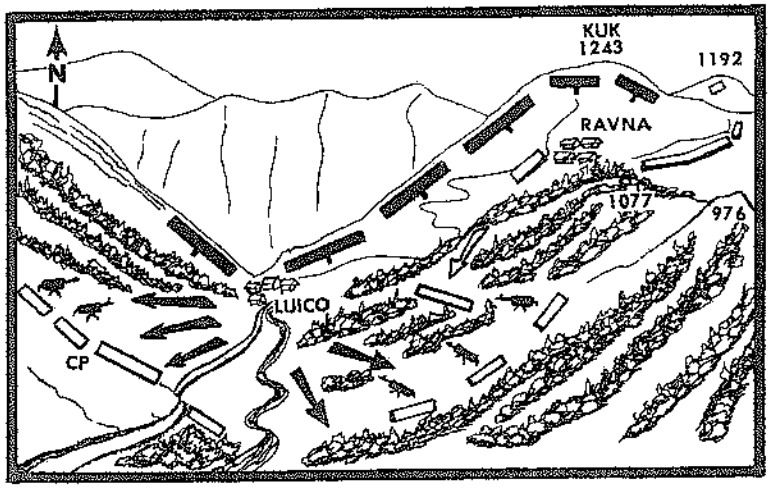
Alarm! Clear everything for action! I expected to be fighting within the next few minutes with 150 mountain troops against great numerical superiority. But our position was strong and our machine guns commanded the valley for a considerable distance. The closer I let the enemy advance toward our blockade, the less chance he had of deploying properly and attacking with his larger force. I ordered all to withhold fire until I gave the signal with my whistle. (Sketch 51)

The head of the hostile column was within three hundred yards of our blockade. In order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, I sent Deputy Officer Stahl toward the enemy as intermediary with a white armband. He was to order the enemy to lay down his weapons without a struggle, pointing out our possession of the slopes on both sides of the road. While he hurried toward the column, Lieutenant Grau, Wahrenberger, Streicher and I stepped out in front of the bend in the road. By waving handkerchiefs we intended to emphasize Stahl's words.

Stahl reached the head of the hostile column. Officers rushed forward, snatched off his pistol and field glasses which he had not discarded because of haste, and took him prisoner. He scarcely got a word in edgewise. Our waving did not help. The Italian officers ordered the leading groups to fire on us. We quickly disappeared around the bend. Then my whistle loosed a hail of fire from both slopes on the enemy column that swept the road clear in a few seconds. While the enemy was taking cover, Stahl succeeded in escaping and hurried back to us.

Since we had to be very careful with ammunition, I ordered the men to cease firing after a minute. The answering fire was weak. By waving a handkerchief I again demanded surrender. Too soon! The enemy made use of the pause in fire to rush out of the bushes in deployed formation. At the same time, several machine guns

opened fire on us from the slope just west of the road. Then it did become evident who was the better shot. Our fire from concealed and very superior positions had excellent effect on the still densely massed enemy. After a five minute fire fight I once again



Sketch 51
The fight with the Bersaglieri Regiment near Luico.
View from the south.

demanded their surrender. Again in vain! Again his forward units charged us during the pause in firing. They were about ninety yards away.

Finally, after ten minutes of very violent firing the enemy conceded that he was beaten and gave the sign of surrender. Thereupon we ceased fire. Fifty officers and 2,000 men of the 4th Bersaglieri Brigade laid down their weapons on the valley road and moved toward us. I entrusted the capable Deputy Officer Stahl with the job of gathering and moving the prisoners through La Glava and Hill 1077 to Ravna. I could spare only a few riflemen to form an escort.

We were reinforced by the 3d Company, which had also intervened during the final phase of the fight with the Bersaglieri from the slopes east of the valley. Sounds of violent combat had been coming from the direction of Luico for some time. In order to

clarify the situation there, I armed the captured automobile with a heavy machine gun and traveled in the direction of Luico. It took quite some time to get by the Italian weapons and equipment which littered the road for nearly three quarters of a mile. Just south of Luico I met the heavy Italian battery observed from Ravna; its horses lay dead in the road. When I arrived in Luico itself toward 1530, the other units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion under Major Sproesser and the 2d Battalion of the Life Guards had just reached Luico and the valley to the south. They had attacked from Ravna. I met Major Sproesser at the south entrance of the town just as units of the 2d Life Guards Battalion were driving the enemy up the Matajur road in the direction of Avsa.

I suggested to Major Sproesser that, with all available units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, I climb toward Mount Cragonza on the shortest way across country from Polava and capture that peak. If we held Mount Cragonza, then the enemy on Mrzli peak would have to find another road to the south and we could attack him in the rear while he was engaged on the north and northeast by units of the 12th Infantry Division and the Alpine Corps. Besides that, control of Mount Cragonza permitted us to cut the only ridge road leading to Matajur and we could cut off all Italian batteries emplaced near or moving on that road. An advance against Mount Cragonza along the Matajur road through Avsa and Perati seemed less desirable to me. How did the enemy view the situation? After giving up Luico pass, strong Italian units were moving, in fairly good order, along the Matajur road to the east slopes of the Mrzli-Cragonza hill mass. Presumably they intended to occupy prepared rear positions there. On the Matajur road a weak rear guard was adequate to hold off the pursuer. This gave him time to reassemble his units and for deliberate occupation of the prepared positions. It was also assumed that the positions on both sides of the Matajur road were occupied. These considerations caused me to suggest climbing Mount Cragonza by the shortest possible route.

Major Sproesser agreed and gave me the units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion in and south of Luico (2d, 3d, and 4th Companies, 1st, 2d, and 3d Machine-Gun Companies, and the Signal Company). At the same time the Gössler detachment (1st, 5th, and 6th Companies and the Mountain Machine-Gun Detachments 204 and 265) was ordered to move toward Luico under the direction of Major Sproesser. Major Sproesser himself went to brigade headquarters in the Italian auto captured in Polava, in order to report regarding our previous battles and to secure artillery support for the anticipated actions.

Observations: The decision of the Italian commander on Kuk to stop the German breakthrough in the Kolovrat position by committing his numerous reserves for defense in several lines on the east slope of Kuk was incorrect. He gave the Rommel detachment the urgently needed respite (for organization of the defense, reassembly, bringing up of support). It would have been more advantageous to use these forces to recapture Hill 1192. The necessary fire support could have been given from the numerous positions on the north slope of Kuk. If the hostile command had succeeded in getting an attack going from the east against the Rommel detachment, the latter would have been in a very difficult position.

Further, it was not profitable to locate the three positions on the steep, bare and stony east slope of Kuk (forward slope). In hours of work the Italian soldiers barely succeeded in denting the ground even though their work was not disturbed by any harassing fire. Reverse slope positions on the west slope of Hill 1192 would have been much more favorable for the enemy since they would have been out of reach of our artillery and machine guns.

Furthermore, the enemy delayed in blocking the ridge road on the south slope of Kuk and in covering the bare slopes below the ridge road with fire.

At the start of the attack against Kuk, two or three Italian battalions opposed the Rommel detachment with numerous machine guns in commanding positions, in part well developed; in part hastily installed. The detachment first attacked only with two assault teams of 16 men each under the fire support of one machine-gun company, six light machine guns and two heavy batteries. These teams felt out the possibilities of approaching the enemy and I then used the main body to encircle the entire Kuk garrison, which was captured during the later hours of the morning by assault units from the Württemberg Mountain Battalion and a company of the Bavarian Infantry Life Guards.

In the attack the effects of the machine-gun and heavy-artillery fire against the hastily entrenched enemy proved to be especially

strong. In many places the enemy was unable to stand up under this severe nervous strain. This fire would have had little effect had the Italians been properly entrenched.

Our own machine-gun fire from Hill 1192 proved to be a magnet and attracted the entire attention of the Italian fire units, thus permitting our initial assault team and then the entire detachment, to reach the eastern slope of Kuk without suffering losses by means of the camouflaged road which was open to enemy observation.

In Ravna communications within the Rommel detachment broke down because a machine-gun company commander began to round up some of the captured mules. The result was that I reached the valley near Polava with only a third of my forces, could only block the Luico-Savogna valley, and had to give up blockading the Matajur road in the region of Mount Cragonza. To be sure, the units which dallied at Ravna later took part in the attack against the enemy at Luico, but our success would have been even greater had Mount Cragonza come into our possession on October 25. Doctrine: If an attack breaks into the defensive zone or a breakthrough succeeds, the reserves must stay up with the leading units and must not be diverted by taking booty, etc. On such occasions the most rapid pace is required of all rearward units.

A regiment of the 4th Bersaglieri Brigade, in march column, unexpectedly bumped into our road block in the narrow valley. Even though the leading units were pinned down by fire, the rearward units could have mastered the situation by attacking on the slopes to the east or west. Clear thinking and vigorous command were lacking here.

In the afternoon of October 25, 1917, the order of battle was:

Kraus Group: The 1st Imperial Rifle Regiment was attacking Stol from Saga. The 2d Battalion had taken Cum and the 1st Battalion had seized Pvrihum. The 43d Brigade was climbing Hill 1450. The assault company of the 3d Imperial Jäger Regiment was taking Mount Caal, the 13th Company of the 3d Jägers was attacking Tanamen Pass.

Stein Group: 63d Infantry Regiment of the 12th Division had advanced down the Natisone valley as far as the border two miles south of Robic and was driving all Italian reinforcements back. The Italian positions on the north slopes of Matajur were not being

attacked. Eichholz's Group was still engaged a mile south of Golobi and was gaining ground slowly, taking Golobi at 1700 and reaching Luico at 1800, only to find the town already in possession of the Bavarian Infantry Life Guards and the rear units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion. In the Alpine Corps, the Kuk garrison was captured at 1400 by units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion and a company of the Life Guards. At the same time the 6th Company of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion rolled up the Kolovrat Ridge from Hill 1110 to Hill 1114. After encircling Kuk and cutting off the Luico-Savogna valley, the Rommel detachment captured major elements of the 4th Italian Bersaglieri Brigade in a fight near Polava. The bulk of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion and the 2d Life Guards Battalion had taken Luico by attacking from Ravna. The 1st and 10th Jäger Battalions were fighting on the south slopes of Hill 1114 and, in the course of the afternoon, captured Hill 1044 and all of Hill 1114. In the 200th Division, the 3d Jäger Regiment was fighting south of Hill 1114 in the vicinity of Crai and, at 1800, the 4th Jäger Regiment took La Cima half a mile south of Hill 1114.

Scotti Group: The 8th Grenadier Regiment crossed the Judrio in an attack from Pusno against Mount Hum. The 2d Mountain Brigade took Cicer and the 22d Mountain Brigade took St. Paul.

The results were: On October 25 the powerful third line of Italian positions on Kolovrat Ridge south of the Isonzo had been smashed as far west as the Luico pass, and to the east to Hill 1114, principally through the combat activities of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion. This action permitted the Alpine Corps and the units of the 12th Division north of Luico to continue their advance.

The Storming Of Mount Cragonza

With the other units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion that I had been given in Luico, I rushed back at top speed to the road block north of Polava, where we quickly divided the captured pack animals among the seven companies which now made up my detachment. Without pause we began climbing in the direction of Jevscek and Cragonza. The more rapidly we went, the greater the probability that any enemy force we ran up against would be unprepared.

In spite of the tremendous exertion and privations of the past

Observations: The night attack of the Rommel detachment on the Klautana Pass failed because the combined fire of the machine-gun company and the advance of the assault companies were not synchronized.

Pursuit To Cimolais

The matter-of-fact manner in which the mountain troopers carried their heavy burdens was amazing. Without appreciable rests they had been on the road or in battle for twenty-eight consecutive hours. Twice within this time they had climbed the Klautana Pass, a total difference in elevation of some six thousand feet. We moved downhill with a free gait. The Gössler detachment, as advance guard, had a considerable head start; we caught up with them at noon in Klaut village and moved on. The Gössler detachment ran into the enemy near Il Porto and attacked. A serious battle did not develop for the enemy withdrew to the north. While the Gössler detachment (5th Company, 3d Machine-Gun Company) moved toward Il Porto, the Rommel detachment (1st, 2d, and 3d Companies, 1st Machine-Gun Company) left St. Gottardo as advance guard for the Württemberg Mountain Battalion which had been reinforced by the 1st Battalion of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment and was moving on Cimolais.

The Rommel detachment now deployed in pursuit of the enemy who was retreating along the western edge of the valley leading towards Cimolais. This valley, with sheer rock walls towering to some six thousand feet on either side, narrowed appreciably as we approached the town. Bushy terrain on both sides of the road concealed our movements from the enemy. A few cyclists under Lieutenant Schöffel, and as many of the staff as were mounted, acted as a sort of security line ahead of the deployed companies.

Darkness was falling as we reached the near bank of the Celina River just east of Cimolais. The gravelly stream bed, more than one hundred yards wide, was nearly dry. It seemed that the enemy had moved on in the direction of Longarone, since Cimolais appeared to be unoccupied. With the cyclists disposed on a broad front, I crossed the bed of the river. Not a shot was fired. This being so, Lieutenant Streicher and I rode up into the town. The local magistrate greeted us with extreme politeness, told us that everything

had been prepared for the German troops, and attempted to press into my hand the keys of the town hall. How much could we trust all this? Had not, perhaps, the enemy prepared a clever ambush?

I sent the cyclists a short distance down the western road toward Longarone to provide security. Then the dead-tired Rommel detachment marched in and, on the alert, took up quarters in the southern section of the town where it secured the road to Longarone and the way toward Fornace Stadion. The billets were good and food was abundant. After the prodigious efforts of the Rommel detachment—thirty-two hours of uninterrupted battle or marching with very few pauses—a few hours sleep were needed to restore these riflemen to battle fitness. Who could tell what lay ahead of us farther down in the valley of the Piave?

The staff of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, the signal company, the Schiellein detachment (4th, 6th Companies, 2d Machine-Gun Company), and the 1st Battalion of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment, moved into the northern part of Cimolais. The latter provided security to the north. Night had fallen. The cyclists of the Rommel detachment under Lieutenant Schöffel reported the enemy to be in position digging himself in on the slopes of Mount Lodina (1996) and Mount Cornetto (1793). This report was transmitted to the battalion.

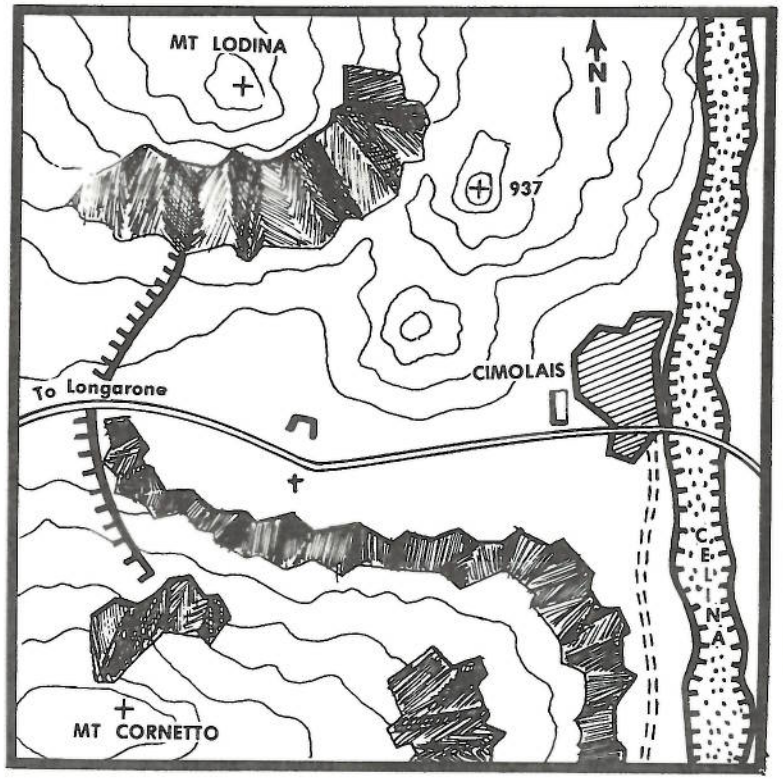
The battalion order arriving toward midnight read in part:

"While the 3d Company attacks the enemy west of Cimolais in the morning of November 9, from the west edge of Cimolais, the Rommel detachment (1st, 2d Companies, 1st Machine-Gun Company) encircles the hostile positions west of Cimolais via Mount Lodina (making the ascent before daybreak; similar envelopments by Schiellein's detachment (4th, 6th Companies, 2d Machine-Gun Company) via Mount Cornetto (1792), Mount Certen (1882), Erto, and by Gössler's detachment (5th Company, 3d Machine-Gun Company) via Hills 995, 1483 and Erto." (Sketch 63)

An ascent by night over rugged, impassable rocky mountains, sixty-six hundred feet high (an elevation differential of forty- nine hundred feet) seemed impossible to me in view of the complete exhaustion of my men. Shortly after midnight, I went to Major Sproesser and asked him to change the orders. I suggested attacking the enemy west of Cimolais frontally with my entire detachment. Major Sproesser unwillingly changed the order so that only one company of the Rommel detachment had to execute the encirclement via Mount Lodina, while the other companies were at my disposal for the frontal attack.

Attack On The Italian Position West Of Cimolais

Three hours before daybreak, the 2d Company under Lieutenant Payer, guided by a native, moved off via Mount Lodina to encircle the hostile position to the north. By 0500, Lieutenant Schöffel found



Sketch 63
The situation near Cimolais.

the enemy west of Cimolais was completely quiet. He surmised that, as on the previous day, the positions had been vacated.

Thereupon, I prepared for combat and ordered the mounted company commanders to the southern end of Cimolais. I rode off with

my cyclist guards to determine whether the enemy actually had retreated and to reconnoiter the attack terrain in front of the hostile positions on both sides of the pass road. It was just first light as we trotted forth from the southern exit of Cimolais. The road rose gently toward the mountain and the cyclists were fifty to a hundred yards ahead of us.

When we reached La Crosett Chapel, 160 yards west of Cimolais, the slopes in front of us began to flash. Machine-gun and rifle

Sketch 64
The surprise machine-gun attack against the staff on reconnaissance. View from the east.

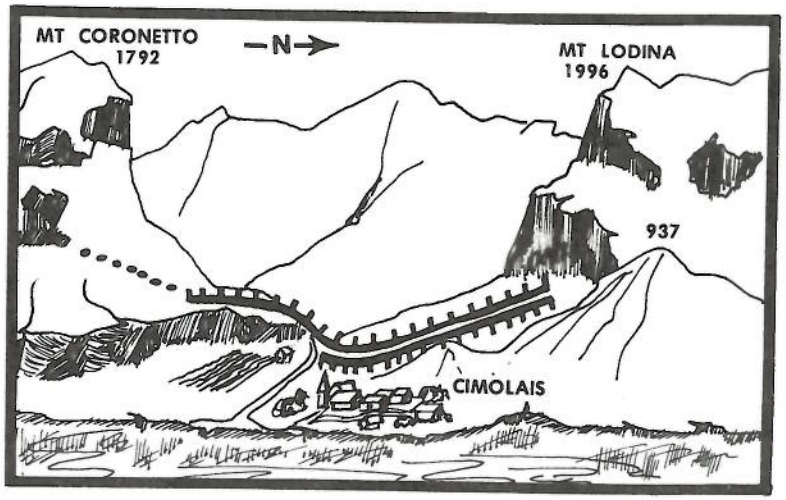
fire struck the road and whistled around our ears. In a few seconds, the cyclists were off their bicycles and riders off their horses, which galloped back toward Cimolais. Soon the whole reconnaissance staff gathered in La Crosett Chapel. No one was injured. The walls of the small chapel protected us against the lively fire now concentrated on our shelter. Soon the roof slate began to splinter under Italian machine-gun fire and the fragments cascaded down. The enemy had a better view of his target with each succeeding minute

and his nearest position was a bare two hundred yards away. One hostile shell would have been enough to dispatch us into the hereafter. Such a fate was a certainty if we stayed. (Sketch 64)

When the rifle and machine-gun fire died down a little, I determined the sequence in which we would run back individually from cover to cover toward Cimolais. Sergeant Brückner went first and I followed him. To be sure, the enemy fired heavily on each one of us, but since we ran out in different directions and never left cover at the spot where we had entered, we all succeeded in returning to Cimolais uninjured. Only a few horses were hurt on the reconnaissance trip. All of us would have been killed had the Italians allowed us to continue for an additional hundred yards.

Day had dawned. During the attack the observation squad of the detachment staff under Technical Sergeant Dobelmann had determined the extent of the hostile positions west of Cimolais with the detachment observation telescope (a 40-power glass captured in the Tagliamento incident). The flashes of the discharges in the morning twilight had facilitated their reconnaissance. Dobelmann took me up to the Cimolais church tower and pointed out the enemy who was in about battalion strength and well entrenched on both sides of the Cimolais-Erto road in fortified and well-developed positions abutting on the vertical rock walls of Mount Lodina about half a mile northwest of Cimolais. The enemy line ran along the steep boulder slope until it crossed the main road six hundred yards west of Cimolais. South of the road it ran along a rock ridge dropping abruptly to the east. The developed and connected positions ended 160 yards south of the road. From here, the northeast slope of Mount Cornetto was occupied by a hostile skirmish line of about company strength and a few machine guns. The hostile rifleman farthest left was about six hundred yards above the valley floor. The individual riflemen were skillfully dug in with a front toward Cimolais, but the rocky subsoil prevented the preparation of deep positions. Their positions consisted mainly of rocks and stones piled up round about. The hostile positions on the slope of Mount Lodina and on both sides of the road were protected by wire entanglements. The positions on the slope of Mount Cornetto did not need such protection, because vertical rock walls or roof-steep rocky rills made approach almost impossible. (Sketch 65)

During the night I had obligated myself to Major Sproesser to take these positions with a frontal attack. Could I keep my promise? I had imagined the task to be considerably easier. Now it was necessary to make an effort under these difficult conditions. A frontal attack on a broad front and astride the road could be made only against the wire-protected positions on Mount Lodina. It was exposed to flanking fire from Mount Cornetto. Of course it was possible that this effect might be partly counteracted by installing some machine guns on the commanding heights of a foothill of Mount



Sketch 65
Enemy positions west of Cimolais. View from the east.

Lodina eight hundred yards north of Cimolais, which the enemy had not included in his position, but the possibilities for adequate fire support for the attack against the wired-in positions were none too bright. An advance against the positions on Mount Cornetto appeared hopeless. A stone avalanche by the defenders would be sufficient to halt an attack without resorting to the hostile flanking fire from the Mount Lodina position. Daylight ended the possibility of an envelopment of the hostile positions via Mount Lodina, while a similar undertaking via Mount Cornetto offered no possibility of success. The east slope of the mountain consisted of vertical rock walls which probably no one had ever climbed.

There were no signs of the 2d Company, which had climbed Mount Lodina during the night, and I guessed it had moved to the north and would not be ready to attack until dark. I also figured

that Schiellein's and Gössler's enveloping units would not be able to attack prior to that time.

The only location from which suitable supporting fire could be delivered against the enemy positions west of Cimolais was a small hill eight hundred yards north of the town. This was a foothill of Mount Lodina, three thousand feet high, whose summit was covered with low brush. Having thoroughly surveyed the attack terrain with the glass from the church tower of Cimolais, I made the following decision: To attack the garrison on Mount Cornetto with combined fire of several light machine guns from commanding positions on the hill eight hundred yards north of Cimolais, to pin the garrison down, and then to attack up the valley and astride the road.

During the next few hours, unobserved by the enemy, I moved the 1st Company's light machine guns into position in the bushes on the knoll eight hundred yards north of Cimolais. They were placed under the command of Lieutenant Triebig, to whom I explained my offensive plan and the particular role he was to play. The remaining units of the detachment (the rest of the 1st Company, 3d Company, 1st Machine-Gun Company) assembled on the concealed slopes just northwest of Cimolais and the individual units were given their missions. For the time being no one was committed. The command post was near the 1st Machine Gun-Company; the communications squad established telephone connections with the fire detachment of light machine guns, as well as with the 1st and 3d Companies.

During these preparations, four mountain howitzers and several machine guns of the 1st Battalion of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment opened fire on the Italian pass position from the vicinity of Cimolais church without having previously established contact with the Rommel detachment or made any joint plans. Since this independent firing did not fit in with my plans, I went in person to Major Sproesser's command post in Cimolais and had them cease firing.

At 0900, I ordered the fire detachment of the 1st Company to open fire. According to orders, the fire of four light machine guns covered the hostile riflemen farthest left on the slope of Cornetto, while two light machine guns pinned down the remainder of the Cornetto garrison. Of course, the distance was excessive for the light machine guns (over fifteen hundred yards), but the effect was excellent. We observed it from various positions with the glass. To

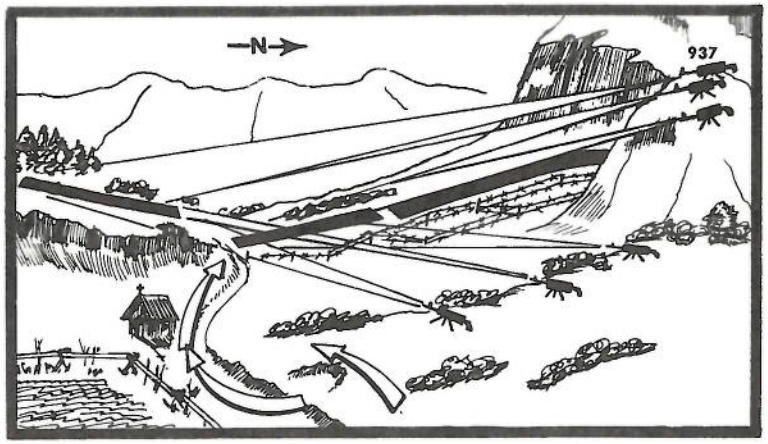
be sure, on the southeast flank the Italian riflemen, exposed to the fire from commanding positions, were not hit, but they were so covered with fire that they quickly abandoned their skirmish trenches and sought refuge in the hitherto unendangered zone of their neighbors to the left. The light machine-gun fire of the mountain troops followed them, and it soon became too hot for the Italian soldiers even in their new holes. They moved rapidly toward the prepared position south of the pass road hoping to find shelter there against our fire. (Sketch 66)

At first only a few Italians moved, but an entire platoon was soon under way. That was what I had been waiting for. The 1st Machine-Gun Company was ordered to take up the fight from the hill just west of Cimolais. Up to that moment we had been unable to occupy that position because of its exposure to fire from Cornetto. The Cornetto garrison had been driven out. When the first heavy machine guns chimed in, a crowd of Italians (at least a company) on Cornetto, seven hundred yards away, rushed panic-stricken toward the southern end of the prepared positions on the cliff 160 yards south of the pass road. The effectiveness of our weapons increased considerably. One heavy machine gun after the other joined the fight. In addition we had the fire of the six light machine guns from very commanding positions. Across from us men were stampeding toward the narrow trench. It was soon jammed with soldiers and offered little protection against our light machine guns which were providing most effective plunging fire.

The 3d Company was ordered to attack astride the road. It had nothing to fear from the Cornetto slope, and the machine-gun company was pinning down the remaining Italian positions. The machine guns did their job. While the 3d Company worked its way forward in deep echelon, covered against the fire of the Italian garrison on the Lodina slope, the automatic weapons from the front and above covered the hostile positions south of the road, which were full of men. They pinned down the enemy north of the road and diverted him. The Italian positions south of the road began to empty. Movement was to the rear. The enemy had difficulty in escaping through the close network of German machine-gun fire delivered at 550 yards range. Most of the fleeing enemy were mowed down in a few minutes. I had the conduct of fire under complete control; for I was with the machine-gun company, and had a telephone line to the light machine-gun fire detachment upslope to the rear.

The 3d Company reached the hostile entanglements and smashed its way into the pass positions, splendidly supported by the heavy and light machine guns. We had won!

I ordered the fire detachment to continue firing. With everything else I followed rapidly into the captured pass position, using the same route as the 3d Company. The hostile garrison on the Lodina



Sketch 66
Attack west of Cimolais. View from the east.

slope still held out. A report was made to the battalion regarding the successful attack, and at the same time cyclists, mounted runners, and horses were ordered forward. When I arrived in the captured position, the Lodina garrison of two officers and two hundred men also laid down its arms. Particularly pleasing were our few losses; only minor wounds were listed. I had not expected that we could take the hostile position so cheaply.

Units of the hostile garrison fled to the west. My next job was to follow and overtake them and to capture the Piave valley as soon as possible.

Observations: We would have been spared the fire attack of the enemy on the reconnaissance staff had the combat reconnaissance

against the enemy west of Cimolais been more thorough during the night of November 8-9.

On the other hand, their fire attack allowed us to determine their precise location. Technical Sergeant Dobelmann, the independent observer of the detachment, was especially skillful in using the fire attack to locate the enemy positions.

From a technical standpoint, the attack at Cimolais was a headache until the precise solution was found. Here the psychological effect of light machine-gun fire even at great distances was taken into account. The first Italian soldiers leaving Mount Cornetto caused panic among their fellows.

The cooperation of the weapons in the attack against the enemy west of Cimolais was masterful. Very strong fire was concentrated at the place of breakthrough just before the 3d Company attacked. The well-prepared telephone net made tight control of the attack possible.

Pursuit Through Erto And The Vajont Ravine

We had no time to reorganize, for to leave the fleeing enemy alone, even for a few minutes, might have given his commanders an opportunity to reestablish control. I sent everything I could lay my hands on in pursuit. The rearward units and fire detachments were ordered to move up the road at top speed.

Machine-gun fire from the slopes of Mount Lodina, three hundred yards west of the captured positions slowed our pursuit. This fire was coming from elements of our 2d Company who, due to their considerable height, were unable to distinguish friend from foe and thought us to be Italians. We had no protection against their fire and the next few minutes were most disagreeable. Fortunately, they realized their error and shifted their fire. During this interlude we lost contact with the enemy and we had to speed up and make up for lost time, for we wanted no more delays short of Longarone. Lieutenant Streicher and I reached St. Martino at 1010 with the leading units of the 3d Company. At the same time the cyclists and mounted runners arrived with the staff's horses from Cimolais.

The road made a very wide curve to the north and widened half a mile west of St. Martino in the village of Erto-e-Casso. The mountains receded on both sides and small closed columns of

Italians were rushing down the road six hundred yards ahead of us. I quickly emplaced a light machine gun for fire support but ordered it to fire only in case we got into a scrap. We chased the enemy down the road. On horse and bicycles we soon caught up with the nearest fleeing Italians. No firing ensued. A shout to surrender, a sign to disarm, and an indication of the direction of march which the prisoners were to take was sufficient. We reached and passed through Erto at the gallop. Tethered pack animals stood in the street but there was no shooting. Those we caught up with surrendered without resistance.

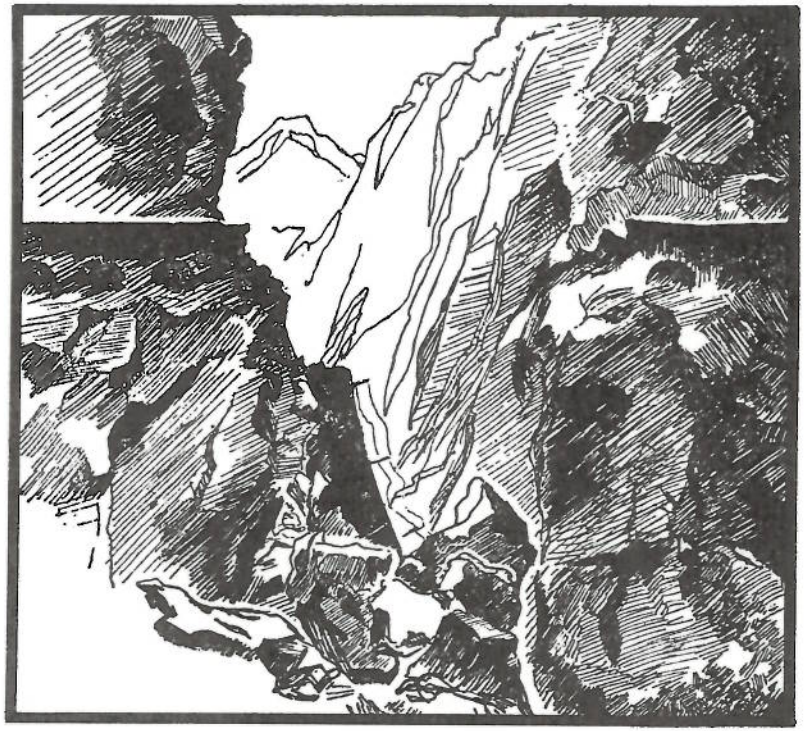
Up front with the head of the column, the pursuit looked like a race between horse and bicycle; farther back it looked like the tail end of an army baggage train. Puffing, the soldiers carried their light and heavy machine guns. The Rommel detachment was extended over several miles. Every rifleman realized that it was a question of running down the enemy and that success depended on speed.

The valley narrowed as we left Erto and the road dropped into the Vajont ravine. Two and a half miles still separated us from our objective—the Piave valley—and the most difficult part of the terrain, namely, the Vajont ravine, still lay ahead. It was two miles long and extraordinarily narrow and deep. Initially the road, blasted into the vertical walls which were four to six hundred feet high, ran along the north wall. A 130 foot bridge crossed the middle of the ravine five hundred feet above the roaring mountain brook. From this bridge the road ran along the south of the ravine. Various lateral ravines were also bridged and there were several long tunnels along the road proper. A carefully-placed demolition charge would have blocked the road to Longarone for days. As a matter of fact, a machine gun set up at the entrance to a tunnel would have held us up for a long while. All this was apparent from the map, but I did not have time to study it carefully.

After passing Erto, the downgrade gave the cyclists a considerable advantage over the horsemen. At a turn of the road they overtook more Italians; then they disappeared from our view. Shortly thereafter shots rang out. Farther forward we saw an Italian automobile driving west. We urged the horses on downhill as fast as they could go, and raced through the first pitch-black tunnel only to be almost thrown from our mounts by a terrific explosion a hundred yards ahead of us. We felt our way through the dark tunnel, which later proved to be full of Italians, toward the outlet.

Fifty yards farther we saw the results of the explosion! A deep chasm yawned before us. The enemy had succeeded in blowing up a bridge which spanned a lateral gulch of the Vajont ravine.

Where were my cyclists? Fighting farther west answered my question. We dismounted and I ordered the mounted runner Wörn to send forward all units of the detachment as soon as they came



The blown bridge in the Vajont ravine.

up. Then we clambered down to the right in the gulch, across the ruins of the blasted bridge, and back up on to the road again on the other side. We moved forward at a run to the place where the shots were still sounding.

We found the cyclists behind a bridge house at the north end of a bridge which crossed the Vajont ravine in a single span. They were firing on the crew of an Italian truck which had just driven

into the tunnel on the other side of the bridge. To all appearances, this was a demolition crew left behind to blow all bridges and tunnels which had been previously prepared for demolition. The cyclists told me they had crossed the other bridge just a few seconds before the explosion, and that Sergeant Fischer had gone up with the bridge in an attempt to pull the smoking fuze from the explosive charge.

Now another bridge lay before us. This one was 130 feet long and five hundred feet above the roaring stream. It was said to be

The mined bridge over the Vajont ravine.

the highest bridge in Italy. At both ends of the bridge, explosive charges could clearly be seen set in deep square holes cut into the center of the traffic lane. Had the fuses already been lit? The enemy at the far end of the bridge had ceased firing and could no longer be seen in the tunnel entrance. Had they actually withdrawn? If the bridge went up before our eyes, it could be days before we reached the valley of the Piave, which lay so near. Decisive measures were imperative.

I gave the following order to Sergeant Brückner of the 2d Company, who I knew to be an especially courageous and reliable soldier: "Take an axe, run across the bridge, and chop through all wires leading to the bridge from that side. As soon as that is done,

all of us will follow you in close formation and rip out the fuzes on the way."

A number of low-hanging cables led to the bridge and I was afraid that the Italians might use an electric detonator. The excellent Sergeant Brückner accomplished his mission, and as the last cable broke, I rushed forward with the cyclists, tearing out the fuzes on the way. It was in this manner that we gained possession of the undamaged bridge.

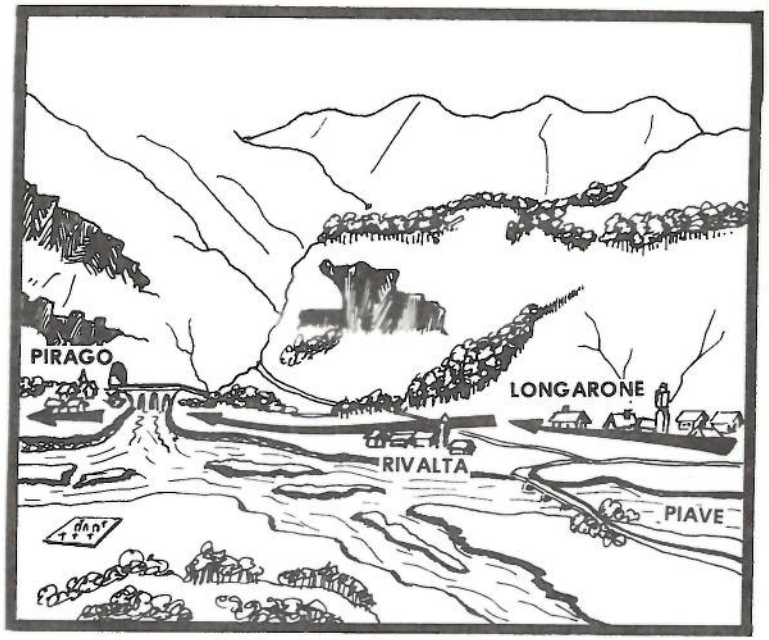
We moved on in great haste toward the Piave valley. We had to prevent the hostile blasting squad from carrying out its work at defiles along the road. Sergeant Brückner was sent out ahead with a few cyclists. The detachment to the rear received an order to increase its rate of march to the absolute maximum. After passing through several tunnels, the road sloped down to the outlet of the ravine. The vertical wall of rock, into which the road had been blasted, reached a height of fifteen hundred feet. Brückner's squad was not shooting and my guess was that it had reached the mouth of the ravine.

At 1100, I reached the ravine outlet with some cyclists and riflemen of the 3d Company and of the detachment staff—in all, ten carbines. We were less than a mile from Longarone. It was a beautiful sight. The Piave valley lay before us in the brilliant light of the midday sun. Five hundred feet below us the bright green mountain stream rushed over its broad, multibranched, stony bed. On the far side was Longarone, a long and narrow town; behind it lofty 6,000-foot crags soared up to the heavens. The automobile of the Italian demolition crew was crossing the Piave bridge. An endlessly long hostile column of all arms was marching on the main valley road on the west bank. It was coming from the Dolomites of the north and was heading south through Longarone. Longarone and its railway station, as well as Rivalta, were jammed with troops and stalled columns. (Sketch 67)

The Fight At Longarone

The situation in which we found ourselves was one which did not present itself to many soldiers during World War I. Thousands of the enemy, retreating in orderly fashion in a narrow valley hemmed in to the right and left by unscalable mountains sixty-six hundred feet high, were in complete ignorance of the danger which threatened their flank.

The hearts of the mountain riflemen leapt with delight. Those Italian forces must not retreat farther, that was certain. I quickly put my ten carbine soldiers in dense clumps of bushes a hundred yards south of the road, and we proceeded to open fire on the



Sketch 67
The Piave river near Longarone. View from the east.

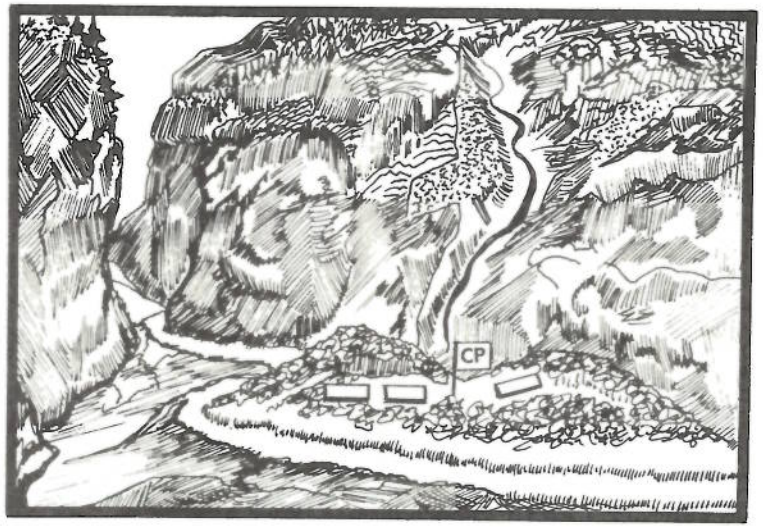
columns on the Rivalta-Pirago road at a range of about fourteen hundred yards. We concentrated our fire on a place where escape was impossible for the enemy; on the right, the rocky wall; on the left, the Piave! The leading elements of the 3d Company began to arrive breathless at the mouth of the pass, and they reinforced the firing line. (Sketch 68)

In a few minutes our rapid fire had split the hostile column in two. The northern half marched back toward Longarone while the southern half quickened its pace. Minutes later, the enemy turned a large number of machine guns against us. The fire was ineffective for we had occupied good positions among the bushes on the for-

ward slope and had moved away from the mouth of the Vajont ravine. The Italians only fired at the road and up the Vajont ravine, but their actions did slow the advance of our reinforcements.

Small groups of the enemy in Longarone now tried to run the gauntlet to the south. A platoon of the 3rd Company, with two light machine guns, was now in position south of the Vajont ravine and it quickly discouraged these ventures.

Suddenly, one of my runners noticed a company of Italian in-



Sketch 68
Position in the bushes just south of the mouth of the Vajont ravine. View from the west.

fantry descending the rock walls in our rear (from the direction of Hill 854). I moved a few riflemen and a light machine gun to meet this new threat. The enemy continued to climb down the steep wall in column of files and came to within three hundred yards of us. Things looked promising, for any man hit when we opened fire would have fallen down the cliff and dragged several of his comrades along. I was sure of success. But I did not fire immediately; rather, I shouted to the enemy to surrender. The enemy saw that the game was up and surrendered. Had we discovered him

five minutes later, he would have been down the steep wall and could have done us much harm.

In the Piave valley the enemy blew up the bridge east of Longarone. An attempt to move off in the direction of Mudu in closed column was thwarted by our fire. Only in very small groups was it possible for the enemy to move at all on the Mudu-Belluno road or along the railway line running south. The situation remained unchanged even when several hostile batteries chimed in from the knolls south of Longarone. They did not find our positions south of the Vajont ravine either. Instead, dozens of shells hit on the pass road in front of and in the Vajont ravine, as well as on the cliffs above the road. In spite of the very unpleasant effect of the hostile machine-gun and artillery fire, which was increased considerably by falling rocks and stones, by 1145, the remaining units of the 3d Company, as well as the 1st Company and a platoon of the 1st Machine-Gun Company, had reached the heights a hundred yards south of the entrance of the road into the Vajont ravine.

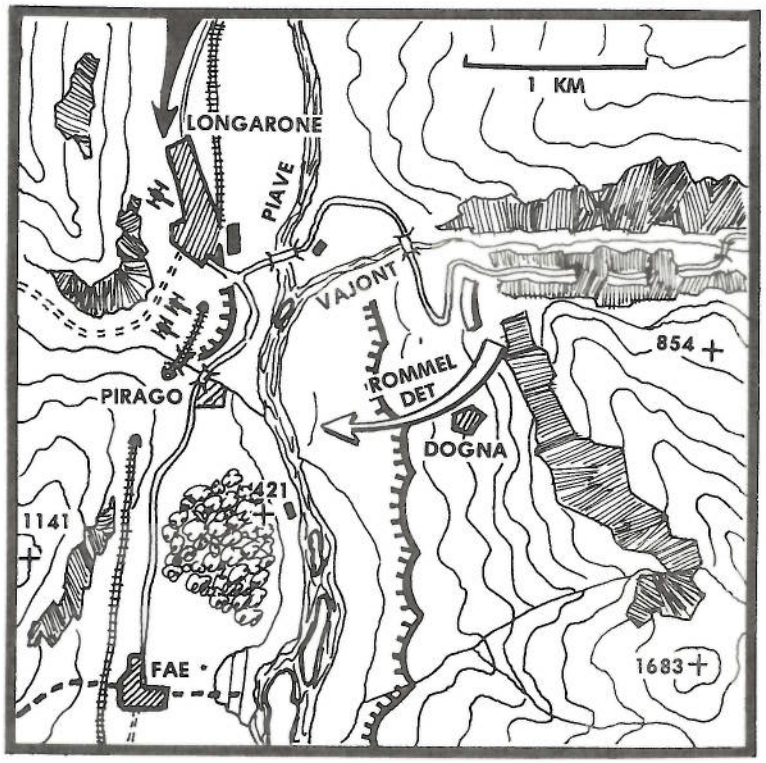
In order to block the road and railway toward Belluno on the west bank of the Piave and to capture all hostile units coming from the north, I sent the 1st Company, reinforced by the heavy machine gun platoon, through Dogna to the west bank of the Piave in the vicinity of Pirago. The entire 3d Company furnished fire support for this movement and prevented the enemy from marching anywhere in closed formation.

In file with very short intervals, the 1st Company hurried off in the direction of Dogna. Its way there led over a steep, grassy slope devoid of cover and fully exposed to enemy observation. Italian machine guns and batteries turned their fire on the company, but it managed to reach the protecting houses of Dogna almost without losses. The hostile machine-gun and artillery fire increased perceptibly with its bulk falling in the Vajont ravine.

Then we saw the 1st Company west of Dogna moving across the bed of the Piave. But the river bed offered no protection against observation, and still less against fire. Very soon the Italians around Longarone poured such a hail of fire on the 1st Company that only rapid retreat to Dogna prevented heavy losses. While this action was in progress I hurried to Dogna with the detachment staff. Telephone wire was laid to the 3d Company, which remained in the former position. Shells and machine-gun fire sped us on our way. The enemy was firing on each individual.

In Dogna I met the 1st Company, which had just returned from

the Piave channel. This failure did not discourage me. That an entire company did not manage to get through the hostile fire zone in the Piave River bed did not mean that such a maneuver was im-



Sketch 69
Crossing the Piave at Pirago and Fae.

possible for a few men who could take better advantage of the terrain and perhaps veer off somewhat farther to the south.

The heavy machine-gun platoon was so emplaced on the top floor of a house that it covered the railway and highway bridge at Pirago, a thousand yards away, across which small groups of Italians were moving southward. Its mission was to bar this road to larger units. We had less than a thousand rounds per gun and this meant close economy in our ammunition expenditure.

Then I sent several scout squads, under particularly capable leaders, across the Piave. They were to cross the river in very loose formation and, once on the west side, were to move to the vicinity of Pirago and capture all the small enemy groups which were straggling south. As soon as a fairly large number of prisoners had been gathered, they were to send them to the east bank of the Piave in the direction of Dogna. This was a difficult mission and required a maximum of skill and dash from the men as well as from the leaders.

The five scout squads moved forward under strong fire support but their progress was slow. Under these circumstances, I doubted whether any of them would reach the west bank of the Piave.

Meanwhile, Major Sproesser had arrived at the mouth of the pass with the signal company and the attached 1st Battalion of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment. Upon my request, the signal company now relieved the 3d Company in the position south of the mouth of the pass. Then, by rushes in small groups, the 3d Company joined us in Dogna.

We saw no signs of the scout squads in the river bed, although hostile machine guns were spraying the bare gravel banks of the half mile wide river bed. Toward 1400, I attacked from Dogna with the 1st and 3d Companies on a broad front in the direction of Pirago. My idea was to get some units across the river and block the valley road on the west side by the fire of the rest of the detachment. Heavy machine-gun and artillery fire drove us to ground after we had covered a few hundred yards, and we had to dig to find cover. Our net achievement was that we were deployed on a broad front six hundred yards from the enemy's line of retreat and that our attack had drawn the enemy fire from the scout squads farther to the south.

I was skeptical as to whether or not any of the five scout squads had reached the west bank of the Piave, so I sent out two other squads under Lieutenants Streicher and Triebig. The former was soon incapacitated by the blast effect of an Italian shell on the main branch of the Piave, and the latter was wounded by machine-gun fire. It seemed impossible to get a single man across the river. From two sides the Italian artillery cut up the terrain in which we were lying. His guns were in position just south of Longarone and in the vicinity of Mount Dregnon (southwest). The enemy did not seem to lack ammunition.

The detachment staff dug in behind a small stone wall in the bed of the Piave. This place was the favorite target of an Italian battery. Various gaps in the stone wall showed that the enemy had made his bracket but we had used the spade to good effect.

Technical Sergeant Dobelmann studied the region south of Longarone with his powerful glass; the adjutant was out on reconnaissance, and I dictated the Cimolais combat report to Sergeant Blattmann who was being trained as detachment clerk. The fire of the enemy continued in undiminished intensity and the 3d Company bore the brunt of it. Now and again on the west bank, we could see small groups of the enemy and occasional vehicles hurrying southward through our fire zone.

Toward 1430, the 3d Company and the 1st Machine Gun-Company of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment arrived in Dogna. They were to support us. The leaders reported at my command post. I did not want to expose additional troops to the hostile fire in the river bed, so I left these new units in reserve in Dogna and committed only one heavy machine gun platoon, in order to increase the volume of fire being laid by the Württemberg Mountain Battalion on the Longarone-Belluno road and railway. I expected to be across the river before dark.

Seven scout squads had been on their way to the far bank of the Piave for hours. Not a single one had reported back. Could none of them have been able to cross the river? On the opposite bank we could still observe some of the enemy slipping away to the south but we were powerless to stop them. Ammunition, especially for the machine guns was running low and we had to use it sparingly. The minutes dragged on while the hostile fire continued, claiming an occasional victim.

Toward 1500, Technical Sergeant Dobelmann reported that he thought he saw mountain troops to the southwest on the opposite bank. He said an Italian, coming from the hill west of Fae, had been captured by a soldier standing behind a house near the railway. I grabbed the glass and convinced myself that everything was in order. No Italians would get past Fae.

But we waited in vain for the agreed return of prisoners to the east bank of the Piave. I had expected to make maximum use of their passage of the river by crossing my people at the same time.

Finally, toward 1530, we saw a dense mass of captured Italians a mile and a half south of us in the broad bed of the Piave. Most of them were already on the east bank heading toward Dogna. I was getting angry because we had lost our chance of shifting to the

other bank, when the Italian artillery around Longarone opened on this mass of prisoners. Apparently, the artillery thought they were German. The fire forced the prisoners to return to the west bank near Fae. This incident did not change our situation; as before, the enemy kept us pinned down with artillery and machine-gun fire.

Shortly before dark, a great number of Italian prisoners appeared near an old levee damming the westernmost arm of the Piave in the vicinity of Hill 431, a mile north of Fae and began to cross the Piave. What I hoped for all day happened. I moved the bulk of my detachment to the weir. We no longer worried about the hostile fire which was still being directed at our old positions and on the west edge of Dogna.

On the main branch of the Piave, hundreds of prisoners protected us from further hostile fire. The shifting of the detachment took little time. The prisoners showed us the best means of crossing the wild river with its many arms, some of which were very swift and chest-deep in places. A single man, even a good swimmer, reached the far shore only with difficulty; the strong current simply carried him away. The Italians grabbed each other's wrists and walked obliquely into the river, facing upstream with the body more or less bent forward, according to the strength of the current. We imitated them and were soon across. However, once there we set out for Fae. The ice-cold bath in the Piave helped us maintain a rapid pace.

We were glad to meet the scout squads at Fae. They quickly informed us as to their activities. Deputy Officer Huber and Technical Sergeant Hohnecker with sixteen men of the 1st Company succeeded in fording and swimming the Piave a mile south of Pirago, in spite of the very violent hostile machine-gun fire from Longarone, and took possession of Fae castle. Private Hildebrandt was killed. At Fae the small group blocked the road and railway to Belluno and captured the small squads of Italians coming from Longarone who believed they had reached safety. Lieutenant Schöffel arrived later. In the course of the afternoon the units of the 1st Company at Fae captured 50 Italian officers and 780 men, and a large number of vehicles of all types.

They were glad to see the arrival of these welcome reinforcements. At times it had been rather uncomfortable for so few men to have so many prisoners. Above all, the Italian officers needed to be strictly guarded. It had been impossible to move them off, and they were confined in an upper story of the castle and were guarded

by two mountain troops. I had more important things to do than to worry about them.

Our scout squads had cut all telephone lines connecting Longarone and Belluno. Nevertheless, I was convinced that help was on the way for the Italians who were trapped in Longarone—at the very least the hostile battery on Mount Degnon knew exactly what was going on in the vicinity of Longarone. I therefore gave the 3d Company of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment, reinforced by a heavy machine-gun platoon of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, the mission of providing security and reconnaissance toward the south, the most advanced outpost being about half a mile south of Fae with the reinforced company in the neighborhood of Fae.

I did not count on receiving additional forces. The encircling detachments of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion (the Gössler and Schiellein detachments and the 2d Company), even if they did not encounter the enemy, could not have arrived at the mouth of the Vajont ravine, eleven hundred yards east of Longarone, before midnight. There, Major Sproesser had the remainder of the 1st Battalion of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment, the signal company of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion and the 377th Mountain Howitzer Detachment, which was out of ammunition.

Should I have been satisfied to block the Piave valley to the north and south on the west bank? Should I have waited until the enemy attacked? No, that was not according to my taste. In order to gain the decision at Longarone quickly, I decided to make a night attack on Longarone with the units of my force still at my disposal (1st, 3d Companies of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion and 1st Machine-Gun Company of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment).

Night fell. The retreat of the enemy from Longarone toward Fae had ceased shortly after our passage of the river. Italian artillery delivered rapid fire in the vicinity of our crossing of the Piave channel. The enemy probably knew that the road to Belluno had been blocked. He had surely seen the eight hundred prisoners and the Rommel detachment crossing from bank to bank in the evening twilight. What did he have up his sleeve? A breakthrough attempt in the night? I had to anticipate him.

The heavy machine-gun platoon at Dogna was, from time to time, still delivering harassing fire on the road and rail bridges near Pirago as well as on the open road cut one hundred yards

north of that town. I now had a telephone message sent ordering them to cease fire since the detachment itself would be advancing along the road toward Longarone.

We moved off to the north. I led the point. The column moved in the following order: The light machine gunners marched on the right-hand side of the road with their weapons loaded for steady fire; in the ditch on the left were the riflemen in column of files at ten-yard intervals. The companies followed in columns of files. The detachment staff was at their head. We moved as quietly as possible for hostile sentries had excellent audibility on that clear and quiet night.

In spite of all precautions, the point was fired on by an Italian sentry three hundred yards south of Pirago. In the pitch-black night we saw the flashes of a few shots; then my light machine gun on the right hammered away. Its fire struck sparks from the road, a house wall to the right, and the steep rocks on the left of the road. The enemy did not answer for he had been swept away.

We continued the advance, reached Pirago without further encounter with the enemy, and crossed the bridge which we had blocked with fire during the day. Our machine guns at Dogna were silent, presumably because of the order sent them by telephone.

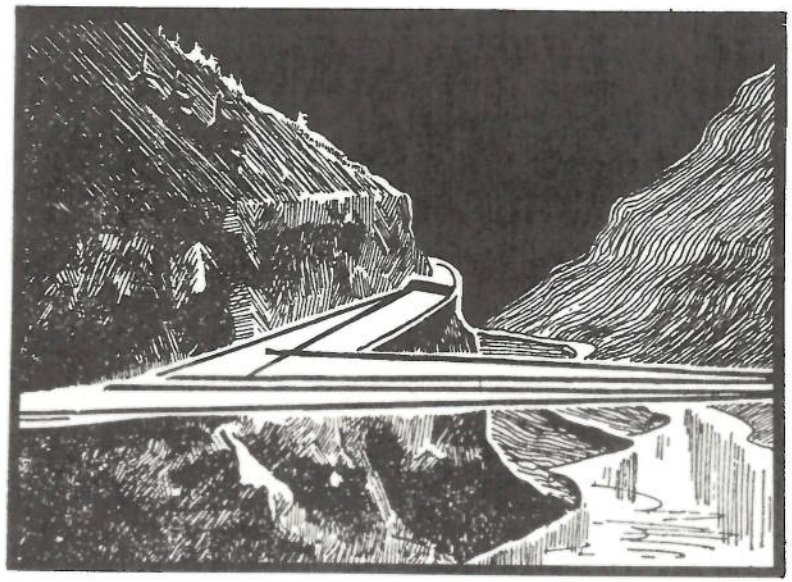
We worked our way forward on the road. On the cliff to the left some hundred yards away Italian artillery was firing shell after shell out over us in the direction of the crossing used by us in getting over the Piave. The shell fuzes left a peculiar luminous trail behind them in the dark night. It was a fine gratuitous fireworks display.

Only a hundred yards or so separated us from the first houses of Longarone. We moved forward slowly. There, in the light of the fireworks, a black wall extended across the bright road. It was about a hundred yards away. We did not know if it was a bend in the road or a roadblock. We moved up to within seventy yards and I made certain that it was a road block. We were expected.

I ordered a halt and brought up the machine-gun company. The company commander (a first lieutenant) received the mission of silently bringing several heavy machine guns into position alongside each other on the road and preparing a fire attack on the barricade. After a short fire for effect, I intended to attack with the 1st and 3d Companies and take the south entrance to Longarone.

Preparations for this undertaking were in full swing. The crews of four heavy machine guns were just about to bring their guns

into positions eighty yards in front of the barricade, when a sudden burst of machine gun fire hit us in the flank. Our own machine guns in Dogna were firing! The order to cease fire had not been transmitted to them. Sparks flew everywhere. We tried to take



Caught in a crossfire at the roadblock.

cover and in doing so created quite a rumpus as the machine-gun equipment was banged around. The roadblock opened up, and several machine guns began to sweep the area in which we had taken cover. Machine-gun fire at eighty yards, without a chance of taking cover, is enough to drive one crazy! Death stands very near at such moments. We ourselves did not get a chance to fire. The heavy machine-gun equipment was not assembled. We lay for minutes in the worst kind of crossfire. An attempt to take care of the enemy behind the barricade with hand grenades failed. The distance was too great. To attack on a narrow road against the fire of several machine guns was impossible. We sought shelter under semicircular recesses in the road wall, and when fire struck here from the flank, in the ditch to the left. Throwing hand grenades only increased the volume of fire from the roadblock. Losses mounted! Among others,

the leader of the machine-gun company of the 26th Rifle Regiment, lay severely wounded in the ditch to the left. It was a good thing that the night considerably decreased the Italians' accuracy.

The undertaking was a total failure and it remained to get away as quickly as possible without suffering excessive losses. I was pinned down by fire. By word of mouth I transmitted the order to withdraw to the bridge near Pirago. The units farther to the rear disengaged themselves with ease but those up front had a more difficult time. Moments when the enemy fire died down were rare. They were taken advantage of for short, quick sprints. We covered a few yards only to be forced to earth again when the machine guns opened up.

A few dashes brought us uninjured to the safety of a bend in the road, safety at least from hostile fire. Unfortunately, the machine gun platoons in Dogna caused a good deal of trouble even here. They blocked the highway bridge at Pirago. I had only a few of my mountain troopers with me. Part were already back in the direction of Pirago, but a considerable number were still up front near the barricade.

Strangely enough, the enemy ceased firing. Shortly after, the sound of voices came from that direction and came rapidly nearer. They were not mountain troopers. It was strange that none of the detachment came back. I hurried back to Pirago. On the way, I overtook a few mountain soldiers, among them a man with a flare pistol. I found no one at the bridge in Pirago. My orders to halt there had not been received.

A group of howling Italians came down the road and I did not know whether they were attackers or prisoners. I had no idea of what had become of my leading elements (3d Company and the machine-gun company of the 26th Rifle Regiment). I decided to use a couple of flares and clear up the situation.

I fired them just to the right of the highway bridge near the low wall leading to the mill and, in their light, I saw a closely packed mass of handkerchief-waving men rushing toward Pirago. The head of the group was a scant hundred yards away and the light of the flares made me an excellent target. The shrieking Italians did not fire a shot as they approached, and I was still undecided regarding their status.

The four or five riflemen with me were insufficient to stem that mob and the rest of the detachment seemed to have gone back in the direction of Fae. I ran down the road intending to catch up

with the bulk of my unit, face them about and stop the onrushing horde.

A few minutes later I gathered about fifty men together near a group of houses, three to six hundred yards south of Pirago. Lieu-

Attempt to block the road south of Pirago.
View from the south.

tenant Streicher took one half of the men and occupied a house on the right of the road, the remainder were used to bar the road. The men lined up with their carbines ready. Lieutenant Schöffel was on the left against the rock wall; Technical Sergeant Dobelmann and I were on the right by the house. The riflemen were instructed to fire only on my command. There were no flare pistols or flare ammunition. The enemy masses were unable to turn off to the left and darkness and lack of time prevented us from determining how things stood on the right where we assumed the Piave to be. We only had a few seconds to complete our preparations. The howling mob drew closer.

The night limited visibility to a bare fifty yards along the road and the terrain to the right and left was pitch black. When the enemy was within fifty yards I shouted "Halt!" and demanded their surrender. The answering roar was neither affirmative nor negative. No one fired and the yelling mass drew nearer. I repeated my challege and got the same answer. The Italians opened fire at ten yards. At the same time a slavo rang out on our side, but before we had a chance to reload (light and heavy machine guns were

unfortunately missing) we were overwhelmed and trampled down by the powerful mass. Almost all who were on the road fell into the enemy's hands. The bulk of the garrison in the house, whose upper story had only black painted windows, and consequently was poorly adapted for defense, escaped in the dark across the Piave. The Italians raced along the road to the south.

At the last moment, I escaped capture by jumping over the road wall and I raced the Italians moving along the road. I tore across country over plowed land, small brooks, over hedges and fences. The 3d Company, 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment and a heavy machine-gun platoon of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were still at Fae, a mile away. They faced south and were ignorant of the impending danger. The thought of losing this last remnant of my force gave me superhuman strength. I felt a path under my feet and raced on toward Fae.

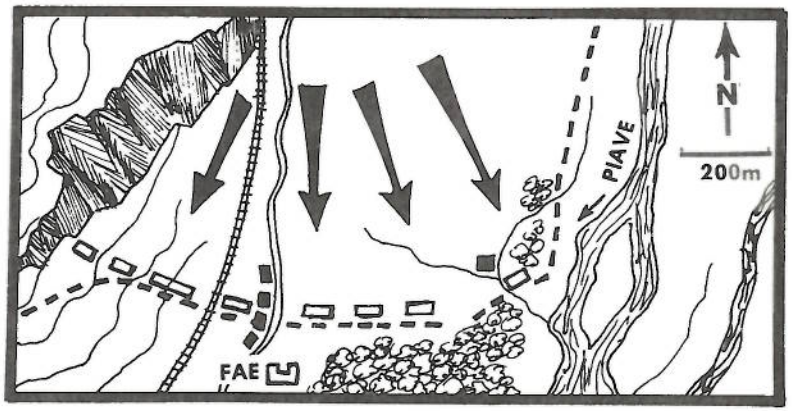
I succeeded in arriving before the enemy, and, with everything available, I hastily formed a new front to the north. I was firmly resolved to fight to the last man. Scarcely had the 3d Company of the 26th occupied the north edge of Fae, when we heard the Italians coming down the road. I opened fire when they were still some two to three hundred yards away. The hostile advance slowed down immediately and the Italian machine guns began to rattle, spraying their fire against the walls which sheltered the Styrian troops. The enemy appeared to be attacking to right and left of the road. A thousand men were yelling *"Avanti, avanti!"* ("Forward!")

If I wished to defeat a hostile breakthrough to the south, my reinforced company had to hold a line extending from the sawmill on the Piave, four hundred yards east of Fae castle, across the north edge of Fae to the cliffs of Mount Degnon, three hundred yards west of Fae, or a total front of nearly seven hundred yards. In the middle of this line the reinforced 3d Company of the 26th was already engaged on both sides of the road. Large gaps existed between Fae and the river and Mount Degnon. My last reserves consisted of one or two squads of the 1st and 3d Companies, the remnants of the forces which had advanced against Longarone. (Sketch 70)

In order to be able to sense hostile attempts at encirclement, and in order to have better visibility, I ordered a squad of mountain troopers to light fires along the entire front from the Piave to Mount Degnon. The riflemen knew that "the chips were down." Soon the sawmill on the Piave was burning and flames began to rise

from a large haystack fifty yards to the right of the road and from various houses and barns on the left above the road.

Units of the 3d Company of the 26th were withdrawn from the battle line and used for a continuous, if scant, garrison of the front.



Sketch 70
Position at Fae just before the enemy night attack.

In spite of the fierce hostile fire we succeeded in closing all gaps. My valiant orderly Unger offered to get help from the eastern bank of the Piave. He was a good swimmer and thought he had a good chance of getting through. Meanwhile dozens of hostile machine guns hammered against the walls of the castle. The hostile infantry lay densely massed ready for an attack about a hundred yards in front of us in ditches and plowed furrows. Again and again the battle cry: *"Avanti, avanti!"* was heard above the rattle of rifles and machine guns. The rapid fire of the good men of the Styrian and Württemberg Mountain troops prevented the enemy mustering sufficient courage to rise and advance. The enemy's fire front widened.

During this battle, Technical Sergeant Dobelmann, severely wounded, dragged himself across the field in the vicinity of the sawmill and into our lines. The splendid fellow had received a chest wound in the night battle on the road a mile north of Fae, but had been able to escape capture in the darkness and was able to make his way back to us.

I held a few riflemen ready in case the superior enemy succeeded in penetrating our thin line at some place. Two soldiers still held

the fifty Italian officers prisoner upstairs in the castle; the latter, knowing that their own troops were near at hand, became very bellicose, but did not dare attack the two soldiers.

The shots striking the north front of the castle rattled like hail. Most of the Styrians were in position at a wall on the north edge of Fae and fired shot after shot—even if unaimed—over the wall at the enemy. Whenever the Italians shouted their battle cry we increased our fire. This sort of fighting naturally required immense supplies of ammunition. Our supplies would have been soon exhuasted had we been unable to fall back on the abundant weapons and stores of ammunition in the castle yard—the booty of the Huber-Hohnecker scouting expedition in the afternoon. In the course of the battle, the rearming of our forward elements with Italian guns and ammunition was accomplished with the help of my few mountain troops. It was none the less unfortunate that the heavy machine-gun platoon in position on both sides of the road had only fifty cartridges for each gun.

For officers I had only the commander of the 3d Company of the 26th and Deputy Officer Huber. All others seemed to have fallen into enemy hands. I sorely missed Lieutenant Streicher.

The battle raged for several hours in undiminished violence. The front between the Piave and Mount Degnon filled and the enemy tried repeatedly to overwhelm us by sheer weight. Our uninterrupted rapid fire prevented a hostile breakthrough at all points. Our southern security element consisted of six men from the 3d Company of the 26th. No others were available. It was already close to midnight. New fires were started on the front, since the old ones threatened to go out. We waited in vain for sorely needed reinforcements. We believed that units of the 22d Imperial and Royal Infantry Division must be arriving on the east bank of the Piave and that the other detachments of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion also were there. We had no telephone communication with Major Sproesser's command post.

The enemy fire slackened shortly after midnight and allowed us to breathe more easily. Our losses were moderate, thanks to the skillful use of the small amount of available cover. We worked feverishly to strengthen our positions. Our outposts reported the enemy to be withdrawing and as soon as all firing had ceased we sent out patrols to maintain contact. One of these lost its able leader from fire at close quarters. Another returned at 0100 with 600 prisoners who had surrendered a short distance from our position. The bulk of the enemy withdrew to Longarone.

Reinforcements arrived at 0200 in the form of the entire 2d Company, which under Lieutenant Payer had made the circuit around Mount Lodina, and elements of the 3d and 1st Companies, which, after the night battle south of Pirago, retreated to the east bank of the Piave. We also welcomed the rest of the 1st Machine-Gun Company, which arrived with abundant ammunition, and the 1st and 2d Companies of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment under Captain Kremling.

The whole defense was reorganized and the castle itself converted into a strongpoint. Large quantities of ammunition were available. A company of the 26th Rifle Regiment provided security and reconnaissance to the south. Furthermore, the fifty Italian officers, who had been silent witnesses to the battle at Fae, were sent to the east bank of the Piave. Their crossing of the ice-cold Piave required a great deal of urging on the part of the escort.

Not without preparation, and therefore without surprise, the enemy launched another strong and vigorous attack about 0300 with heavy artillery concentrations at short range. Dozens of artillery shells burst along our line sending walls and gables crashing down. This was immediately followed by storming tactics against various positions, which led to hand-to-hand fighting. But our front held, since we succeeded in shifting our forces to the vital spot in every instance. In fact, we were not obliged to commit the reserve at any time and the whole affair was over in a quarter of an hour. Would the enemy try again? (Sketch 71)

This last assault, however, proved to be enough for the Italian command. Their considerable losses forced them to break off the battle and withdraw to Longarone. Unfortunately, we also had a few killed by the Italian artillery.

Shivering, we sat around in our wet clothes and waited for morning. We warmed ourselves by drinking a few bottles of Chianti with our comrades-in-arms from Styria. Before daybreak the 1st Company reconnoitered the road above the railway as far as the bridge at Pirago. Scout squads of the 2nd and 3d Companies reported the territory between the Piave and the Longarone road to be free of the enemy as far north as Pirago. As usual, the scouts returned with prisoners.

By 0630, another battalion of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment had arrived at Fae castle and it was used on security missions to the south. At the same time the Rommel detachment renewed the advance on Longarone. The 2d and 3d Rifle Companies and the 1st Machine-Gun Company marched along the road while

the 1st Company moved on the slope above the railway. Our idea was to tighten the noose about the enemy in Longarone.

We met Lieutenant Streicher on the way. He had escaped capture by the Italians in the fight south of Pirago, but in the attempt

Sketch 71
Italian night attack at 0300. View from the south.

to cross the Piave was swept half a mile down stream and washed ashore unconscious.

As we neared the Pirago bridges the enemy blew them up. Under cover of the 1st Company up on the slope to the left, we soon reached the site of the blown bridges to find, half buried under debris, a severely wounded mountain rifleman. There was no sign of the enemy on the other side.

Heavy machine guns were emplaced on the steep slopes just south of the bridge sites, and under their cover we scrambled over the wreckage of the iron bridges. As we approached the spot where the barricade had been placed the night before, we saw Lieutenant Schöffel riding toward us from Longarone astride a mule. He was followed by hundreds of handkerchief-waving Italians. Schöffel, who had been taken prisoner in the night battle south of Pirago, brought the glad news of the capitulation by the

entire Italian force around Longarone as written down by the enemy commander:

> Headquarters, Fortress Longarone
> To the commander of the Austrian and German forces:
> The forces in Longarone are not in any condition to offer further resistance. This Headquarters places itself at your disposal and awaits your decision as to the disposition of our troops.
>
> Major Lay

This happy ending to days of hard fighting made us feel fine, especially since we knew that our comrades, who had been taken prisoner at Pirago, were free again. The Italians lined up on both sides of the road and our march to Longarone was to the accompaniment of their cheer *"Evviva Germania!"* The commander of the 1st Machine-gun Company of the 26th Rifle Regiment, who had been captured, severely wounded, by the Italians before Longarone with the greatest part of his company, was driven out toward us in an automobile ambulance. Our progress through the crowded streets was very slow. I went ahead with the ambulance and, in the Longarone marketplace, found the units of my detachment who had been captured. Their arms and equipment had been restored and they held the town pending our arrival. My detachment was the first body of German troops to enter Longarone. We marched in and quartered ourselves in a group of buildings south of the church. It began to rain. There were thousands of Italians and it was slow work moving them from Longarone to the Piave flats to the east. The remaining units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, following the 22d Imperial and Royal Infantry Division, marched out of the Vajont ravine.

The other units of the battalion had attempted to come to our assistance during the pursuit and during the fighting on the west bank of the Piave. Immediately after the capture of the Italian positions west of Cimolais, Major Sproesser had initiated pursuit with the signal company of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion and the 1st Battalion of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment. This movement was contrary to the orders of the 43d Infantry Brigade. The nature of the terrain and the type of combat we were engaged in were such that relief by other units was unfeasible. On arrival in St. Martino, Major Sproesser again received orders from the 43d Rifle Brigade:

"The Württemberg Mountain Battalion will halt, camp, and spend the night in the mill at Erto. The 26th Rifle Regiment takes over the advance guard."

Major Sproesser answered:

"The reinforced Württemberg Mountain Battalion is fighting at Longarone and requests infantry support on the pass road and the forwarding of the 377th Imperial and Royal Mountain Howitzer Detachment."

The tenacity with which Major Sproesser stuck to his task, and his refusal to be diverted by orders of the 43d Brigade caused Captain Kremling, the commander of the 1st Battalion of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment, to remark: "I don't know which I should admire more, your courage before the enemy or your courage before your superiors."

Toward noon, Major Sproesser reached the exit of the Vajont ravine eleven hundred yards east of Longarone. It took some time for the signal company and units of the 1st Battalion of the 26th to work their way out of the ravine, which was being subjected to heavy enemy fire. Then the signal company relieved the 3d Company, which was advancing toward Dogna, and fired on the retiring enemy from the heights just south of the debouchment of the Vajont ravine road.

As soon as the leading companies of the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry cleared the Vajont ravine at 1400, they were sent to Dogna as reinforcements for the Rommel detachment. No other forces were at Major Sproesser's immediate disposal. The Gossler detachment (5th Company, 3d Machine-Gun Company) had climbed the Forcella Simon (1483) from Il Porto over Cra Ferrona (955). Here its splendid leader, Captain Gössler, an expert mountaineer, had fallen to his death while hurrying ahead of his detachment across an icy slope. The Schiellein detachment (4th and 6th Companies, 2d Machine-Gun Company) had climbed from Fornace Stadion across Mount Gallinut (1303) and had reached the Vajont ravine via Cra Ferrona (995). The 2d Company under Lieutenant Payer was descending Mount Lodina and was headed in the direction of Erto.

After the unsuccessful night attack by the Rommel detachment on the west side of the Piave, unbelievable reports reached Major Sproesser at his command post by the exit from the pass: "Enemy breakthrough south of Longarone—Most of Rommel detachment including commander taken prisoner." Soon thereafter, the sounds of the battle at Fae and the burning fires put an end to these rumors.

When our messenger, Private Unger, reached the battalion command post, Major Sproesser sent additional units of the 26th Rifle Regiment through Dogna to Fae, and later the 2d Company, which had arrived from its envelopment of Mount Lodina. The 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry began to build a footbridge across the Piave west of Dogna.

On November 10, Major Sproesser had his available forces ready for combat on the high ground a thousand yards east of Rivalta. These forces consisted of Schiellein's detachment (4th and 6th Companies and 2d Machine-Gun Company) and the Signal Company of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, four infantry guns of the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry and the 377th Imperial and Royal Mountain Howitzer Detachment. The Grau detachment (5th Company, 3d Machine-Gun Company) was marching up from Erto.

During the night Major Sproesser sent an Italian prisoner of war back to Longarone with the following message written in Italian by Dr. Stemmer:

"Longarone is surrounded by troops of a German-Austrian division. All resistance is useless."

When Major Sproesser found out, at dawn, that the Rommel detachment had renewed its advance against Longarone and that the enemy in Longarone was laying down his arms, he started to march to Longarone with the units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion located a thousand yards east of Rivalta, followed by the 43d Brigade of the 22nd Imperial and Royal Rifle Division.

November 10 was a rainy day and it took a long time to clear all Italian soldiers from Longarone's streets. Piles of weapons lay in the public square, and even Italian cannon were delivered there. The lowlands east of Longarone were full of prisoners. In all, over 10,000 men—an entire Italian division—had laid down their arms. Our booty amounted to 200 machine guns, 18 mountain cannon, 2 semi-automatic cannon, and more than 600 pack animals, 250 loaded vehicles, 10 trucks, and 2 ambulances.

My detachment's losses in the fighting at Cimolais, in the Vajont ravine, at Dogna, Pirago, and at Fae amounted to 6 dead, 2 severely wounded, 19 slightly wounded, and 1 missing. The losses of the 1st Battalion of the 26th Imperial and Royal Rifle Regiment were unknown.

Lieutenant Schöffel was captured in the attempt to stop the Italians south of Rivalta. At first he was beaten by the Italians.

Upon his complaint, he was brought before a company commander, who did not even apologize for the bad treatment, but wanted to have a personal "souvenir" from the German officer. Then Schöffel had to march along in the front line to Fae. When fighting broke out here, Schöffel lay at the edge of the road close beside an Italian officer who balked all attempts at escape. Schöffel found German fire especially unpleasant. When the Italians disengaged themselves at Fae around midnight, Schöffel was taken back to Longarone, where he encountered the other captured mountain and Styrian troops. Toward morning the captives had to march again toward the south under heavy guard. But they soon halted because, once again, the Italians failed to break through. The prisoners were then led back to Longarone. In the course of the morning, the Italian officers became very friendly toward Schöffel, who made exaggerated statements as to our strength. Finally he was sent toward us with the written message containing the capitulation of the Italian troops in Longarone.

Toward noon on November 10, Longarone was full of German and Austrian troops and sentries with fixed bayonets were required to retain possession of the quarters we had occupied on arrival. Most of my soldiers took off their wet clothes and devoted themselves to well-earned rest in the good and comfortable quarters. In the evening the mountain troops insisted on forming a torchlight procession for their leader.

Observations: After we succeeded in breaking through the hostile positions west of Cimolais, the mobile units (horsemen and cyclists) took over the pursuit of the retreating enemy. They succeeded in catching up with them and, with the exception of one bridge, prevented the Italian demolition squad from doing much damage. This mobile force made it possible to continue the pursuit.

The use of a few riflemen at the ravine exit was sufficient to halt an entire division. The Italians subjected this handful to heavy machine-gun and artillery fire. The riflemen were well dug-in and the fire did little harm. The enemy defensive tactics were incorrect. An attack by part of the enemy forces against the western outlet of the Vajont ravine would have saved the situation.

The attack by the Rommel detachment across the unprotected Piave valley west of Dogna was carried out under heavy fire. The troops made quick use of the spade. Meanwhile weak scout squads on the west bank captured those enemy units escaping to the south after weathering the fire of our detachment.

Large fires provided the necessary illumination during the night fighting at Fae, and the ensuing lack of ammunition was made good by rearming with captured Italian guns and ammunition. Both were accomplished under the strongest hostile fire, a remarkable achievement by the mountain troops.

Combat In The Mount Grappa Region

On orders of the 22d Imperial and Royal Infantry Division, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion moved into the second line and had a day of rest on November 11, 1917, when we buried our dead in the Longarone cemetery.

The momentum of the attack began to slow down. The tempo of pursuit slackened although the enemy was nowhere offering serious resistance.

In the course of the following days the mountain troops marched through Belluno to Feltre where they were attached to the German Jäger Division. On November 17 we moved down the Piave from Feltre. Violent fighting was going on in the vicinity of Quero and Mount Tomba and we were soon having difficulty in advancing through the narrow Piave valley, which was jammed with troops. We got into range of the Italian artillery, which was placing heavy interdiction fire on the valley road from time to time. Our information was to the effect that the leading Austrian units had encountered strong enemy forces on Mount Tomba.

While in Ciladon we received the mission from division to penetrate the enemy positions as far as Bassano by advancing across Mount Grappa.

In the afternoon the deployed battalion moved into the area just north of Quero, which was under the heaviest Italian artillery fire. The Italian artillery had excellent observation posts on Mount Pallone and Mount Tomba and it was small wonder that it had registered perfectly on the defile at Quero and on all other important points within range.

Major Sproesser sent the Rommel detachment (2d and 4th Companies, 3d Machine-Gun Company, one-third of the signal company, two mountain batteries and a radio unit) over Quero—Campo—Uson—Mt. Spinucia—Hills 1208, 1193, to Hill 1306, and the