

THE INNISKILLINGS MUSEUM

# BATTLE OF THE GARIGLIANO ITALY

17<sup>TH</sup>~18<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 1944



# THE GUSTAV LINE IS BREACHED

A first for the Inniskillings: Crossing of the Garigliano

Italy, 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> January 1944

## The Objective

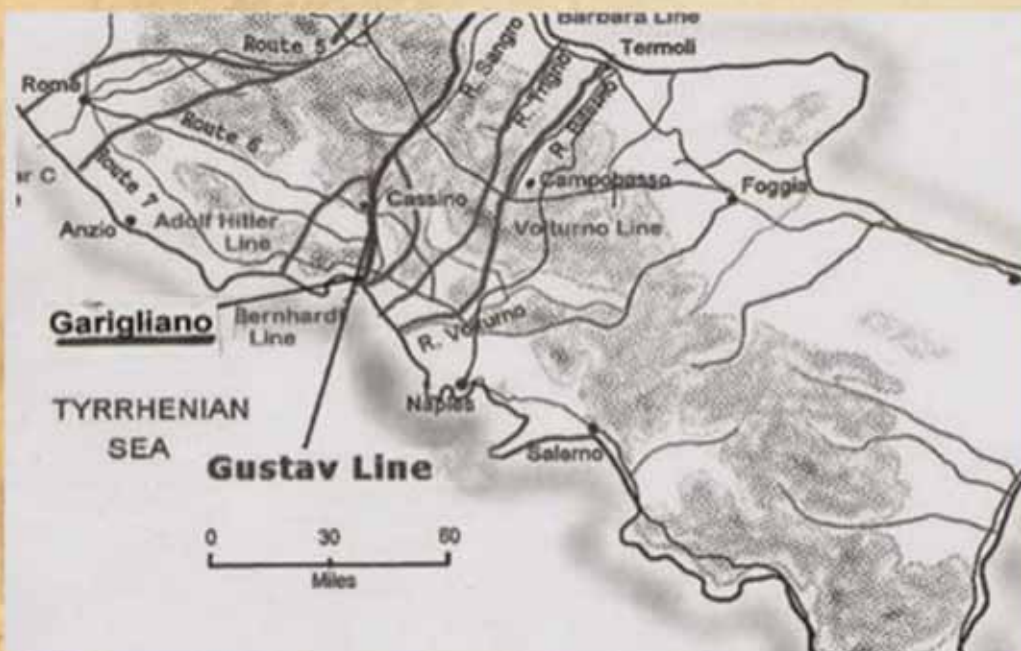
The Gustav Line was one of three German defensive lines south of Rome. It stretched across Italy and was anchored on Monte Cassino in the west. The plain of the river Garigliano, at the western end, not far from the sea, had all the attributes of the ideal German defensive zone. It is a wide, deep water obstacle, bisecting a plain flat enough to provide wide fields of fire from trenches and dug-outs. It was amply protected by mines. Several thousand yards back from the water obstacle there is a stretch of rugged high ground giving excellent observation and positions for a main line of defence.

## The Attack

The attack across the river was to be made by three Divisions. The 5<sup>th</sup> Division (with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Inniskillings) was to force a crossing in the coastal sector.

## The Plan

13<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 2<sup>nd</sup> Inniskillings and 2<sup>nd</sup> Wiltshires, would cross simultaneously at points selected for their suitability as bridging sites, would seize a firm bridgehead across the river and capture the heights beyond.



Map illustrating the Gustav Line and Garigliano River.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Inniskillings' role

Zero hour: 9.00pm on 17<sup>th</sup> for the crossing and clearing of the ground a mile beyond the river and 3.30 am on 18<sup>th</sup> for the attack on the high ground, accompanied by heavy artillery fire.

'D' Company, Major Bill Bradley: operate the boats and clear and guard the far bank (a company consisted of about 150 men)

'A' Company, Major Martin Grant (KIA): cross next and clear the cluster of farms which lay on the plain.

'B' and 'C' Companies, Majors John Nixon and Percy Blake: cross last, move through 'D' and 'A' companies and form up for the final attack on the ridge.

## *"no plan survives contact with the enemy"*

a paraphrase of a writing by von Moltke, the Elder.

### Mishaps and Problems

Most of the boats had not arrived before zero hour. The delay meant that the artillery barrage opened up before the companies could cross, thus alerting the German defences. When boats arrived, they were shelled during 'A' Company's crossing, many men being wounded, killed or drowned. The Battalion had suffered greatly even before the battle had begun.

To get the rest of the Battalion across, Lieutenant Colonel O'Brien-Twohig got permission to use the Wiltshires' boats further to the left, they having crossed unopposed.

Meanwhile, 'A' Company, despite terrible losses caused by German machine gun fire sweeping across the open fields, was clearing the farm at Massa Rossi. It was here that Major Grant was killed by a mortar bomb, which also killed German prisoners in



The first tanks cross the Garigliano



Ambulances crossing the Garigliano

his charge. Losses were so high that command of the company devolved to Lance Sergeant John Banton. Banton led a bayonet charge which took the farm (awarded the Military Medal).

A critical moment in the entire battle had arrived. The attacks on either side of the Brigade were held up. Three quarters of the Inniskillings had not yet crossed, but under O'Brien-Twohig's inspired leadership the two attacking Companies, 'B' and 'C', were ferried across, along with Battalion Headquarters.

By 6.00am, 'A' and 'C' companies were re-assembling. As O'Brien-Twohig said, "If you are lost, make for the sound of firing". The attacking companies, 'B' and 'C', pushed on towards their objective protected by creeping artillery fire.

Then, suddenly the whole nerve centre of the Battalion was practically wiped out when a shell landed in the middle of Battalion HQ. O'Brien-Twohig himself was wounded. Strenuous efforts by the wireless officer, Captain David Cole, (awarded the Military Cross) quickly restored order and communications.

With great verve, inspired by Sergeant Robert Boak (awarded the Military Medal) the leading platoons of 'C' Company, advancing closely behind the barrage, drove the Germans out of their trenches. 'B' Company ran into a deep minefield and suffered heavy casualties. Led by Major Percy Blake, 'C' Company pushed on, capturing prisoners and German dugouts. Within 15 minutes a breach had been made in the main defences of the Gustav Line. 'B' Company found a way round the mine field and by 7.30am had established its objective. By 10.00am, the two Companies had occupied the German trenches on 800 yards of the Gustav Line. They were the first regiment to breach the Line.



*The Garigliano is Crossed, Jan. 17, 1944*

*Two miles beyond the river, Minturno is captured on January 20. The pontoon bridge to the south-east can only be used at night, and daylight is spent in repairing it under German observation.*

THE TIMES FRIDAY FEBRUARY 11 1944

CROSSING THE GARIGLIANO



Two pictures of the crossing of the Garigliano River, which was made by troops of the Fifth Army in face of stiff opposition, are seen above. That on the left shows a tactical headquarters on the opposite bank, and the top picture shows a raft on boats approaching the bank. The other picture shows "Priest" self-propelled guns going into action in the Anzio bridgehead.

## German counter-attacks

'B' Company found itself under attack from three sides by overwhelming numbers. As ammunition began to run out and hand to hand fighting developed, the decision was taken to withdraw. Only the bravery of men like Sergeant Andy Anderson, Corporal Stephen Hughes and Fusilier John Stranex (awarded Military Medals) enabled the Company to withdraw to 'C' Company's position.

Expecting further counter-attacks, Major Percy Blake ('C' Company) organised his company and the remnants of 'B' Company. When the attack came, elements of practically the whole Battalion fought a ferocious battle to keep the Germans at bay. Eventually sustained British artillery fire halted the attack. Major Blake was awarded the Military Cross.

The next day, 19<sup>th</sup>, the remnants of 'D' Company recaptured the positions vacated the previous day by 'B' Company. For his bravery Lance Corporal Harry Bell was awarded the Military Medal.

By the afternoon of 19<sup>th</sup>, the assault phase of the battle was over. During a forward patrol, Lance Corporal John Doherty's gallantry was awarded the Military Medal. The Battalion had been in 40 hours of almost continuous combat. For two further arduous weeks, before being relieved, the Battalion, much depleted in officers and men, clung to the positions it had gained.

Lieutenant Colonel Pat O'Brien-Twohig was awarded a bar to his DSO.

This was the Battalion's most bloody single battle of the war, 53 killed and hundreds wounded (this can be compared to the Battalion's losses during the Dunkirk campaign, 1939-40. It went to France with 34 officers and 783 ORs, and returned with 11 officers and 204 ORs).



German prisoners shortly after the crossing.



Lieutenant Colonel Pat O'Brien-Twohig, DSO and Bar



From left to right:  
Major Percy Blake, MC, CO 'C' Coy  
Captain David Cole, MC



Right:  
Major Martin Grant, CO 'A' Coy



From left to right:  
Sergeant Andy Anderson, MM; Sergeant Robert Boak, MM; Corporal Hughes, DCM, MM



From left to right:  
Lance Corporal Harry Bell, MM; Lance Corporal John Doherty, MM; Lance Sergeant John Banton, MM; Fusilier John Stranex, MM



CSM Doherty pays his respects at the early graves  
(Note the hole in the helmet)

Minturno Military Cemetery  
where the Inniskillings are buried

