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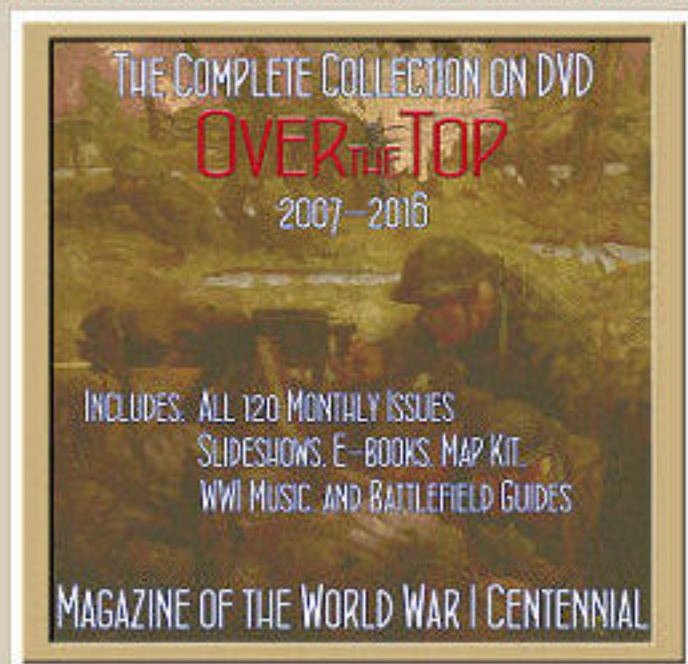
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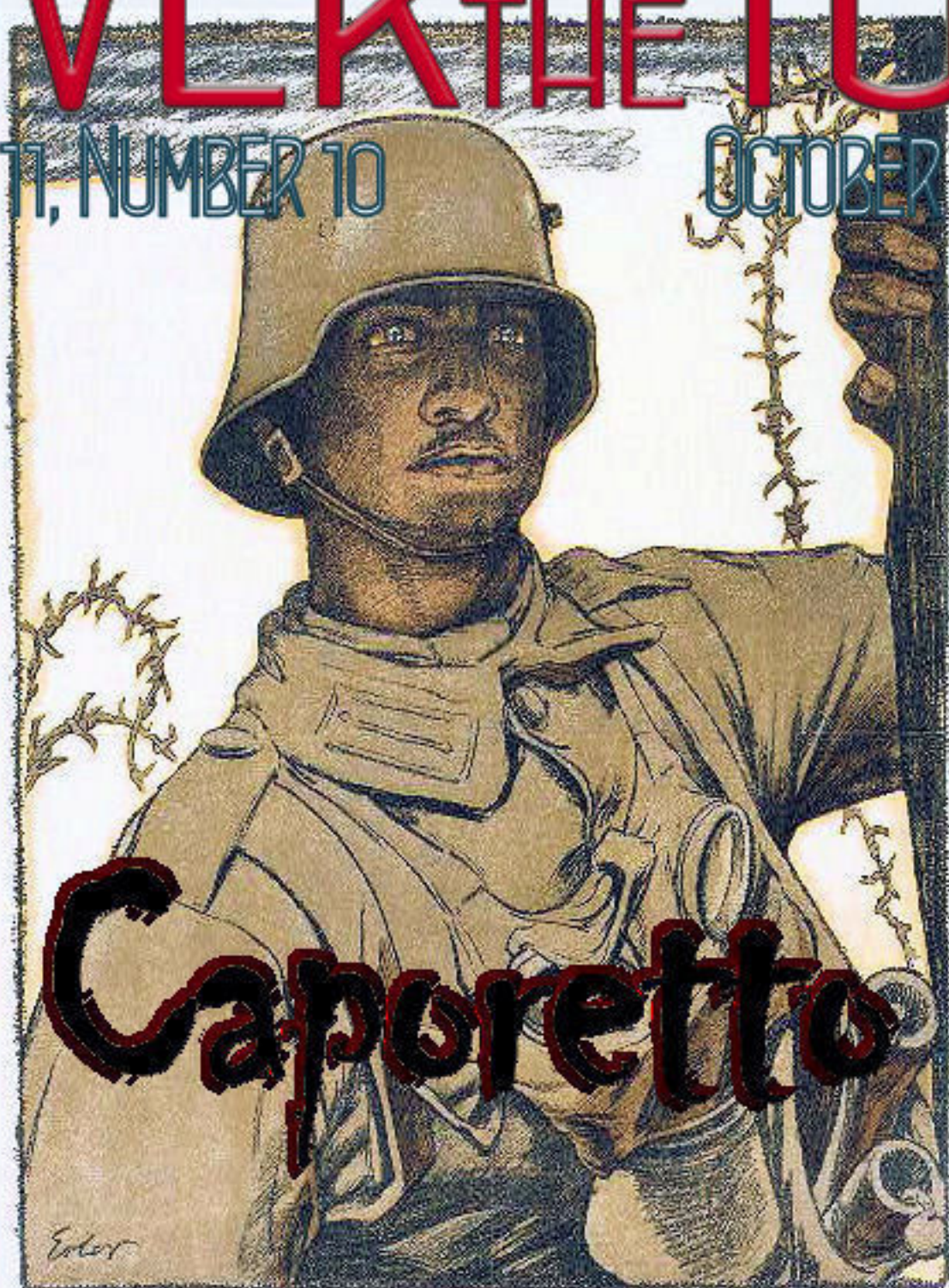


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OVER THE TOP

VOL 11, NUMBER 10

OCTOBER 2017



The German Perspective
MAGAZINE OF THE WORLD WAR I CENTENNIAL

Caporetto: The German Perspective

Vol. 11, Number 10, October 2017

The 1917 Battle of Caporetto is one of the most difficult events of the Great War to comprehend. It opened with a tremendous breakthrough of the kind that commanders on the Western Front could only dream about over mountainous terrain, evolved into a long pursuit across rivers running at flood stage, and ended at a formidable defensive line improvised by the previously humiliated Italian forces. As we did with our Centennial focus on the Battle of Jutland, we are going to look at Caporetto from multiple perspectives in this issue. The most important viewpoint is that of a German junior officer, deployed to the region in the fall of 1917, named Hermann Balck. He was a member of the Alpenkorps, Germany's specialized mountain troops that served with distinction on every European front during the war. The Alpenkorps was one of seven German divisions sent to the front to counterattack and alleviate pressure on the Austro-Hungarian forces that had been depleted and exhausted after defending against 11 Italian offensives in the Isonzo river valley. Balck later became one of the Second World War's most brilliant generals, was convicted of a dubious war crime (sentence not carried out), and finally got around to writing a memoir about his service in both World Wars. His volume, a cleaned-up version of the journals he had kept scrupulously since August 1914 and had hidden from his American captors in 1945, was published in 1981 and translated into English in 2015. Readers will find he has a fine eye for detail and a surprising sense of humor. Lt. Balck's experience at Caporetto parallels the entire effort of the Central Powers in the campaign: an initial deception program about the deployment to Italy, the brilliant two-prong breakthrough, the capture of tens of thousands of prisoners, a long pursuit down the Italian boot that gradually unraveled, and the shocking discovery that the enemy had regrouped and was still capable—with the help of her allies—of organizing an effective defensive line.

MH

Important Dates on the Italian Front

26 April 1915

Treaty of London Concluded
Bringing Italy into the War

9 August 1916

Gorizia Captured in 6th Battle of
Isonzo

15 June 1918

Austro-Hungarian Offensive
Along Piave Line Begins

24 May 1915

First Shots Fired By Fort Verena

16 November 1916

Construction Begins on Monte
Grappa Bastion

24 October 1918

Advance from Piave Line Begins
One Year After Caporetto

23 June 1915

1st of Eleven Battles of the Isonzo
Begins

17 August 1917

11th Battle of the Isonzo Begins

3 November 1918

Italian Navy Seizes Trieste

10 May 1916

Battle of Asiago—Austro-
Hungarian Strafexpedition

24 October 1917

Battle of Caporetto Begins

4 November 1918

Armistice Takes Effect on Italian
Front

Overview: the Battle of Caporetto

by the Editors

The Battle of Caporetto began at 2:00 a.m. on 24 October 1917 with an artillery bombardment. Italian trenches were destroyed by the Austro-German Army's brief, but very intense, artillery barrage, and the survivors of the artillery attack were quickly surrounded and overrun by the fast-moving enemy columns. The Austro-German infantry assault was greatly helped by the dense fog that provided them with cover until they were almost on top of the Italian trenches. Poison gas was used widely and proved especially lethal in the Plezzo basin, where possibly the most successful chemical warfare attack in history took place. The XIV Austro-German Army took only two days to capture all their immediate objectives around the Isonzo River. The subsequent exploitation, pushing the Italian forces back to the Piave River, lasted about a month. The key to the success of the Central Powers at Caporetto was a double breakthrough that shattered the entire Italian defensive deployment the first morning of the battle. (Map, pg 4)



Italian Prisoner Column, 24 October 1917

Tolmino: Southern Breakthrough Point

Because of the bridgehead at Tolmino (Map, pg 4), German forces deployed there could attack on both sides of the Isonzo River. Further, a successful breakthrough at this point would place them behind the first and second Italian lines on the right (east) side of the river. This decisive attack was launched from the Tolmino bridgehead against the Italian XXVII Corps. Italian defenses were far stronger at Tolmino than at Plezzo, but still inadequate. Few of the XXVII Corps's artillery batteries managed to open fire before being overrun. Italian command and control were successfully targeted by Austro-German artillery and Italian Second Army's headquarters was left unable to effectively issue orders or receive news from the front.

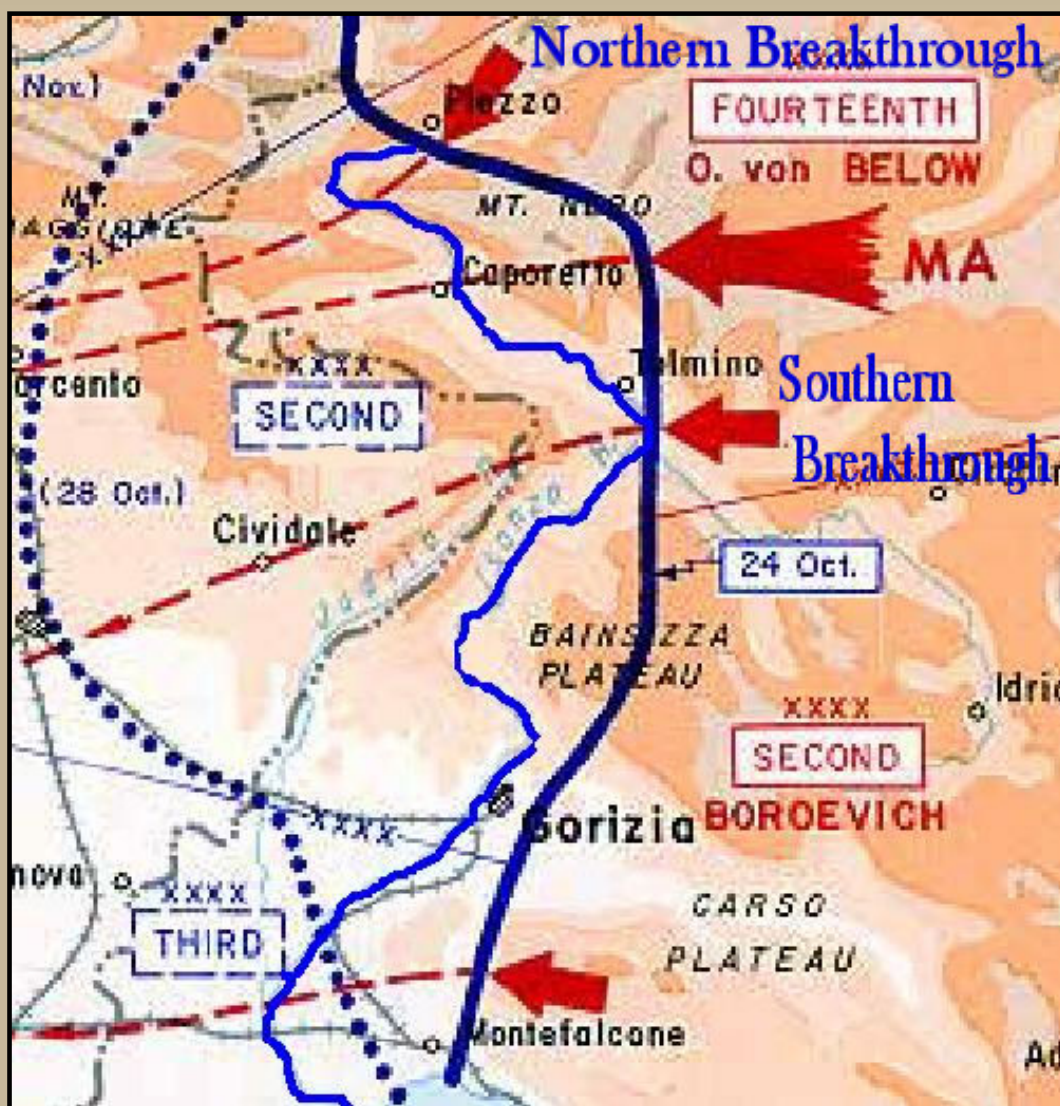
Throughout the battle, the Italian artillery performed miserably, either because the batteries were overrun or because they never received orders to open fire. The Italian infantry was left with little or no artillery support throughout the battle. Tens of thousands of Italian troops deployed on the mountains on the east side of the Isonzo were captured *en masse*, many never firing their weapons.

Plezzo: The Northern Breakthrough Point

The assault through the Plezzo basin was preceded by a massive gas attack on the night of 23-24 October. Italian gas masks were ineffective against the mix of phosgene and diphenylchlorarsine used by the Germans. The entire Italian 87th regiment deployed in defense of the Plezzo basin was killed in the attack. At dawn, the I Austro-Hungarian Corps attacked down the Isonzo valley from Plezzo, encountering only sporadic and poorly coordinated resistance until they reached the Saga Narrows.

Near Knock-Out

At Caporetto, the Italian Army suffered one of the most stunning defeats of the entire First World War. Italian casualties totaled 40,000 dead and wounded, over 280,000 prisoners and 3,150 artillery pieces captured. The Italian Army was reduced in size by one half, from 65 infantry divisions to 33 and the Italian province of Friuli was abandoned to the enemy along with much of the Veneto Province. The entire Italian Second Army was wiped off the board. Today, 100 years after the event, Italians still say "It was a Caporetto" to mean "It was a complete disaster."



Who Was Hermann Balck?

In the Second World War General of Panzer Troops Hermann Balck (1893–1982) was one of only 27 soldiers awarded Germany's highest decoration, the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds. Various military historians have called him "the best division commander in the German Army," "the most brilliant field commander on either side in World War II," and holding "a record of battlefield performance unsurpassed anywhere in the history of modern warfare." In the First World War, Balck had commanded mountain troops, fighting on all the European fronts. In the fall of 1917, then Lt. Balck was sent to the Italian Front to participate in the Battle of Caporetto, in which he commanded the Machine Gun Company of the 10th Jäger Battalion. He was wounded seven times in the Great War and in October 1918 was recommended for the Pour le Mérite, but the war ended before the award was fully processed.



Hermann Balck, Interwar Period

Impressions of the Battle of Caporetto

by Lt. Hermann Balck, 10th Jäger Battalion, German Alpenkorps



A Machine Gun Assault Unit at Caporetto Similar to Lt. Balck's

Tyrolean Deception

Whenever the Alpenkorps was loaded up, the rumor spread that we would be going to Tyrol. This time was for real. On 10 September 1917 we loaded on trains in Focșani, Romania. I was in charge of the Alpenkorps's advance party. If one has never loaded up an advance party, one cannot even begin to imagine what it entails. The number of freight cars was fixed. But every type of unit showed up with at least twice as many horses, vehicles, and people and then tried to get on somehow. I was completely exhausted by the time everything was finally loaded. To make matters worse, everybody was suffering from dysentery. Bad weather, the constant eating of grapes, and unbelievably hot weather had brought everybody down.

In Craiova the train was divided into two, and naturally both sections left before everybody had returned from foraging. As usual, nobody had any idea about what was going on, "*Nem tudom. Nix Deitsch, Magyar.*" (I don't know. Not German, Not Hungarian.)

On the 12th we passed through the Iron Gate. Even the Danube had shrunk to a trickle because of the hot weather. Steep, brush-covered, sun-scorched mountains flanked the river. Some small islands in the river

had medieval fortifications. One of them still belonged to Turkey, a witness of the former Ottoman Empire.

On the 13th I received a telegram, "Convoy commander notified to report immediately to B.V.G. of 2nd T.L. [movement control headquarters] in Vienna." I got on the next fast train to Vienna, but the telegram had been a false alarm. Nobody wanted to see me, but I got to see Vienna, St. Stephen's Cathedral, the Schönbrunn Palace, the Belvedere Palace, and the great dance shows in the Variety Theater Ronacher. What a contrast there was between Vienna and Budapest, much to Vienna's favor. The people were friendly and nice. Everybody was very helpful and they did not try to take you, like they did everywhere else. The military bearing of the soldiers was also much better.

After a slightly manipulated delay and with a bad conscience I continued on to Salzburg, where I hoped to catch the troop train; but I arrived 24 hours ahead of it. Salzburg too was wonderful. The old residential city greatly appealed to my interests in history and architecture. Eventually the troop train arrived. It had been rerouted accidentally through Ljubljana. For once I appreciated the Hungarian lack of organization.

Jägers and Alpenkorps

Jäger (literally *hunter*) in its original sense referred to light infantrymen. During the First World War it took the broader connotations of scouts and sharpshooters.

The **Alpenkorps** was a provisional mountain formation of division size formed by the Imperial German Army during World War I. It was considered by the Allies to be one of the best in the German Army. Notable members included Balck, Erwin Rommel, and Friedrich von Paulus.

We finally off-loaded in Mattarello, near Trento (Map, pg 7, #1), where we were totally re-equipped. We received a huge number of machine guns, 12 alone for the machine gun company, and six for each Jäger company. I was put in charge of the machine gun training for the whole battalion. In the healthy Tyrolean air all the illnesses we had picked up in Moldavia faded quickly.

The positioning of the Alpenkorps in Tyrol [Trentino] was supposed to be a ruse, which naturally nobody had told us about. Our presence became known like a wildfire. Our 2nd Company had fought [in the Tyrol] for some time in 1915, and now we were back there again. Some brave Jägers of the 2nd Company were clearly uncomfortable about returning to the area. Upon our arrival, several of them lay low in the backs of the trucks. But the locals were not at all hostile. With no sense of rancor, mothers brought their “little Jägers” up to the trucks to show them off full of pride to their fathers.

The convoy was a triumphant procession in every respect. Military bands played in the towns and food was prepared. The front was dead quiet. Everywhere members of the Austrian high nobility sat on the mountaintops and pretended they were at the front. The officers even had their families with them. In short, it was an operetta war that could not have been any nicer. We were handed cleanly printed souvenir brochures with lots of sketches and other information. According to prisoner reports, the Italians were supposed to advance across the Chiese River with two battalions and attack Zanè. The Austrians had evacuated Zanè and two other villages. Once in a while a completely obsolete howitzer from our side popped off some interdiction fire on the Chiese River crossing sites. We were supposed to reoccupy the three towns in a night attack and destroy the Italian force that had been blocked by the interdiction fire.

We advanced down the road in the darkness. The terrain did not allow us to move forward anywhere else. There was nothing in the first village, and we kept advancing. At the entrance to the next village we saw some movement and then a figure clad in white appeared. “If you please, dinner for the officers is ready.” It was the cook of the local officers' mess. He knew the situation, and he was not concerned one bit.

The “battle” along the Chiese River continued. Orders were issued frantically, with the most senior officers personally issuing directives. Nobody was allowed to decide anything. High-ranking generals ordered individual patrols out and even briefed them personally. It was micromanagement of the worst possible kind. But there were also quite a few things accomplished. The positions were well prepared throughout. Every one of them was built into caverns and well protected against fire. All the roads and funiculars were built mostly by female construction companies, who sometimes also improved the wire obstacles in front of the fighting positions.

Eventually everything climaxed into the preparation for an attack on Mount Vies. The transport of our equipment on a funicular proved impossible. We had to haul it up ourselves. We stayed overnight in the Malga Ringia. About the time we got there the carrier company coming back from the mountaintop arrived, all of them happy and strong women and girls who made the trip daily with a load of 50 pounds on their heads. It was a balmy night on the Malga Ringia—and that was the end of the attack on Mount Vies.

Days earlier our battalion commander, Captain Heinrich Kirchheim, had been asked about the attack on Mount Vies by a waitress in Daone. She knew all the details and everything else worth mentioning about it. We were appalled. But the typical German is too dense to play along in a situation like that. The deception was perfectly organized. Our troops prepared for the attack, fully convinced it was real and expecting it to come off. Nobody could fathom that we were playing theater here.

We moved back toward Trento and then on to Pergine, which had been Italianized from its former German name, Fersen. Along with the Italianization came dirt and poverty. The old Renaissance palaces still stood as witnesses to the town's former wealth. As I entered my assigned quarters, I was swallowed up by a huge gate with a gothic hall behind it. It had once been a warehouse belonging to old German patricians. I walked up to the second floor and an ill-clad, dirty old woman opened the door. I found myself in a big hallway with precious antique furniture everywhere

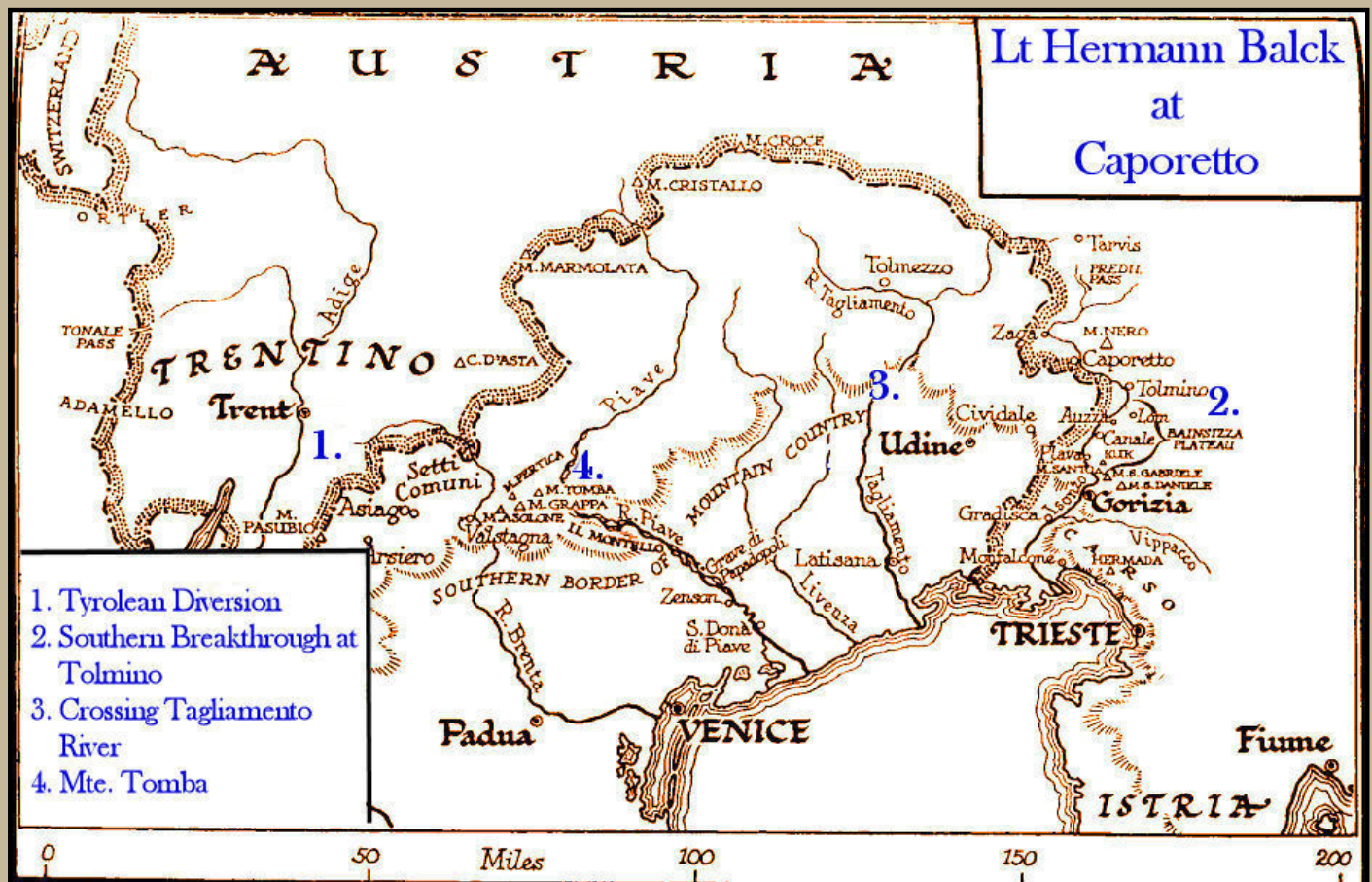
and old engravings hanging on the walls. The old woman spoke only Italian. She disappeared and a young girl appeared, who seemed to be from a family of education and standing. Speaking German, she apologized that her mother had misplaced the key to my room. What a surprise! The mother of this house full of old engravings and precious furniture was this old frump who received me at the door.

From my room I could see the Fersen Castle and the magnificent alpine world. A few days later we were on a train again, heading toward the Isonzo River. On the wall of the train station there was a notice from the Imperial and Royal Austrian Railways warning, "Railway employees caught selling bread to prisoners of war will be fired and punished with conscription into the military." You could not have insulted the military profession more.

In Arnoldstein in Carinthia we got off the train, crossed the Wurzen Pass, and arrived in Carniola [modern day Slovenia]. The names of the towns were German, the population was Slovenian. The few remaining Germans, mostly belonging to the upper class, had no

faith in the future. They knew the Slovenians were pushing them out, but they conceded, "They have fought a good fight." The landscape lay before us in all its autumn beauty. We reconnoitered the advance route and the assembly area. There was not a single inch of land in this valley that was not covered with equipment for the offensive. One howitzer to the next, one mortar to the next. The valley was filled with fog and rain. On 20 October it snowed and rained, which offered the advantage of surprise, but which also could go completely wrong for us.

We marched across almost impassible mountain crests into the region of Gorizia. It was a horrible route, but thank God the rain had stopped. The troops in front of us along the route of march had thrown away all kinds of equipment, including machine guns, ammunition, pack saddles, oats, and bread. A few dead pack animals lay along the way. On the descent, we had to chain up our pack animals. We spent the night in the most miserable huts. The next day, 22 October, was about the same, but the sun finally came out. The timing was perfect. Our advance had been covered in fog, and then at the right moment the weather turned good.



I had to ride forward again to reconnoiter. The roads were completely jammed. Twice I got stalled so badly that I could not move ahead or back. A distance that would normally comfortably take ten minutes on horseback took me an hour and a half. An Italian aircraft appeared overhead twice and we shot at it intensely. Actually, the enemy should have figured it out by that point. The two avenues of approach into the bridgehead at Tolmino (Map, pg 7, #2), were already under artillery fire. I reconnoitered our

assembly area as the military fire grew more intense. From Mount Mrzli Vrh the Italians were firing interdiction fire, and that night the fire grew heavy on both advance routes.

The battalion finally arrived, hours late. Thank God it was still under the cover of darkness. On 23 October, we rested in the assembly area, taking only occasional enemy artillery fire.



Contemporary Photograph of Sites Described by Lt. Balck

- His Company Crossed the Mountains in the Distance Arriving in Tolmino in the Valley to the Right
 - They Had Been Under Fire from Mte Mrzli Vrh on the Left
- The Morning of 24 October, the Unit Departed Tolmino, Climbed the Ridge, and Assisted with the Capture of Hill 1114, Shown in the Immediate Foreground

Caporetto Opens

Early on 24 October the gas attack started. But rain also set in, raising questions about how effective the gas would be. Then at dawn the earth began to tremble, as an incredible preparation barrage commenced. Smoke, fog, and rain filled the valley, reducing visibility to less than three hundred meters. The Bavarian Life Guards Infantry Regiment to our front started the assault, and we moved directly behind them. The counter-fire was minimal. The first Italian positions were completely destroyed by artillery and mortar fire. Some of the captured enemy gun crews were moving toward us. They were sent to the rear by the Leibers [Life Guards].

Even from a distance we could tell that the Italians were relieved that it was over for them. One battery commander was captured with his guns. They had been expecting an attack by two Hungarian divisions since the 18th; they knew nothing about German troops. "Hopefully you will be in Milano soon. Then at least this horrible war will be over."

The attack advanced and the main objective of the enemy positions on Hill 1114 was taken. The Leibers reported 2000 prisoners and 25 captured artillery pieces. We moved on along the endless serpentine paths under heavy artillery fire onto [another peak],

where we spent a bitterly cold night. On 25 October, we were awakened by heavy artillery fire. I was hit on my steel helmet by a large chunk of rock, which knocked me down. On Hill 1114 the situation was still unclear. We moved forward through knocked-out batteries and heavy fire but took no losses. A machine gun salvo ripped right over our heads. Our 4th Company was supposed to take an Italian position between the Bavarian Life Guards Regiment and the Bavarian Jägers. I reconnoitered forward to assess how to support that maneuver with my machine guns. In a maze of small hilltops I could see an Italian position in deep and heavily covered ditches screened with strong obstacles. My current position had recently been the headquarters of an Italian divisional staff. It had a well-stocked commissary. From there I could see the plain below and a network of excellent roads.

When the commander of the 4th Company, Lieutenant Müller, was killed right next to me, I also assumed command of the 4th. While I was still contemplating how to lead the attack, the Italians decided to make it easy for me. Along the whole front line white sheets popped up and 300 men came running and jumping toward us. "*Eviva Germania, la Guerra finite, la Guerra finite! A Milano, a Milano!*" ("Long live Germany! The war is over, the war is over. On to Milan, on to Milan!") Laughing, they slapped us on the shoulders. The only real danger was being trampled to death by them.

When I sent a few men over to the Italian position, a machine gun opened up. They would not let us approach, but they did let their own people go. A real hardhead had to be over there still. I committed two platoons to the attack, supported by four machine guns. Just then a *Feldwebel Leutnant* of the Bavarian Jägers emerged from a ravine with his platoon. He was

walking right into the enemy's fire. I yelled at him to stop. "I do not take orders from you," he responded in a thick Bavarian accent. His principled defense of his Bavarian turf rights cost him two dead and three wounded.

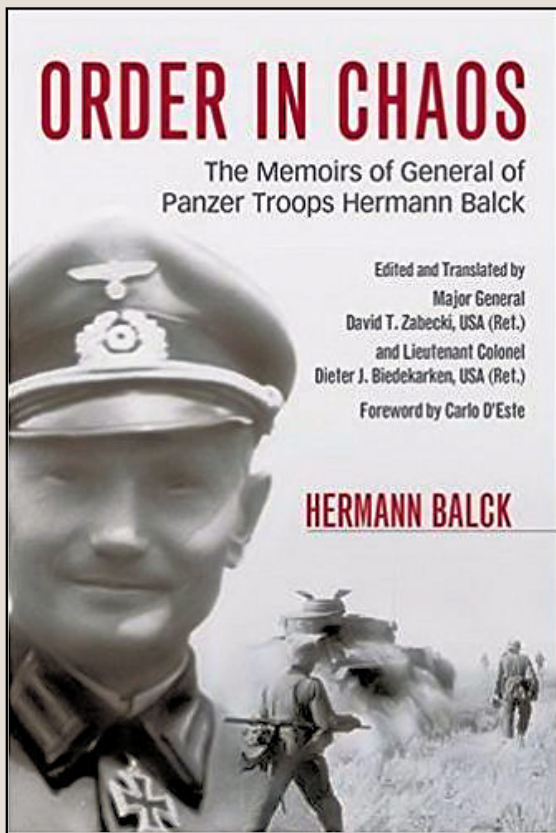
The Italian position finally fell. On the next hillcrest we played the same game. Again, white sheets and deserters, and again a desperately defending Italian with a machine gun. One of my own gunners was having trouble keeping his piece in action. I jumped forward and took over the gun. Just as I had fired off half an ammunition belt, I got hit in the chest, hands, and back by an Italian machine gun salvo. According to the 10th Jäger Battalion official report: "Two grazing shots across the right hand, one across the left hand, one across the right side of the chest, one on the left shoulder blade. Everything minor." Even the most senior veterans could not remember anyone having that much luck, ever.

The following day I was leading my company with both arms in a sling. In the meantime, the Jägers had advanced toward the machine gun, which was being fired by an Italian colonel. As they took him prisoner he tried to pull his pistol, but he could not get it out of the holster. With tears running down his cheeks the only thing he could say was: "What a shame to be Italian."

"*Mort a te Cadorna*" ("Death to Cadorna," the Italian Supreme Commander) was written in large letters in countless spots in the Italian trenches. The Italians were completely demoralized. They fled toward the rear, leaving everything behind—artillery piece next to artillery piece, supply wagon next to supply wagon, and as many rations as we could have wanted. Prisoners by the thousands marched toward us, constantly yelling "*Eviva Germania! Eviva Germania!*"



Mass of Prisoners from the Italian Second Army



This article, presented by permission of the University of Kentucky Press, is excerpted from their 2015 title, ***Order in Chaos: The Memoirs of General of Panzer Troops Hermann Balck***, a translation of the 1981 work ***Ordnung im Chaos: Erinnerungen 1893-1948***.

Pursuit

We descended the steep hillsides and into the plains. The situation remained one of total collapse, with fleeing automobile convoys and at one position a battery firing off its last rounds. We could see the crews servicing the guns, and then it was every man for himself. White flares were being fired off to the right and to the left as far as one could see. They marked the forward line of our troops, aggressively advancing along a wide front. In San Pietro we crossed paths with the 12th Infantry Division's Upper Silesian regiments, totally drunk, loaded down with bacon, sausages, and chocolate but still advancing. There was no stopping us now. The morale was fabulous. Everything had the aura of an event of world historical significance. Added to that, our losses had been minimal—only 224 dead, wounded, or sick in the entire Alpenkorps. The bag for the first day alone was 40 howitzers and 13,000 POWs.

We reached the plains. Italy was supposed to be the best-supplied front line of the Allies, and it certainly was. After a few days there were no more skinny horses in the company. My company became unrecognizable, with everyone decked out in the newest, best-quality Italian trousers, boots, and clothing. Our quarters were excellent, often in substantial castles. But then the rain came and it poured down without end. The water rushed down from the southern slopes of the Alps, which were only lightly forested.

The 14th Reserve Jäger Battalion ahead of us had marched through the Torrente Grivò [a river in the Friuli province] without getting their feet wet. Then the water came rushing down with unbelievable power. The company in front of me still made it across the *torrente*, but my company, last in the battalion column, had the water up to our belts. The troops had to hold on to each other to prevent being swept away. It was an indescribably comical scene, with everybody carrying recently requisitioned open umbrellas forcing their way through the water. One pack animal at the end of the company was swept away with its guide. *Feldwebel* Wiederholt, my best and most courageous platoon leader, saved the guide at the risk of his own life, and received the lifesaving medal.

The next unit in line, the 10th Reserve Jäger Battalion, was not able to get across the *torrente*. Even though cables were strung across the *torrente* for the Jägers to hold on to, anyone who tried it was swept away by the raging waters. Eventually the 10th Reserve Jäger Battalion had to halt all attempts to make it across the Torrente Grivò. It had taken only about half an hour from the time that the water came rushing in to the point where it became impossible to get across. On the maps, the Torrente Grivò was indicated as only a harmless trickle.

A little farther on, the Tagliamento River was normally a small creek, but it too had become a raging river that held up the pursuit. A wagon loaded with heavy howitzer ammunition that had been pushed into the river to function as a bridge support was turned over. All of the roads were blocked with discarded military equipment, and several thousand Italians who also had been cut off by the flooding threw down their weapons. The rain had saved the Italian Army from total annihilation and Italy itself from total collapse—and it robbed us of victory.



Austrian Troops Encountering Difficulty Crossing the Tagliamento

The weather conditions meant a few days of rest for us. I took the advantage to make a small detour to Udine (Map, pg 7), which had been cut off by a German brigade. Actually, no one was allowed to enter the town, but I finally got permission. It was the most maddening sight I had ever seen. Every window was broken, all the stores were looted, and there were heaps of broken glass everywhere. You could not even identify the original purpose of any of the stores, everything was a black, tamped-down mass, covered with the stench of vomit and red wine.

In March 1918, I sat on a court-martial board in Mörchingen in Lorraine. A supply NCO from the logistics command of the Alpenkorps had brought goods back to Germany from Udine valued at 50,000 marks. He was caught in Munich. When he arrived in Udine, tens of thousands of people were looting, half of them Italians and the other half Austrians. The NCO bought a truck full of fabrics worth 20,000 marks by paying 20 Kronen and 100 cigarettes. Truck drivers were earning between 20,000 and 30,000 Kronen on the road from Udine to Bled. Along the railroad lines commercial companies had sprung up that were making incredible profits—thankfully all without German participation. But because the trucks were being used for other things, ammunition did not get forward.

Reaching a verdict proved difficult. The defense argued that when the man reached Udine, he saw tens of thousands of people looting and breaking into the stores. How could this one man stop anything? We finally acquitted the NCO, because in Udine the principle of “unclaimed merchandise” could be applied and because the defendant had not acted with criminal

intent. A decisive factor in the verdict was the fact that he was Jewish. He just had a different perspective on business matters. It was a somewhat convoluted rationale because war booty technically belongs to the state. But the verdict was just. The judges, who even admitted being anti-Semitic, concurred.

Taking a detour along the Via Venetia, I returned to my company. Everywhere it was the same picture of incredible collapse. Eventually an Austrian division was able to ford the Tagliamento River where it exits the mountains near San Daniele (Map, pg 7, #3). We slogged on in the pouring rain, soaked to the bones. All the roads were covered with heavy mud. It took the entire column three days to march across the bridge. Everybody was nervous, tired, edgy, seeing every other fellow human as a personal enemy. It was nothing but rain, rain, and more rain. We would slob ahead for three minutes, then stop for half an hour, then move ahead for another minute, then stop for an hour. This went on for three days and the rain just kept pouring down.

But soldiers are inventive. After a little while everybody had a chair and an umbrella and sat down happily during longer halt periods under the cover of the umbrella. When it came time to march on, they moved the couple of steps that the column would actually move, taking their chairs and umbrellas with them. This was the famous “night chair march” of the Alpenkorps across the Tagliamento River. We had often ridiculed the Italian commander-in-chief, Cadorna, who almost always canceled offensives because of bad weather. In cartoons he was always drawn carrying an umbrella. The man had been wronged

When after three days the endless marching and the Tagliamento lay behind us, the pursuit turned into a frontal push. The Alpenkorps followed as the second echelon. Even though the subsequent river crossings were conducted more expertly, the rain kept coming back in a deluge, and dry creek beds turned into large streams within minutes.

Maintaining constant enemy contact, we followed toward the Piave River, which we reached near Valdobbiadene. The Piave at that point emerges from the Alps into the northern Italian plains. The front line, which had been stabilized in the river flats from north to south, made a sharp right angle at Valdobbiadene and followed along the southern slopes of the Alps exactly from east to west. As a mountain unit, the Alpenkorps was naturally ordered across the Piave and into the mountains.

The Italians, meanwhile, had recovered with the support of the French and English divisions that had arrived to help them. We were hoping that we would be able to take care of the resistance along the Piave quickly, especially since Field Marshal Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf's South Tyrolean Army Group was standing ready to attack on the plateau of Setti Comuni near Asiago and Arsiero.



Advancing German Soldiers Entering Vittorio Veneto

There was a footbridge exactly at the point where the front made a 90-degree right turn on the Piave near San Vito. It sat between the front lines in no-man's-land. All of the approach routes were covered by interdiction fire. Kirchheim wanted to cross with four Jäger companies at the footbridge. He handed responsibility for all the pack animals to me. I was supposed to march them and my machine gun company northward on the eastern bank of the Piave, and then cross farther upstream out of artillery range. But that route was also under fire and—even worse—subject to rock slides. Discounting any Italian action, which was possible but highly unlikely, I decided to follow Kirchheim over the footbridge. I went first, followed by 700 pack animals. Harassing fire in the mountains, where evasive maneuvering is impossible, does not exactly make for a pleasure walk on a narrow valley road. Marching slowly, stopping every few minutes for all elements to catch up, we reached Fener. It was an inferno like on the Western Front, but I was able to work my way around with the first 20 pack animals. Pack animal guide Number 20 had hesitated at every point along the way whenever I asked, "Has everybody caught up?" "All caught up!" he would answer, but it was not exactly so.

We had to go back. Close to the bridge most of the pack animals had turned left instead of right, and they were heading straight toward the enemy. Totally exhausted, I finally caught up with the lead animals, which by then were almost on top of the Italian positions. Turning them all around, we started back. This time, I stopped at the critical junction while under horrific fire and waited until the last animal had passed. By the time all elements had reassembled north of Fener and were safe and accounted for, we had had minimal losses. Three men had been killed by direct hits. But it was still a night of frustration.

The Mount Tomba massif with its foothills blocked the entrance to the plains (Map, pg 7, #4). Taking this mountain was our mission. We moved into the mountain along narrow access paths, toward the two bridge locations under fire, where we crossed the *torrente*. Even weak artillery fire can turn a night march into hell. The path went straight up on the steep, razor-sharp ridges, slippery with wet snow. It was more than hell, because of the constant impact of mortar rounds.

There were no supplies coming forward, no bread. For days we scraped chestnuts out of the snow. There was no salt either. For eight days all we had was cold and unsalted food, including the half-frozen chestnuts. Our only shelter from the weather was a thin, drafty tent half. All of this was enough to make this mountain a version of hell, even without the enemy's constant artillery fire. Our Austrian comrades called Mount Tomba "*Monte Paura*" ("Mountain of Fear"). There was nothing to add to that.

At night, constant traffic moved along the narrow crest paths. Relief parties going up and down, carrier details, ammunition, mines, rations, wounded soldiers, everything and everybody moved back and forth in two uninterrupted lines through the most intense mortar fire. The descent was even more difficult than the ascent because men constantly slipped and fell. Suddenly, there was a scream for a medic. The medics grabbed the man in the darkness and stuffed him into a tent canvas suspended from a tent pole. The four men dragged the supposedly wounded man down the mountain. We did not leave our comrades behind. At the bottom of the slope the stretcher bearers collapsed with exhaustion. . . but then the "wounded" man jumped up and disappeared into the dark. That was the only time I heard such human cries of utter anger and frustration.

Sometimes the shooting stopped. Heads popped up and you could see the Adriatic Sea on the horizon, Venice in the distance, and below us the town of Fener, built like it was made out of a wooden toy kit. "Run down to the local pub and get me a bottle of champagne," called Jung, our battalion adjutant, who was always good for a joke. One young Jäger actually got up and ran down to the town, returning with 400 bottles of Marsala. The effect on our bodies, which hardly ever received any real nutrition, was devastating. The whole battalion was combat ineffective down to the last man.

The order to attack came as a relief. The Italian position was on a steep ridge. A narrow ridge ran toward the Italian main position. To the right the Leibers were supposed to attack to repel flanking attacks. Artillery fire was laid on the Italian position. The infantry assault was supposed to start at 0900, but nothing happened. Suddenly there was a raging crashing and whirring of splinters and rocks. Everything was covered in smoke and dust as shell after shell came in. All communications were out and we had no word from the front line. Finally, a walking wounded came back from the 2nd Company. The Italians had

moved into the gap between us and the Leib Regiment and had attacked our 2nd Company in the wire obstacles from behind. Our assault had stalled with horrible losses. All the officers had been killed, and the 2nd Company flooded back into its initial attack position. The gorge was full of human corpses. The Italian heavy howitzer shells hit with incredible force. You could see clearly as the shells came in. As they burst with a horrific bang the air was full of the shouts, "Medic, Medic!" At 1245 hours the Italian troops got in line for the assault. Even though some of our troops were retreating, a mountain gun from a Lower Saxony unit was pulled forward. Elements of the 1st Company under *Feldwebel* Falcke immediately prepared to counterattack. Our machine guns hammered away and finally threw the enemy back to his initial positions. The help arrived in the form of a thick layer of fog that covered the mountain and facilitated the recovery of casualties and the withdrawal of our most forward elements.



German Troops on the March While Italian Prisoners Are Trucked to the Rear

One by one the casualties came stumbling back. One of them had gone mad and was crying like a child. Another had been buried alive and had lost his hearing, screaming all the time that he could not hear anymore. It was horrible. The Italians, however, never fired on retreating casualties that were walking or were being carried. They always stopped firing in such situations, which was absolutely unique in this war.

The 10th Reserve Jäger Battalion relieved us. We bivouacked in the valley near the railroad tunnel and the remnants of the battalion got some rest. That was the first and only time during the war that an attack by the 10th Reserve Jäger Battalion had been repulsed. The enemy artillery fire in our sector had just been too heavy and the Leibers had been poorly positioned to protect our flank from the enemy. Consequently, and understandably, the Leib Regiment had not attacked to cover us, but we never got the word.



German Soldiers Prepare to Assault Mte Tomba

In 1970 I returned to Mount Tomba. In my estimation, the attack should have succeeded if the staff of the Alpenkorps had considered committing the artillery of the adjacent division to our left. That would have choked off the Italians from the rear. Hardly any force could have withstood something like that.

We redistributed equipment in the bivouac area. Despite heavy losses, my courageous troops had not lost any equipment and had not left any of our wounded behind. Then we were hit with gas, as the poisonous vapors entered our railway tunnel. You learn who your friends are in such situations. As one soldier was trying to grab somebody else's mask in order to save himself, a runner came up to me, stood calmly at attention, and said, "Sir, your gas mask!" Only then did he put his own on.

"Monte Paura" was still holding us in its grip. We marched back up and relieved the 10th Reserve Jäger Battalion. We stayed up there for an extra day, and then we finally came down under orders. Inconveniently, our assigned rest area was situated to our left on the plains. We had to cross through the interdiction fire zone three times when we were relieved to go back to Vas. There we crossed the Piave, which had been impossible to do in San Vito. Back on the other side of the Piave, we moved on difficult trails toward our left and front just short of Valdobbiadene, and from there straight away from the front line to Mareno, where our supplies were located. The total march was 40 kilometers.

It was deathly quiet when we moved off Mount Tomba on 12 December—my birthday. In Fener it started up again, as we were subjected to raid after raid. The pack animals bolted from the designated holding area. We found them after many hours of tramping across the mountains. Daylight was gone as we pressed ahead under time pressure. I had ordered vehicles to meet us to pick up our equipment and the troops, but the Italian artillery had scattered them. Rain, mud, and a thick layer of sludge covered everything. Not a button or rank insignia could be recognized. Desperate, on the edge of mutiny, the column pressed ahead, eyes glazed over, breathing heavily, muttering hard and angry words. As we were marching past the billets of an Austrian general officer's headquarters, a cook dressed in white, wearing his chef's hat and carrying a tray of freshly baked pastries, tried to shove his way through the column. I thought to myself, "This is not going to go well." At just that moment the cook was picked up and dumped on his head, and the tray of pastries was passed down the column. While the mud-covered cook sat on the side of the road, faces brightened, bodies straightened up, and marching along they sang, "Hurrah, I am a hunter of the 10th Jäger Battalion."

When we reached Mareno everybody collapsed into a death-like sleep. Then came the order, "Alert! Back to Mount Tomba!" We retraced our steps all over again, but when we arrived back at the peak we found that we were not needed anymore. We volunteered to stay one more day on this "mountain of horror" just to relax. Then we turned back and climbed down for good. The Italian campaign was over.

For the Record

Ludendorff had given priority to the offensive in Moldavia over the attack on Italy. As a result, we were dragged into the Italian rainy season, the immense impact of which nobody had had any clear idea about. Four to six weeks earlier, the Tagliamento and the Piave would have been small creeks that could have been crossed easily at any point. The operational halt that had saved the Italians would not have happened. Originally, there had been no follow-on objectives. The intent had been only to relieve pressure on the Isonzo front with a short push. It is always a mistake, however, to push an offensive farther than originally intended.

Between the wars Ludendorff came to a gathering in Goslar of the 165th Infantry Regiment, which he had commanded at Liège. The officers stood on the parade field and were introduced to Ludendorff. "Where did you earn your *Hohenzollern* (Knight's Cross with Swords, Hohenzollern House Order)?" he asked me.

"Near Tolmino, Your Excellency."

He looked at me musingly and said, "Ah, if only the Austrians had then. . ."

I wanted to say, "I thought we were never supposed to advance that far." However, the moment and my awe of this great soldier stopped me from showing the typical lieutenant's nerviness.

This time it certainly had not been the Austrians' fault. Their Germanic divisions and some of the others, particularly their Croatian and Bosnian regiments, had fought with the same boldness as did the first-rate German divisions of General Otto von Below's Fourteenth Army. General Krauss, who commanded an Austrian corps, proved to be a master of mountain warfare and an outstanding leader of troops. Indeed, the attack of Field Marshal Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf's South Tyrolean Army Group near Asiago in the Setti Comuni did not punch through. But Conrad's forces had been too weak. Reinforcements were not able to reach him because of the sad state of the Austrian railway system. Some German units would have been able to reach him, but the consensus was that the Germans should not have been committed to the operation. The German High Command had made the correct decision in this case.

The question remains whether the Italian total collapse was predictable and calculable. It is most peculiar that German intelligence in 1917 had predicted neither the

French collapse of morale in the spring of that year, nor the Russian collapse, nor had it recognized or reported on the condition of the Italians. The total failure of this service did not allow us to see the potential for victory. If they had done a better job, many decisions made by OHL would have been different—I am thinking here especially of the resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare. Victory would certainly have been ours if we could have prevented America's entry into the war, or even have delayed it.

On the enemy's side, the rains that had turned the Tagliamento, the Piave, and all the other small streams into torrential, non-crossable rivers gave the Italians the time to halt the retreat of their army. Nor would the French and the English divisions have reached the Piave ahead of the Germans without those rainfalls.

There is another reason why the main Allied forces got to the right place at the right time. Shortly before the breakthrough at Tolmino an English patrol found a postcard in no-man's-land that a German soldier had lost. Written on it was: "We are enjoying well-deserved peace and quiet here in Austria, Heinrich." The card also included the field post number, which Allied intelligence was able to determine belonged to the Alpenkorps. The Allies then concluded correctly that wherever the Alpenkorps was, there would be the main effort. Certain indications were already pointing to an offensive in Italy. That postcard from the field was the final piece of intelligence that contributed to the French and English divisions arriving at the Piave just in time to stop the Italian withdrawal.

On the Italian side, they did everything that any army would do to restore such a situation. Officers in the rank of captain and above that had abandoned their units were picked up in the rear areas and summarily executed without trial. Hemingway talks about this in *A Farewell to Arms*. In Albania in 1941, the Italian General Roni told me with some sense of pride, "What the French were capable of doing with their iron discipline (i.e. punitive measures), we, the Italians, did too."

[Because of Caporetto] Italy for the foreseeable future had eliminated itself as a serious world power. But our Austrian allies also had shown such weakness that we had to be grateful that they were even able to hold the Italian Front. They were hardly capable of any further serious, active participation in the war.