

NEWSLETTER

THE FRIENDS OF THE SOLDIERS OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE MUSEUM



AUTUMN 2021

Presidential Unit Citation May 1951

At a special parade at 29 Brigade HQ, Sosa, South Korea, on 8 May 1951, just over a fortnight after the end of the battle of the Imjin River, 8th Army Commander Lt Gen James Van Fleet awarded a Presidential Unit Citation to the 1st Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment. Lt Col Digby Grist, recently confirmed as CO of the battalion, received the award. The Glosters remain the only regiment in the British Army to have been awarded the honour.



But what exactly is a Presidential Unit Citation?

The 'Distinguished Unit Citation', instituted in February 1942 in the wake of Pearl Harbor, was to be awarded to units which had displayed 'such gallantry, determination, and esprit de corps in accomplishing its mission under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions to set it apart from and above other units participating in the same campaign.' The first unit to receive a citation was the 29th Cavalry at the Battle of Lingayen Gulf, the last recorded charge of the US Cavalry. Fifty-four citations followed in WW II. The Citation is the unit equivalent of the award of the Distinguished Service Cross to an individual.

In Korea the first citations in late 1950 went to US Marine units. The first allied unit to receive a citation was the Turkish Brigade in January 1951. The Glosters's award recognised the role the battalion played in slowing the Chinese Spring Offensive. The citation read: 'These gallant soldiers would not retreat... Their heroic stand provided the critically needed time to regroup other 1st Corps units and block the southern advance of the enemy.'

The Glosters were not alone in receiving a citation for their role at the Imjin. So too did C Troop 170th Independent Mortar Battery Royal Artillery, attached to the Glosters on Hill 235, and the 1st Belgium Battalion for holding the northern spur of the 29th Brigade's position. The 3rd Battalion the Royal Australian Regiment, 2nd Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and 'A' Coy 72nd Heavy Tank Battalion US Army received citations for their simultaneous defence of Kapyong. Before the war was over allied units from France, Greece, the Netherlands and South Africa would be awarded citations. Thereafter the Glosters wore the distinctive dark blue ribbon on the uniform sleeve. In 1955 the Queen gave special permission for the dark blue citation streamers bearing the words 'SOLMA-RI KOREA' to be displayed on the pike staff of the regimental colour. The honour transferred to the RGBW but not to The Rifles.

Tim Brain

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT



The cautious optimism with which I commenced my spring report could not unfortunately be sustained and the continuation of the national lockdown into July meant that regrettably it was necessary to cancel our planned summer reception at Frampton Court. I am most grateful that you have been so understanding of our situation, and I am also extremely grateful to Janie and Rollo Clifford for their supreme efforts in trying to make the event happen.

However, the lockdown having been lifted has meant that the Museum has now reopened and has presented a marvellous range of lectures and other events through the summer months. Congratulations to Vicki and everyone involved.

Going forward we are in the hands of the Delta variant and the national decision-makers, but as matters stand at the time of going to press, we will be holding our annual Chavenage Lecture on Friday 29 October, with a reception from 6:45 pm. I am delighted that Sinclair McKay has confirmed his availability, and we look forward to hearing his lecture 'X and Y: Bletchley and its Listening Stations'. The booking form is forwarded with this edition of the newsletter.

The late autumn/early winter means that it will also shortly be time for our Annual General Meeting. This will be held on Tuesday 2 November, 7 pm, at The Highwayman Inn, Elkstone, of which formal notice is given on page 19. We hope that many of you will be able to attend. All arrangements are, of course, subject to the prevailing Covid situation.

This edition of the Newsletter commemorates the Battle of El Gubi, in which the RGH distinguished itself. Stephen Keoghane has provided our keynote article, and we are fortunate to have a strategic overview of the early campaigns in the Western Desert provided by John Penley. Rob Dixon rounds off his account of the Glosters at the Imjin River with narratives of the reforming of the battalion in the days following the battle and the long captivity of those taken prisoner. My thanks to all our contributors.

Thank you once again for all your support, understanding and generosity over the last few very fraught months, and we look forward to better times ahead.

Dr Tim Brain OBE QPM



THE WAR IN NORTH AFRICA 1941

The Background to the Battle of Bir El Gubi 1941

Colonel John Penley OBE TD

The Official History of the Second World War runs to 18 volumes, eight of which are headed 'The Mediterranean and the Middle East'. Volume 2 is entitled 'The Germans come to the Help of their Ally', which is a very apt description of most of the campaigns of that year. When they did come, the outcome for the Allies was not good as was seen in Greece; when they did not, the outcome was good as seen in East Africa and in Syria against the Vichy French.

In February 1941, the Allies had finally and comprehensively defeated the Italian 10th Army at Beda Fomm on the coast of Cyrenaica (East Libya), south of Benghazi, and it seemed that the threat to Egypt by land had been removed. However, the 7 Armoured Division was mechanically exhausted and needed a complete refit. It was replaced by the 2 Armoured Division coming out from England, and thus untried, and it had to send an Armoured Brigade Group to assist in Greece. Although it was anticipated that German forces would be sent to Cyrenaica, it was not considered that this would occur before May, which proved to be a serious underestimation.

2nd Armoured Division could be said to have been misnamed; the Divisional Reconnaissance Regiment, 1 King's Dragoon Guards had only converted from horses to armoured cars in January. The single remaining armoured brigade had one regiment of light tanks greatly below strength, one being equipped with the best of the captured Italian M13 tanks (with a good 47-mm gun but otherwise slow, unhandy, uncomfortable, and unreliable), and the third, equipped with British cruiser tanks, did not join until the second half of March and suffered greatly from mechanical breakdowns.

Many words have been written, and expletives uttered, about British Armour in the first three years of World War II. The scales were tipped against our armoured and anti-tank Regiments, and much skill, resourcefulness, bravery and sacrifices were required of our tank crews and gunners to redress the balance. As early as 1938 it was foreseen that there was a need for a heavier gun than the 2lb and by April 1940 a 6lb gun was ready for trials. In the aftermath of Dunkirk, it was decided that the supply of 2lb guns must not be prejudiced by switching production to a 6lb gun. It was not until November 1941 that the 6lb gun was being delivered in quantity but by the end of May 1942 only about 100 had reached the Middle East. Whilst the 2lb gun compared favourably to the German 37mm, by 1940 they were producing a short 50mm gun which was ready to equip their tanks going to the Middle East and the scarcer long barrelled 50mm served as an anti-tank gun.

The German reaction to the Italian defeats culminating at Beda Fomm was to put together a new and substantial force to be called the Deutsches Afrika Korps (DAK); its commander was General Erwin Rommel. His analysis was that the Allies were under strength and not able to hold on to what they were occupying, and he was proved right. On 1 April he launched his attack starting at Mersa Brega, 244km south of Benghazi on the coast road. By 4 April his forces had taken Benghazi. Lt Gens Neame (Commanding Cyrenaica Command) and O'Connor (Commanding British troops in Egypt) and Brigadier Combe (ex-11 Hussars and an expert on Desert Warfare) were captured on 6 April. Maj-General Gambier-Parry

(Commander 2 Armoured Division) and Brigadier Vaughan, along with most of the Indian Motor Brigade and Divisional Headquarters were captured on 7 April. By 11 April enemy forces were investing Tobruk.

Egypt and the important naval base at Alexandria looked threatened and vulnerable to air attack. Troops were withdrawn from Greece, landings in the Dodecanese postponed and Tobruk was reinforced. By 10th April Rommel announced that the British were collapsing and was letting it be known that his objective was now the Suez Canal. However, German Forces failed to take Tobruk and the Italian *Comando Supremo*, unsure whether to be relieved or alarmed by the swiftness of the Axis advance, called for a halt to regroup, and reorganise over-extended supply routes, before any advance into Egypt was undertaken.

Hitler regarded the capture of Tobruk as essential, with which Rommel agreed but admitted that many more supporting units, especially German ones, were needed. General Halder, the Chief of Staff of the High Command of the German Armed Forces, noted in his diary on 23 April, 'Rommel has not sent a single clear report and I have a feeling things are in a mess... All day long he rushes about and stages reconnaissance raids in which he fritters away his strength. Air transport cannot meet his senseless demands primarily because of a lack of fuel.' General Paulus, a Deputy Chief of the General Staff, was sent to North Africa to examine and report. Halder noted in his diary that he was 'perhaps the only man with enough influence to head off this soldier gone stark mad'.

Rommel's second attempt to capture Tobruk ended in failure, and it was perceived by the Allies that the enemy had been fought to a standstill. However, intelligence suggested that the 15th Panzer Division had reached Tripoli. The British had a weak unit of mixed tanks in Tobruk and one squadron of cruisers tanks in Mersa Matruh some 300km by road west of Alexandria. On 21 April Gen Archibald Wavell (C-in-C Middle East) informed London that in numbers British armour in the Western Desert was gravely inferior to that of the enemy and the disparity seemed likely to increase by the end of the month. On the direct instruction of the Prime Minister a convoy of tanks was to sail through the Mediterranean (the 'Tiger Convoy') to reinforce the British Armoured strength. Encouraged by this news Wavell started to plan an offensive, to be known as operation BATTLEAXE. Pending the arrival of these reinforcements, Brigadier Gott was instructed to drive the enemy from Sollum (some 513km west of Alexandria) and Capuzzo. This was Operation BREVITY and it was a failure, the only achievement being the capture of Halfaya Pass, which was a small return for the casualties and losses sustained. The Pass was lost some ten days later.

The Axis forces had by now, at considerable cost, occupied Crete and so could set up lines of sea communications to Cyrenaica from western Greece. To interfere with this and support Malta and to be able to attack the Tripoli route, British air forces had to be established in Cyrenaica in the area between Sollum and Derna. The aim of Battleaxe was to destroy the enemy decisively so this could be achieved. Wavell considered that they would start with the Allies being stronger than the enemy. There were, however, some ominous negatives. British armoured cars were very vulnerable to air attack and were outgunned by the heavier German ones; this was a great handicap in the fight for information. The 'I' tanks were too slow for the armoured battle in the desert and were vulnerable to the larger German anti-tanks guns and the cruisers which were a little faster than the German medium tanks, were too liable to breakdowns.

The operation was launched on 15 June but failed to take the Halfaya pass mainly because of the very strong anti-tank defence. The Germans had four of the devastating 88mm guns in this location. By 17 June it was clear that 'Battleaxe' was not going to succeed and the order to withdraw was given, which was mostly protected by very effective air cover. 'Battleaxe' cost the Allies 122 officers and men killed, 588 wounded and 259 missing. Four guns were lost and of the 90 cruisers and 100 I tanks which started the battle, 27 cruisers and 64 I tanks were lost either to enemy action or breakdown. The German manpower losses were comparable, but they only lost 12 tanks. On 20 June Churchill dismissed Wavell, replacing him with Gen Claude Auchinleck.



Figure 1: Auchinleck and Wavell September 1941

On 22 June 1941 the Germans launched the invasion of Russia, Operation BARBAROSSA. The consequences were to be very far reaching. The Allies were concerned that if the Russians were eventually defeated, Germany would be able to divert considerable resources to North Africa, but also that they did not miss out on the short-term opportunity created by the diversion of Axis supplies to Russia.

Auchinleck reorganised his forces, creating the 8 Army. Plans were started to drive the enemy from Cyrenaica and so lift the siege of Tobruk in an operation codenamed 'CRUSADER'.

First much detailed reorganisation was needed. Brigades and divisional units had become separated from their divisions, and battalions from their brigades. Armoured formations had almost ceased to exist. As a result, 22nd Armoured Brigade (comprising 2 RGH and 1 & 2 City of London Yeomanry (CLY)), nominally part of 1st Armoured Division based in England, was to be dispatched at once and would form part of 7 Armoured Division along with 7th Armoured Brigade, which was to be equipped with various cruiser tanks, and 4 Armoured Brigade to be equipped with American Stuarts which the US considered to be light tanks but were to be used as cruisers. They were popular because of their manoeuvrability and known by their crews as 'Honeys'. 22 Armoured Brigade were to bring their new cruisers with them from England, confusingly known as 'Crusaders'.

Auchinleck insisted that there needed to be a substantial reserve of tanks, at least 50 per cent. A new tank took many weeks to arrive from England and due to the dearth of engineering facilities and trained mechanics it took about three months to repair a damaged tank. 4th Armoured Brigade was equipped by the end of September, but by the end of October 7 Armoured Brigade was still short of some tanks. 22 Armoured Brigade did not begin to disembark until 4 October when it was found that a special modification to its Crusaders necessary for desert conditions was required, and this was not completed until 25 October. Consequently, there was very little time for training. An Army tank brigade was also formed in Tobruk.

Nearly all the Axis forces were in Cyrenaica. In the Egyptian frontier area between Sollum and Sidi Omar, there was an Italian Division and some German troops. Between Bardia and Tobruk there were two German armoured divisions, and around Tobruk itself there were three Italian Divisions and some German infantry. It was thought that an Italian mobile corps of three divisions was forming in the Jebel Akhaar area. It was estimated that the Axis had supplies for three months' land operations and one month's air operations.

The aim of Operation CRUSADER was to destroy the enemy forces in Cyrenaica which would also result in the lifting of the siege of Tobruk. To do this the enemy had to be brought to battle and this was to be achieved by a move by British armour towards Tobruk. The undefended boarder would be crossed between Sidi Omar and Fort Maddalena, and the main body of the British armour would then move north west. Meanwhile a second force would contain and envelop the enemy's frontier defences. XXX Corps, which included all three armoured brigades, was given the task of destroying the enemy's armoured forces and preventing them from attacking the left flank of XIII Corps. Following the arrival of the Italian Ariete Division in the neighbourhood of Bir Hacheim, British armour had to be prepared to move in any direction (to Sidi Rezegh for example) to give battle. The supply of water was an immense problem, and it was with a herculean effort that that 160 miles of pipeline were laid and seven pumping stations and nine reservoirs constructed. Despite air attacks, the task was completed by 13 November which enabled water to be pumped 270 miles from Alexandria. But it would always be strictly rationed, in theory $\frac{3}{4}$ gallon a man a day, but on some days there was no water at all. There was constant pressure from London for Operation CRUSADER to get under way and finally 18 November was set as the start date.

John Penley

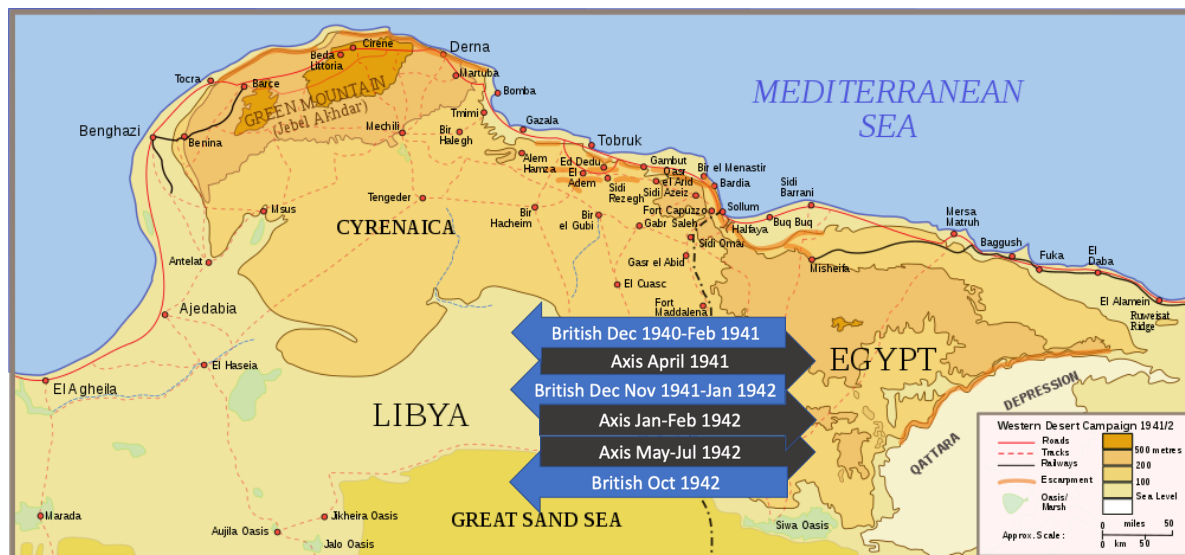


Figure 2: The War in the Western Desert, showing principal offensives and counter offensives

'22 ARMoured BRIGADE WILL ADVANCE ONE UP, 2RGH LEADING'

The Battle of Bir El Gubi 1941

Lt Col Stephen Keoghane



2021 marks the eightieth anniversary of the battle of Bir el Gubi, the opening engagement in Operation CRUSADER which took place in the Libyan desert during November and December 1941. During my three decades spent with the Royal Wessex Yeomanry the weekend after Remembrance Sunday has always had a solemn significance as we recall the casualties inflicted on the 2 Royal Gloucestershire Hussars so early in their war. The factual description of what happened eighty years ago will be familiar to the Friends of the Museum but the decision making around this initial action from the CRUSADER series of battles warrants reflection. I will attempt to describe this short-lived battle but also to analyse why our regiment was sent to its fate in 1941.

It is easily forgotten that 22 Armoured Brigade and 2 RGH arrived in the Middle East on 1 October 1941, a mere six weeks before their first experience of battle, having been sent from the UK ahead of their parent armoured division. The regiment was now equipped with a new vehicle, the Crusader Mk 1 tank that, although an improvement on the obsolete Vickers tanks used for training in the UK, was mechanically unreliable. The 2lb main armament was also only able to fire armour piercing rounds and was therefore unable to engage in fire support on the battlefield, which instead was provided by vulnerable towed artillery.

These Crusaders immediately required a significant and time-consuming overhaul, including fitting new sand filters to cope with the desert conditions. Doug Drake, who had joined G Squadron in 1939 with many of his friends from Stroud and Tetbury, recalled, in a post war interview, the troops view of their new mounts: 'They looked



Figure 1: Mk 1 Crusader tank

good to us. They were of wrought steel construction which is good when you get a shot as it dents rather than fragments internally.'

The tanks were moved via rail and road from El Amirya in Egypt to the Libyan frontier and on 18 November 1941, following an unpleasant torrential storm and downpour, the regiment advanced towards their objective with 51 tanks and 582 officers and men. The RGH crossed the wire into Libya at 08.10 where it then refuelled from a pre-placed RASC petrol dump. Eric Johnson described this initial move through the desert:

The pinkish sand came pouring off the leading ends of the tracks and from under the sand shields and blew back onto the following tanks. In the soft sand, the rear end of the tank dug itself in, sliding sideways before the sweating driver could coax it out again.

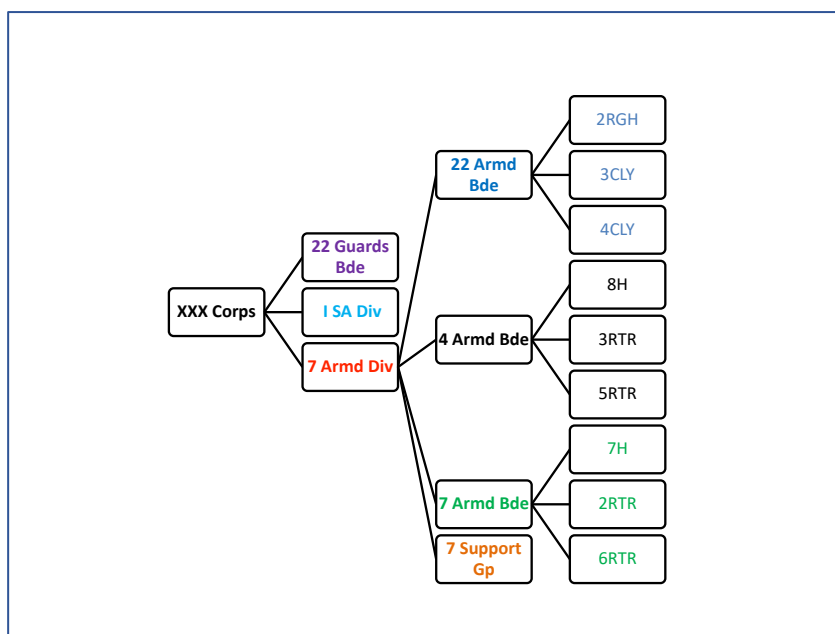


Figure 2: The armoured components of XXX Corps involved in Operation CRUSADER

By 16.30, the Regiment had advanced without any opposition for 76 miles and then moved into close leaguer to replenish, where they were met by Maj AT Smail, a squadron leader from the 11 Hussars, the regiment providing the brigade reconnaissance screen (Smail had previously served with the RGH). The Regiment was informed that ten enemy tanks were known to be approximately five miles to the front, but the failing light prevented any immediate action (this initial move had stopped ten miles short of where planned).

The next morning the first engagement with the screening Italian troops was successful; the Bersaglieri of III (accompanying weapons) Battalion were overwhelmed by the tanks of H Squadron. A platoon of Italian M13s of the IX Battalion was immediately sent to support the infantry but this was quickly destroyed by the combined action of G and H Squadrons. The Royal Gloucestershire Hussars managed to break through the lines of III Battalion and the impetus of the attack clearly frightened the defenders, so much so that about 300 Italians immediately surrendered.

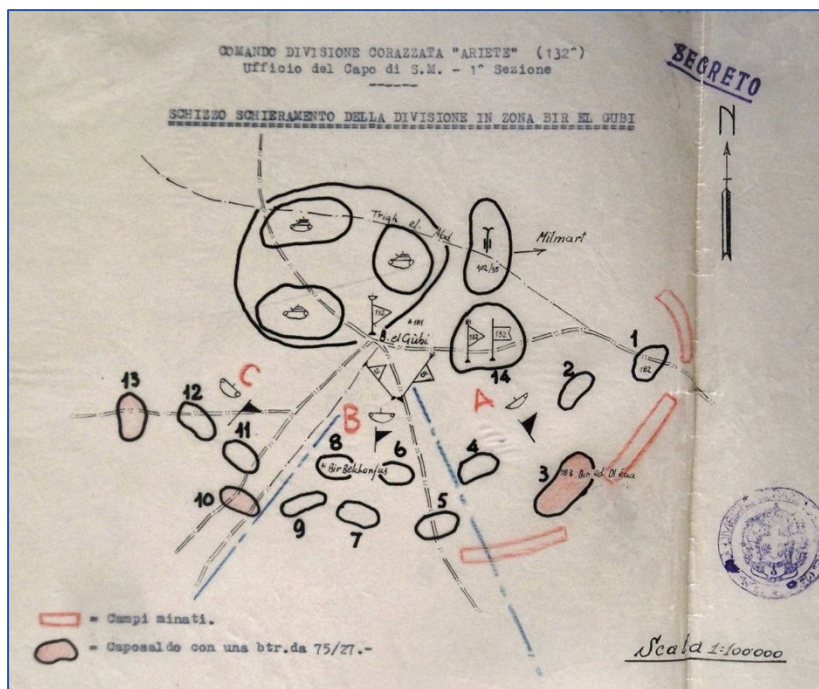


Figure 3: Italian defensive position at Bir el Gubi taken from the Ariete Division war diary showing the lozenge shaped positions described as caposaldos. A mixture of Bersaglieri infantry and anti-tank guns manned these established defences.

By 13.30, when the advance had moved beyond Bir el Gubi itself, the main body of the Ariete Division's tanks and dug in anti-tank guns were encountered. The RGH now faced a Bersaglieri infantry regiment, a medium and a light tank regiment, an artillery regiment and additional divisional assets including 75mm and 105mm artillery. The Italians were occupying well prepared defences and, crucially, 22 Armoured Brigade lacked infantry support.

Lt Roberto Rosselli, an officer of the VIII Tank Battalion [recalls]:

Around 12 o'clock I heard the radio crackling and Lieutenant Serra gave the order 'Motoriiii.'

My commanders were sitting in their turrets, lined up platoon by platoon, led by the company command tank and I raised my arms and stretched them in the direction of the enemy.

Through the sights of their guns the tankers could see the advance of the English tanks, identifiable by the characteristic greenish colour and the typical silhouette of the Crusader that disappeared and reappeared in clouds of sand

The environment was pervaded with smoke and dust and it was even possible to distinguish the origin of the rounds as the Italian ones are whitish and those of the enemy tending to red.

Doug Drake was the loader in his Crusader but hadn't noticed the shell that had penetrated his turret and passed through the wireless set behind his back until his two-pounder main armament misfired. Working his way through the rack of shells in his turret he soon discovered an Italian round sitting quietly with the Crusader's ammunition.

Eric Johnson described the shocking experience of being hit in a tank:

There followed two heavy jolts, one dreadful bang and then that sickening stench of burned cordite, petrol, hot oil and burning paint.

All communication with brigade HQ was soon lost, confusion reigned and by 16.30 on 19 November the RGH began to withdraw but the situation now worsened. The Italian positions that had been overrun during the initial advance had recovered and clearly reconsidered their fate. The infantry and anti-tank guns began to engage the regiment who were now under fire from all angles.



Figure 4: The Italian Ariete division utilised truck mounted four-inch naval guns (Batteries Milmart from the Naval Auxiliary Service) in the defence of the Bir el Gubi positions.

The Ariete artillery regiment war diary describes the action:

At 11.30, armoured vehicles of the enemy appeared to the south and attacked our formations. A furious battle developed. 1 Group supporting XII Bersaglieri Battalion opened fire and the first tanks appeared, some of which moved parallel to our positions. These were beaten back by violent fire but moved east and infiltrated between Group 1 and Group 2. The batteries continued to fire until 17.00. The 20mm sections and the Batteries Milmart were involved in this action firing in all direction including at those who had infiltrated the positions.

*‘The gallant yeomen had metaphorically drawn their swords, stood up in their stirrups and charged the enemy.’ Robin Dunn *Sword and Wig*.*

By 17.30 the remaining sixteen tanks from the RGH had been extracted. The war diary reported 22 missing personnel, 19 wounded, including the commanding officer who gallantly had remained at his post, and ten killed in action.

Sgt R Godwin from H Squadron described the day:

H Squadron lost three tanks but we dealt with six Italian M13s. We had no experience of battle, neither had our regular army leader who had spent years on theoretical TEWTs, possibly with horses. We made what amounted to a cavalry charge on these prepared Italian anti-tank positions.

One of the disabled tanks was commanded by 2nd Lt Geoffrey Gordon-Creed, which, having lost a track, continued to move in circles destroying two enemy tanks at point-blank range. Gordon-Creed was subsequently awarded the Military Cross for treating his gunner and loader's serious wounds whilst under fire and working throughout the night to salvage his stricken tank.

There were many examples of commitment to the mission and disregard for personal safety during the battle but the case of Tpr Jackie Furnivall whose H Squadron tank was hit deserves to be mentioned. His citation for the Military Medal reads:

The tank in which he was travelling was hit by an A/T gun; the driver was killed and the stationary tank was then subjected to heavy and accurate fire.

After several unsuccessful attempts to remove the dead driver, L/Cpl Vowden then assisted Tpr Furnivall to get into the seat on top of the dead driver. Tpr Furnivall was then able to drive the tank out of action into safety.

The remnants of the squadrons and RHQ were now combined to form a composite tank squadron which, with 3 and 4 CLY, would face the Afrika Corps at the battle of Sidi Rezegh

Why was 22 Armoured Brigade, a battle-naive formation, sent forwards against an enemy division occupying well prepared defensive positions?

There is certainly documented evidence of impatience from Winston Churchill who wanted to see success in North Africa following the poor allied performance during Operation BATTLEAXE in Libya earlier in the year. Four days before the attack, the presence of the Ariete Division was definitely known at divisional level and, additionally, the 11 Hussars later directly warned 22 Armoured Brigade about the Italian's strength in depth. Records from the South African Armoured Car Regiment also support the awareness of the location of the Ariete Division on 16 November.

<p style="text-align: center;">8th Army</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Lt-Gen. Alan Cunningham late RA</p> <p style="text-align: center;">XXX Corps</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Lt-Gen. Willoughby Norrie late 11H</p> <p style="text-align: center;">7th Armoured Division</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Maj-Gen. William 'Strafer' Gott late KRRC</p> <p style="text-align: center;">22nd Armoured Brigade</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Brig. James Scott-Cockburn late 4H</p>
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Figure 5: Key personalities in the 8 Army chain of command



Figure 6: General Alan Cunningham (1887-1983)

The assessment of the Italian capability prior to CRUSADER was also based on the experience of Wavell's campaign from the previous winter and the assumptions about poor performance in battle proved incorrect.

XXX Corps and 7 Armoured Division's mission was to attack towards the airfield at Sidi Rezegh to lure out and ultimately destroy the German armour but, fatefully, the division split up, moving in different directions. A distance of twenty miles separated 22 from 7 Armoured Brigade and this dispersal of resources which deviated from the original XXX Corps plan had the effect of breaking the cohesion of 7 Armoured Division.

A further factor that may have surprised 22 Armoured Brigade and the RGH was that Italian doctrine embraced the concept of 'all arms' warfare rather than massed tank on tank duels; in 1941, the British Army were certainly behind the curve with the concept of a combined arms battlegroup

Maj Gen Gott (promoted 6 Spetmeber) had his orders *allowing him to secure* Bir el Gubi (the phrase used was *reconnoitre towards and be prepared to occupy* but following a discussion with Brig. Scott-Cockburn, he gave the order to go on the offensive).

Historians have questioned if a more manoeuvrist approach, avoiding the head-on charge at the well-prepared Italian defences, would have perhaps been a wiser decision. The paucity of artillery support (only eight 25-pounders from C Battery 4RHA and one troop of two-pounders of 102 Anti-Tank Regiment) and the lack of infantry further confounded the impending attack, ordered by a Brigade Commander (4 Hussars) and a Commanding Officer (17/21 Lancers) with only mounted backgrounds and experience.

Robert Crisp, a highly decorated officer with 3 RTR, described a similar tank charge by the 8 Hussars early in CRUSADER in *Brazen Chariots*, his classic account of tank warfare in the desert:

This first action was very typical of a number of those early encounters involving cavalry regiments. They had incredible enthusiasm and dash, and sheer exciting courage which was only curbed by the rapidly decreasing stock of dashing officers and tanks.

A quote that appears in most descriptions of the battle likens the frontal attack by the RGH at Bir el Gubi to a mounted cavalry charge.

Some of the key documents prior to 19 November were sadly destroyed but after the war XXX Corps commander, Lt Gen Norrie, denied being consulted about the orders to engage the Italians at Bir el Gubi and Lt Gen Sir Alan Cunningham, 8 Army Commander, was only made aware of the battle that evening.

Regardless of the thinking behind the orders they received, the yeomen from 2 RGH demonstrated great fortitude and gallantry during their first terrifying experience of armoured warfare in the western desert. Sadly, further significant losses to the regiment lay ahead as Operation CRUSADER unfolded.

Stephen Keoghane

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Stephen Keoghane was the Regimental Medical Officer to the Royal Wessex Yeomanry from 1994-2016. He is a consultant surgeon in Colchester and a military historian and author. Fonthill Media published his first book, *Primus in Armis* in 2020 and his second book *1939-45*

As I remember: *The Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry at war*, is due to be published by Fonthill Media in 2022.

Thanks are due to Andreas Bierman and his incredible website the *Crusader Project* for access to some of the original Italian documents and to the historian and author Andrea Rebori whose grandfather Pietro Ostellino served with the Ariete Division.

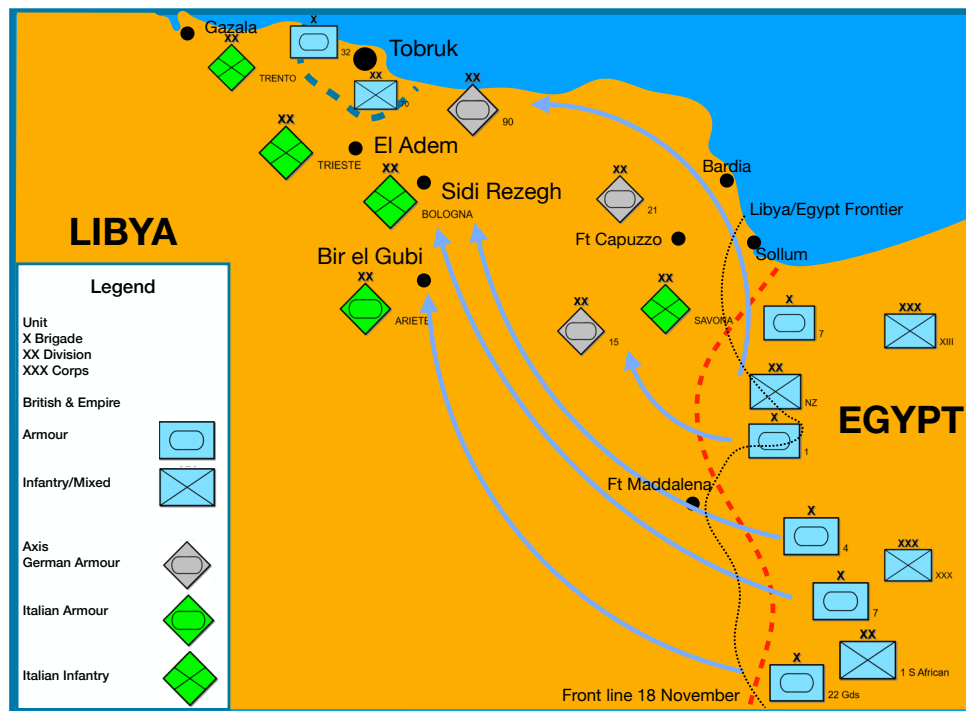


Figure 8: Operation Crusader 18-27 November 1941



Figure 9: Crusader tanks take up their positions at the start of Operation CRUSADER

## THE GLOSTERS IN KOREA – Part II

### After the Imjin

Rob Dixon

#### **'The Glosters are operational again'**

On the evening of 26 April 1951 at Yongdong-po Captain Jack Taylor called the roll. There were 129 survivors from the original 850 initially deployed to battalion's positions around Solma-Ri. But a little later Captain Mike Harvey arrived with his 46. The leave party in Japan returned together with those that had been convalescing from wounds after the Hill 327 battle. Among them was a fire eating Reg Mardell, furious that he had not got back in time to play his part, but now a vital cog in resurrecting the Battalion. The 129 had become 214 officers and men. Major Grist sent trucks down to Kimpo airport to grab any reinforcements coming out from England. Many were literally hijacked whilst the staff of 29 Brigade turned a blind eye. Soon they were over the 250 mark and rising. Grist persuaded Brigadier Brodie to give them an operational role to take their minds off other things. Brodie saw the point and got them to guard the Han bridges. Grist was able to report back to the Colonel in Chief, The Duke of Gloucester, that the Glosters were operational again.

General Van Fleet had recently taken over from General Ridgeway as Commander UN Forces and announced he wanted to meet The Glosters on a formal parade. Grist was by now Commanding Officer as a Lt Col and CSM John Thackrah an ex-Irish Guardsman, was appointed RSM. They duly paraded with the remnants of 170 Battery and were awarded the Presidential Unit Citation - The Solma-Ri Streamer, in front of a UN contingent.

The war looked more hopeful. The communists had not reached Seoul and would never cross the Han River again. The Glosters reorganised at Sosa on the Kimpo Peninsula where the QM Freddie Warlock kitted them out again. Grist spread out the experienced officers: Mike Harvey, Lakri Wood, John Watkin-Williams, Reg Mardell, Jack Taylor, David Holdsworth, Denys Whatmore, and set about welding the reinforcements who had brought the battalion up to strength into a fighting formation. Exercise Phoenix brought them together and enabled Grist to report to Brodie that the Glosters were ready to take on more responsibility than guarding bridges.

#### **26 May**

The battalion moved back to the Imjin position and started the miserable business of trying to identify their dead and then burying them. Many of the bodies were unrecognisable and only identified by ID discs, name tags, or the odd personal letter that had survived. The bodies were eventually reburied at the Pusan Military Cemetery after the war.

As the communists had by now retired back across the Imjin strong defensive positions were constructed with proper defence stores. Continuous patrol action across the Imjin was carried out which was popular and kept up morale. They took over the line from a very friendly and tough Belgian Battalion, mostly ex pats from the Belgian Congo well used to working in difficult conditions.

The Chinese were nowhere to be seen back across the Imjin River. It was the hot and rainy season and the Imjin was liable to flood suddenly. Life in a defensive position can be very tedious if the enemy are not present so the active patrol programme was kept up. The reinforcements that made the Battalion up to strength were itching to see action so patrolling was the best way of training them to operate in this new terrain.

A two-company patrol led by the CO went over the river for several miles and included the new support company commander, Arthur Soames, who remarked to the CO that the lack of enemy made it just like a boring exercise on Salisbury Plain. Within a minute they were under fire and a brisk little action took place. There were no casualties to the Glosters and the new arrivals returned to the defensive position elated.

Whenever possible sport was organised just behind the position. A boxing ring was set up, one company dug a makeshift swimming pool. Rugby and soccer pitches were levelled out. All this was possible as the UN had complete control of the air.

So far there had been no news of any prisoners of war as the Chinese and North Koreans did not recognise the Geneva Convention and would not allow neutral organisations such as the Red Cross into their territory. However, they did allow the Daily Worker newspaper as it was the mouthpiece of the British Communist party. Their photographer allowed his photos to be circulated in other journals including the UN journal and so the Glosters were able to recognise some of their comrades, which caused enormous excitement as this was the first news of other survivors from the Imjin battle. Sam Weller was one of the first to be spotted (see Figure 1 below).



*Figure1: Gloster POWs between Imjin and Yalu Rivers. Maj 'Sam' Weller is centre wearing beard and beret. (SOGM)*

## **August**

The Commonwealth Division under Major General Cassels was formed comprising all the contingents from the Commonwealth: British, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, Canadians including The Glosters affiliated regiment The Royal Canadians. It was time to advance again so the Division crossed the Imjin with the Glosters as the left forward battalion. They went as far as the Samichon River on their left onto a hilly area dominating the ground



in front. The CO ordered the Assault Pioneer Platoon under Dan Cronin to build a road across the paddy fields behind them to ease the resupply in case of flooding. The enemy resented this intrusion and started to probe the Division's defences. The war was real again. Rewards were offered for patrols that managed to snatch a prisoner in the effort to find out the enemy's intentions.

## **October**

Come October the Korean winter started to return. The Reservists that had been with the battalion since the start had finished their term of service and returned to UK with their job well done. The remainder of the battalion was due to be relieved in November but there was still work to be done. The enemy were building up a force on the Samichon and the Glosters were detailed to carry out a battle group attack supported by the 8 Royal Irish Hussars, 45 Field Regiment RA and 55 Field Squadron RE. Detailed recess and planning were carried out and then on the morning of D-Day it was called off. There is no doubt that it would have been a success but there would have been casualties. It was greeted by a mixture of emotions; relief in some quarters and disappointment particularly amongst the newer arrivals looking forward to some real action.

The relieving battalions for 29 Brigade had arrived from England in the form of Norfolks, Welch and Leicesters. It was time to hand over to them and get ready for return to Blighty. 29 Brigade were transported down the Peninsula to Pusan and boarded the Empire Fowey. The Glosters left in two groups. An advance party embarked on 28 October 1951 arriving in Liverpool. The main body left Pusan on 9 November arriving in Southampton on 20 December.

Digby Grist recalled in his memoirs:

*At Pusan. Letters from home told us that it was snowing in England. What did we care? That's where we were going and we couldn't get there fast enough!*

*At Pusan, the Empire Fowey was lying alongside to embark us. Even that old boxing-ring was loaded into the hold. I had a crate marked 'Commanding Officer's spirit ration', which meant exactly what it said and almost every soldier had some trophy of the war.*

*When the Empire Fowey pulled out of Pusan harbour I knew we had done it. The spring inside me uncoiled and I felt I could sleep for a week. I didn't want to speak or read or even think. But the Wiltshire Regiment, stationed at Hong Kong had other ideas; they were all ready to give us a riotous welcome. Their band was playing on the quay as we sailed in; we were to play them at football with free beer for spectators, after which, those that could, staggered into the barracks for a slap-up lunch. Kind Regimental friends, Denis and Gertie Biddle, took me off to spend the night in a charming private house where I was introduced to a beautiful local film star who frightened me more than the Chinese had. I just wasn't ready yet for the pleasures of civilisation.*

The voyage home took them via Hong Kong, Singapore, Aden, Suez Canal and up the Solent to Southampton. It was a tremendous reception but tempered by the fact that so many had been left behind and their fate unknown. The arrival in Southampton waters was marked by a tumultuous welcome sailing up the Solent to a magnificent firework display laid on at RAF Corsholt. After a formal reception at Southampton Docks the Battalion was whisked away to

their new home at Knook Camp on Salisbury Plain near Warminster, before the long-awaited Christmas leave.

### **The Prisoners of War**

The march to Chong Sung 40 miles from the Chinese border had been hard, and many were carrying their wounds from the battle. Seventeen died on the route despite the attention and care of their comrades.



*Figure2: Crossing the Imjin by Gordon Nicoll (SOGM)*

A moving description of the march and subsequent period in captivity was written by Lofty Large - One Man's War in Korea. Lofty was a young private soldier at the time and badly wounded in the battle. He survived and later joined the SAS.

Another excellent account is by Major Dennis Harding who spent 463 days in solitary confinement out of his total of 863 as a POW. He was punished for 'not being co-operative to his Chinese captors'.

Officers, Warrant officers, and senior NCOs were separated from the corporals and privates. The only time they were allowed to see their men was in March 1953 when a mini-Olympics was arranged, as by this time the armistice talks were under way and a little relaxation was allowed. The Chinese wanted to put themselves in a better light.

There were already Americans in the camp, a disheartened lot, but life changed when the Glosters marched to attention into the camp and West Country banter and their regimental spirit took over.

Life in the prison camp at Chongsung was hard, uncomfortable, sometimes brutal, and boring. The food was appalling and the attempts at indoctrination by Chinese political commissars relentless. It was self-discipline generated and supported by the Regimental spirit of togetherness and looking after one's mates that got them through it. Different ways of taking the mickey out of their Chinese captors were always being thought out and enacted. Sport was played whenever possible.



*Figure 3: Pencil and watercolour sketch of POWs in Korea c1951-53, Capt Guy Ward Royal Artillery (SOGM)*

One of the few amusing incidents was instigated by the Chinese who were equally bothered by the plague of flies in summer. They brought in a rule that every POW was to catch 500 flies a day and produce their catch at evening roll call. Out of boredom and needing something to do the POWs decided to co-operate. At first it was easy but as it became increasingly successful catching 500 became more difficult, so they started half filling their collecting cans with earth. The Chinese soon cottoned on but by that time the policy had worked, and the cold of autumn was approaching so it was discontinued.

The international farting competition between USA and UK does not need mentioning in detail here, but needless to say the Brits won!

One particularly tragic death in captivity was that of Pte Donaldson of B Company. As one of the reservists called up he had been captured by the Japanese in WW2 and incarcerated in Bean Camp in Korea about 30 miles east of Pyonyang for the remainder of that war being forced to work in the local coal mines. He died in Chongsung on 9 June 1952.

Armistice talks started in 1952 as the economies of both China and North Korea were both suffering from decades of neglect. The sticking point was the Communist insistence that all the Chinese and North Korean POWs must be handed back when the armistice was agreed, despite the fact that many did not relish that idea. Eventually the UN gave in and there had to be a forced repatriation. It was to be another 18 months before the first UN POWs were repatriated. After painstaking negotiations during the start of the armistice at Panmunjom wounded prisoners were released over several days from 20 April 1953. The armistice was agreed on 27 July. The general prisoner release started on 6 August and carried on into September, the last to leave being the officers. They boarded the Empire Orwell and landed in Southampton on 14 October 1953.

Rob Dixon

## **FRIENDS OF THE SOLDIERS OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE MUSEUM**

### **FORTHCOMING EVENTS**

(subject to Covid-19 restrictions permitting)

#### **Chavenage Lecture**

Friday 29<sup>th</sup> October 2021, 6.45pm

Chavenage House, Tetbury

Lecturer: Sinclair McKay

‘X and Y: Bletchley and its Listening Stations’

#### **Annual General Meeting**

Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2021, 7.00pm

The Highwayman Inn, Elkstone, Gloucestershire GL53 9PH

## **MUSEUM FORTHCOMING EVENTS**

There are plans to arrange Long Room Talks in November 2021 to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle of Bir El Gubi, in North Africa where the tanks of the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars faced a formidable German force and were effectively outgunned.

Further information will be provided by email from the Museum.

### **Calling all budding authors...**

We welcome articles from members and our associates on subjects related to the Museum, the military life of Gloucestershire, and more general aspects of military history. Please contact the Editor, Dr Tim Brain on [timothy.brain@btinternet.com](mailto:timothy.brain@btinternet.com), who will be very pleased to offer advice.

### **Front cover**

*‘Operation Crusader, 18<sup>th</sup> November 1941’ by David Pentland*

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