

## **The Rangers in North Africa**

A small portion of the 1st Battalion The Rangers, consisting of the bulk of H.Q. Company, "C" Company H.Q. plus approximately one Platoon (Capt. Dickinson) and No. 6 Platoon of "B" Company (2nd Lt. Blyth), had been evacuated from Greece the night of 26/27th April, 1941, and were sent direct to Alexandria (where it was intended the whole Battalion should go), and were, therefore, not involved in the operations in Crete. Those who had fought in Crete embarked on 1st June, landed in Alexandria in the late afternoon, and about 7 Officers and 120 Other Ranks were taken to Quassassin camp, which they had left two months earlier. The first train of those evacuated from Crete arrived on the same day and the only Ranger on it was Rfn. Alderman. Another train arrived the next night, with 29 O.Rs. under Company Sgt. Major Streeter, while on 3rd June Maj. Hogg and 36 O.Rs. completed all those who were evacuated.

The Camp Staff insisted that all those who had arrived from the Balkans should form Defence Platoons against possible enemy parachutists, which meant standing-to before dawn and at dusk.

After some harsh words between Camp Staff and the senior Officer we were ordered to Cairo by train. "C" and "D" Companies went to Aimaza to perform a protective role for the Royal Artillery, while H.Q., "A" and "B" Companies went to Cairo Citadel.

Those at the Citadel were under the command of the 2nd Btn. King's Own Royal Regiment, but this was only for a short while as the K.O.R.Rs. moved out, leaving all duties of the Citadel to The Rangers. This was quite a large task, as there were two mosques, an underground lake, a church, a roller-skating rink, barracks for a complete Battalion and also 180 Black Watch. We also had to send a detachment to guard Heliopolis Aerodrome. Maj. Bruce, who was in temporary command, went to Cairo H.Q. to sort the matter out, and after discussion it was agreed that we should be relieved of duties at Aimaza, with the detachment there taking the place of the K.O.R.Rs. who had left Heliopolis. At this time there seemed to be too many jobs and too few people to do them, for within 24 hours 2nd Lt. Blyth with 23 of the Battalion were sent to Cyprus to form the 39th R.T.R., and Capt. Dickenson, 2nd Lt. Campbell and 60 O.Rs. were ordered, at five hours' notice, to South Africa.

A few days later the Aimaza detachment returned and the whole Battalion was told to move to Abu Zabal; this was really too much. The C.O., having heard rumours of this, had already been to this

place of ill-fame half-way between Cairo and the Canal. It was no doubt an important place, as in the area were the main Marconi Broadcasting Station, the Egyptian Broadcasting Station, the main mental asylum of the country and the local Dartmoor, and the Egyptian State Railway's main workshop, so this would have been a very important target for enemy airborne troops. With a depleted Battalion a proper defence of the area was impossible. Cairo had to be approached again, but, luckily, the Brigadier was sympathetic and we were left in peace.

During this period the 1st Btn. of The Welch Regiment, our old friends from Crete and Alexandria, took over the Citadel and we remained as their guests. This gave us time to think and, as there were possibilities that the Battalion would be linked up with the 9th Rifle Brigade (Tower Hamlets) who had lost considerable numbers in the withdrawal from Benghazi, some lobbying at G.H.Q. had to be done in order that both of us should retain our identities. All ranks were therefore delighted when, on June 26th, 1941, Lt. Col. C.M. Grenville Grey was posted as our new C.O. This obviously meant business and that we were to continue in existence.

He soon got to work on re-organisation, knowing that our first needs were one or two proved Officers and Senior N.C.Os. on whom to base a new Battalion. The 1st Btn. K.R.R.C. sent us Capt. James, Lt. Cunningham and 2nd Lts. Charles and Slade, R.S.M. Bailey and C.S.Ms. Starkey and Grout. Bailey and Starkey took over as QM. and R.S.M., which pleased everyone. The Companies were reformed as follows: "A" Coy. Capt. Dickenson, "B" Coy. Capt. James, "C" Coy. Maj. Low, "D" Coy. Maj. Hogg. Some of our best mechanics repaired six vehicles from the R.E.M.E.'s Long Valley Dump, which were used for training and other purposes. For recreation we played football and our "Supporters Club", led by "Ginger" Cracknell, cheered us on to victory. On August 1st a party of 135 under Capt. James moved to Abu Zabal to assist the Egyptian Army defence, while the remainder moved to Beni Yusef, a desert camp about 6 miles south of the Pyramids, which was to be the Battalion's home for the next six months. We were able to split our forces as further reinforcements had been received, with Lts. Lyon and Muir and 150 O.Rs. arriving from the Base Depot, and Capt. Mason and Lts. Crisp and Stevens coming from the 1st. Btn. John Lascelles from "A" Coy.

left us, but Peter Ashton returned from the M.E. O.C.T.U., and Lt. Matheson came back after recovering from wounds he received in Greece. During this time small parties joined other Green Jacket Btns. to gain experience of desert warfare. In the middle of September Maj. Bruce, Capt. Dickenson and a party of eight, which included C.S.M. Clark and Sgt. Holland, had the opportunity, as guests of the 2nd Btn. Rifle Brigade, of being some of the first people in the Middle East to test the "jeep", which was beginning to come over from America in quantities. These vehicles were phenomenal in their adaptability to desert conditions, they could go anywhere and maintenance was simple. The only difficulty experienced on the trip was when one day the party went through the frontier wire near Fort Maddelena and very nearly presented the Germans with their first specimen of this most important type of vehicle. However, it showed a god burst of speed when confronted by enemy armoured cars and a few days later the party returned safely to Cairo.

In September and the beginning of October further drafts arrived from the Infantry Base Depot, which meant that the Battalion could be organised on a four-Company basis. However, one Company had still to be detached at Abu Zabal. 2nd Lts. E.H.U. De Groot, M.J.G. Colmer, D.B.L. Chudleigh and P.R.T. Mortimer joined us at this time. By the end of the month 2nd Lt. Campbell had rejoined us from South Africa and training was back to normal.

In order to keep up interest a Battalion Rifle Meeting was arranged at Abbassia, run almost on pre-war lines with sweeps, prizes, refreshment tents, etc., which was a great success. Unfortunately, the Officers' team had its eye wiped by the Sergeants, a thing which had not often happened under normal conditions. At the beginning of November plans were raised for Companies to proceed one by one to the desert to the west of the Cairo/Fayum Road to undergo intensive training. There were sufficient vehicles for this and "B" Coy. had rejoined from Abu Zabal, having handed over the defence of the area to the Egyptian Army. However, within 24 hours the Battalion was for it again. A party of about 150 drivers and signallers with five Officers under the command of Maj. Bruce received orders to proceed on an unknown mission to Abbassia to be attached to what was known as "A" Force, while later in the month a further party under Colour Sgt. Knief was detached to the same

depot. All hopes of Battalion training were gone. Further postings took place at the same time with 2nd Lts. M. Keeble, G. Infield and I.M. Hanky coming from Infantry Base Depot at Genifa to join us.

It was at this time that Gen. Cunningham started his offensive with the newly formed 8th Army. The command of the 8th changed hands after a certain amount of indecisive fighting and the pursuit towards Tripoli started again. Considerable numbers of prisoners were captured and those remaining behind in the Delta had still one further job thrust upon them. While the Battalion nominally remained at Beni Yusef one or two Companies were detached to Helwan, about 15 miles away on the other side of the Nile, to guard what became one of the large German prisoner of war Camps in the neighbourhood. This was the most depressing period for the Battalion; they knew that the battle was going well in the desert and they were being left out, but with detachments away there was little likelihood of a full-scale mobilisation for some time to come, particularly as the number of vehicles in the country appeared to be considerably less than that required to fit out further Motor Battalions. In order for morale not to drop too much every opportunity was taken to see that both Officers and N.C.Os. received instructions within the Battalion and at the Middle East Schools of Instruction, which had been set up throughout the Middle East. There was plenty to be done in the training of all ranks in the use of the 2-pounder anti-tank guns with which the Battalion was to be armed. Some Vickers machine guns also arrived, and so "B" Coy. could lord it over those who had never seen or touched one. We now came under the Command of the 7th Armoured Division Support Group. - Brig. J.M.L. Renton had commanded the 2nd Rifle Brigade in the desert in 1940. The 1st. Btn. K.R.R.C. was also in this Support Group and the Brigadier saw to it that a long and detailed list of our needs in the way of equipment and relief from other duties was sent to Higher Command. However, the vehicles which were sent had mostly 15,000 miles on the clock and had belonged to the 4\* Indian Div., whose drivers' standard of maintenance left much to be desired.

By the middle of February, 1942, it appeared likely that we were to be mobilised and we were told that all ranks detached to "A" Force were likely to return to the Battalion. It was during this period that we were relieved of P.O.W. guards at Helwan. Also during this time

Rommel's Army had gained the upper-hand, the 8th Army having to withdraw to the Gazala Line, where it was now waiting for reinforcements to initiate an attack or repel an attack by Rommel if he were first. At this time the Brigadier remarked that "As far as individual training is concerned this Unit would appear to have reached a very high standard indeed, they have taken advantage of all Middle East Courses and also of their nine months' stay at Beni Yusef to run a constant succession of Regimental Courses which, although hampered by lack of equipment, reflects great credit on the Commanding Officer and Officers of the Unit situated in such discouraging conditions". During the first few days of March the detachments at last arrived, and immediately we came under orders to mobilise to proceed to the desert as part of the 7th Armoured Division under Maj.-Gen. Messervy. There were only ten days before a complete reorganisation of the Battalion had to be made and leave was owing to those who had been away. This only amounted to three or four days, but after four months away in the desert all ranks had saved a considerable amount of money and a fairly riotous time was had by those who went to Cairo or Alexandria.

As we were about to go into battle Gen. Sir Claude Auchinleck, C.I.C. Middle East visited us on March 18th, accompanied by Maj.-Gen. Messervy, the Divisional Commander. A show was put on for them, which they enjoyed and considered it efficient. On the 22nd of March orders were received to join the 8th Army. As has already been mentioned, a party of six Officers and 150 drivers and signallers joined "A" Force in Abbassia. The party included Maj. R.N. Bruce, Capts. Dickenson and Stevens, Lts. Campbell and De Groot, and C.S.M Grout, and was accommodated at the R.A.C. Base Depot, and after being sworn to secrecy was then taken behind some screens at the edge of the Camp and its future duties were explained. It appeared they were to become the first Mobile Deception Force of the British Army and they were to take over a complete Battalion of 52 mobile dummy tanks, with the designation 101 R.T.R.

There was an air of expectancy about this new job, but there was a considerable amount of hard work to be done; in fact, The Rangers themselves spent over a fortnight cutting out and stencilling canvas and bringing the great number of 30 cwt. truck chassis' that were provided up to first class pitch. The tanks themselves were composed

of a framework of tubular steel, which was welded by the local Sappers, and over it was stretched most life-like painted canvas. During their construction all ranks suggested modifications to make them look like the real thing, such as wireless masts and dummy guns, and considerable thought was given to the use of a track-making machine and even loudspeakers, which would make a real noise, however, the latter two points were not successful at this stage.

Owing to the secret nature of the job leave was not possible, but enthusiasm was great, particularly as in the middle of November, 1941, the 8th Army attacked in force in the Western Desert and we were all eager to join them.

The only difficulty about secrecy was that it was not possible to practice driving these very unwieldy machines. It had originally been intended that only one driver would be allotted to each vehicle, but after considerable discussion with G.H.Q. the establishment was altered so that every tank had two men and the number of wireless sets was increased to 10 for the whole party.

Defensive weapons, however, consisted of only 4 anti-tank rifles and 4 Lewis guns, thus a certain amount of speculation took place as to what might be the result of a tank versus dummy tank battle.

Working against time the whole establishment complete with its "B" Echelon was ready about the third week in November, 1941, and was ordered up to the 8th Army Headquarters at MERSA MATRUH. There was always the possibility that CAIRO still had its full quota of enemy agents and it was necessary to move these vehicles through the crowded city and set out to the open Desert without their being detected, in the end the turrets were removed and each vehicle covered with hessian and inscribed in large letters with the words "Royal Engineers - Road Construction Company". they looked like large bulldozers and it is probable that the bluff worked! The Unit was organised in three Squadrons and had the correct number of tanks, a tank adviser from the 7th R.T.R., and its own Medical Officer who was delighted to be issued, as were all of us, with a black beret, from which he could never be parted for the rest of his time in the army.

At 1 o'clock in the morning during the last week of November the first Squadron slipped out to drive through CAIRO. It was the first time the vehicles had been driven more than 100 yards, but all three Squadrons managed to reach the ALEXANDRIA ROAD before dawn and head about two miles into the Desert with a guard to see that no unwanted prowlers came near. The next night they set off to make the Journey to DABA and then on to MERSA MATRUH. It was necessary to travel without lights and an unfortunate accident occurred in that a staff car going flat out ran into the back of the Column, with fatal results, luckily not to our own personnel.

The unit Commander reported to 8th Army Headquarters but little if any interest seemed to be taken, as no doubt other

important things were on hand as the situation on the frontier wire was critical; this lack of interest was fortunate as we settled down on the beautiful white sands of the blue Mediterranean just east of MATRUH and spent four solid days practising driving and working out movements in tank formation and communication. There was a lot to be learnt as they were brutal vehicles to drive and quite soon it was realised that some of the welding of the framework was liable to come loose letting a ton of steel down on one's head.

Everybody remained full of enthusiasm and welcomed a Most Immediate signal from Advance Army Headquarters ordering the Unit to report there two days previously!!! There thus appeared to be some urgency and a forced march from MERSA MATRUH to FORT MADDELENA across the Desert took place. The distance covered in just over 24 hours, considering a lot of it was done at night, was not a bad effort. A short halt was made near railhead at MISHEIFA where the Unit leaguered for the night. Unfortunately a J.U.88 prowling round in the early hour's of the morning decided that there was something on the ground and let fly a stick of six bombs right across the vehicles; why only one person was scratched is a miracle, but unluckily three or four vehicle were holed.

Immediately afterwards Major Bruce pushed ahead to report and arrived at Headquarters on a day on which the C, in C, was present; there was an air of gloom and irritation among the Brigadiers who immediately administered a rocket for the apparent slowness of the Unit in arriving. One of the reasons given for this was that the Unit had been bombed on the way, this appeared to delight the assembled Brigadiers who cried "What, bombed already - what a very good thing", their joy was to some extent diminished, when they were informed that the Unit was still deceiving the Egyptians under its disguise as a Road Construction Company, as every effort to discard this disguise had been resisted by rear Headquarters. Now, however, the hessian was consigned to the Desert and we emerged in our war paint for the first time, being ordered immediately to join 30 Corps Headquarters for further instructions.

This took us into the battle zone at the time when the Tote Garrison was finally joining up with the rest of the 8th Army. Our

first orders were concise but hardly detailed, we were told to report to the 1st South African Brigade - role, to deceive the enemy. On reporting to Brigadier Pienar with the 101st Tank Regiment the C.O. was greeted with the words "Bloody tanks at last!", his further language when he saw these armoured vehicles at short distance is unprintable however, he was thankful for small mercies and ordered us to go due west to the neighbourhood of BIR HACHEIM, south of the main battle at GAZALA. We were to remain there with the idea of encouraging the enemy airforce to think that we were the real thing.

There is no doubt that these tanks were very lifelike, particularly from the air, and could achieve this object. It was, however, a little nerve-racking to be sent out alone with nothing between us and any enemy force which might arrive, armed merely with four Lewis guns and four anti-tank rifles, with the knowledge that our maximum speed was 15 miles an hour over the Desert and the probability of a breakdown at any time. We were on many occasions reconnoitred by enemy aircraft, but at that time they took little direct action as they were more interested in "soft skinned" vehicles.

The Main battle had now got under way again and the Germans were being pushed back through the JEBAL AKDAR, and after a week with similar jobs to the one mentioned above we lost touch with the battle and left the South Africans to await events. The area allotted to could not have been more unpleasant; about three miles south of the town of TOBRUK on the escarpment in the old battle area, many vehicles and Units such as our own had been grounded in order to give the forward elements as much petrol as possible to continue the chase.

Our own position afforded us the unwelcome experience of getting most of the overs and unders from the nightly and heavy air raids which were launched against TOBRUK. The only good thing about this place was that there was plenty of German loot in the shape of black bread, cheese and cigarettes. We thought as Christmas was coming that we would send a truckload back to the Battalion at BENI YUSEF as a present and into this we packed a number of other articles, which shall be unspecified here, which we felt would be useful for training purposes.



Motor Battalion in a Minefield in Libya.

All ranks were chafing at the conditions in which we found ourselves. All attempts to persuade 8th Army that we should go further forward failed and at the last visit to TIMMINI definite orders were received that we should return to railhead. This was a blow as railhead was 120 miles back and we knew that our vehicles after bumping round the Desert in wind and rain were not going to last forever, and we had already had a number of vehicle casualties which could not be made good. However, on Christmas Day in driving rain the march back was started, first along the coast road and then inland, as at this time HELL FIRE was still being held as an enemy outpost. It later transpired that the message from Corps had been wrongly worded, they wanted us forward at Rear Headquarters (Rear H.Q.) and not Railhead (R.H.)!

One of the most dreadful sandstorms imaginable took place on the way back as we were about to go through SIDI OMAR, visibility was less than three yards and it was more by good luck than good judgment that the whole party got through without being blown up. It is no exaggeration to say that two other Units passing through the same area suffered casualties owing to mines.

Having got back to railhead, which was a congested and unpleasant neighbourhood as it attracted enemy aircraft, little

sense could be got out of those in charge; they offered us a small space upon which to park round railhead itself, this was ungratefully refused and the Unit decided to park itself about 15 miles away in the Desert and keep in touch with those who might wish to give us orders.

Considerable time was spent in trying to get hold of a welding plant to repair our damage, and it must have been the first time in which Riflemen adorned with berets wielded a sailman's needle to great effect in repairing the various canvas patches. To keep ourselves amused we also ran a Unit Musketry Course with what few weapons we had.

After we had been there a few days during which we had changed our masters to 13 Corps, it was discovered that HELL FIRE CORNER was to be cleared of the enemy and that we were going to take part. Our orders arrived by Lysander aircraft much to the amusement of all concerned; the role that we were given was that one of our Squadrons should rumble down SOLLUM HILL to "attract the attention" of the enemy gunners who were well within range, while the infantry attack was put in, the other two Squadrons to play a deception role in the area of BUQ-3UQ. One Squadron reconnoitred the area under Lt. Campbell and the Unit Commander. These did not seem to be very pleasant tasks as we were sitting targets for about a mile down SOLLUM HILL which was full of hairpin bends; however, everything was set when quite by chance the rear link signal truck, which at that time was connected to Corps Headquarters, intercepted a message to say that the Germans had packed in; the drive down the Hill was therefore not necessary.

On the other hand within a few days the less welcome news began to trickle through that our forward elements south of BENGHAZI were being pushed back by the Germans and had reached the GAZALA area where they were digging in. Interest reawakened and most urgent messages started flowing in that we should move immediately to the rear of EL ADEM to go under command of 30 Corps again.

Shortly after arriving at our new area we were visited by General Lumsden who was the first really high-up Officer to take interest in what we were trying to do. It was through his good

offices that we had attached to us a troop of three real tanks who could and did co-operate most nobly both in our protection and by making the necessary tracks visible from the air.

It may be because of this realism that we then began to be attacked from the air on occasions. We will all remember the time when Lt. Campbell and his Squadron Headquarters emerged from a 3-tonner holding a frying pan, the middle of which had been removed completely by a burst of explosive bullets going in on one side and out of the other.

We did not stay long in one place and therefore got to know this part of the country well and also got in excellent practice in driving, navigating and signalling which was to stand the Battalion as a whole in very good stead at a later date.

However, once the battle had become static again we felt that although we had done a good job what we should prefer would be to rejoin the Battalion in our proper role. Many approaches were made at various Headquarters to achieve this, particularly as the number of vehicles available had been reduced, although our numbers had been increased to some extent by a detachment from a similar Unit, 102 R.T.R., with about 15 vehicles, who had arrived from a job they had been doing at JARABUB. Unluckily, owing to lack of transport in that part of the world, they had been ordered to remove their tank frames and use the truck chassis for troop movement, so that they were therefore useless for the role for which we required them.

Captain Dickenson, who was acting as Adjutant, therefore started a sales campaign amongst the various Headquarters to try and find somebody to take over the Unit which was still held to be most useful by all concerned. An attempt was made first of all to interest the Free French, here again, when they heard about tanks they were interested - but not in us - they were much more interested in their own solid tanks which they had left in Syria.

Good news came, however, at first Major Smith Dorrien, who had just joined the Rangers, and then Colonel Grenville Grey, paid us a visit and promised to do their best behind the scenes in CAIRO to get us relieved. This was the talk of the day and many rumours floated around, but it was not until the end of February, 1942, that definite news was received that a relief was on its way. The

advance party of our relief arrived and it was found to be the Royal Horse Guards; some amusement was caused contrasting their peacetime role of palace guarding with the one they were to take over.

There was quite a lot to be learnt and they remained with us three or four days until at the beginning of March we handed over and returned via railhead which had now been established at BELHAMED outside TOBRUK to BENI YUSEF, leaving behind Lt. Campbell and a few other ranks to instruct the newcomers in the vagaries of their canvas steeds. These had become pretty tattered during their three months' use and had travelled considerable distances over the Desert attached to numerous Commands.

It was of interest at a later date to pick up captured documents giving the Germans' ideas of the British Order of Battle which showed that this role had been successful as we were included as a real live Unit. Living with these vehicles for some time we had, got the impression that they could deceive nobody, but this was probably due to our familiarity with them.

Before closing this chapter it should also be mentioned that the party under Colour Sergeant Knief had joined a Unit known as 39 Royal Tank Regiment and had left ABBASSIA some days before ourselves. Their deception consisted of pulling out of the back of 3-ton lorries models of tanks which could be set up on the Desert.

They were not so useful as our own, but happened to be set up near the frontier wire when Rommel put his main thrust through in the last days of November, 1941. The main thrust came slap over this Unit at dusk and gave it a considerable bashing; all their dummies were destroyed and they were lucky to get away with only a few of their number wounded.

## In Action Again

All ranks, who had been continuing training up to the very last moment, were called in from the Desert or the ranges and on the 23rd March, 1942, the Advance Party left for PORT CAPUZZO, the carriers, etc, and other personnel under 2nd Lieuts. Mursell and Kempster proceeding by rail to the same place. On the 26th the main party left at a strength of over 30 Officers and 600 other ranks (nearly a year after it had proceeded to Greece). It took three days to reach the Divisional dispersal area which was fairly close to BIR GUBI and almost due south of TOBRUK and due east of BIR HACHEIM.

The Officers who proceeded to the Western Desert on this occasion were as follows:-

Lt.Col. C.E.M. Grenville Grey.

Majors: R.N.B.D. Bruce, A.R.W. Low, D.S.O., J.N. Hogg,  
G.H. Smith-Dorrien, Captain & Adjutant G.H. Mason.

Captains: P.C. Ashton, P.O. James, H. Wake, J.M. Dickenson,  
E.H. Burton and F.B. Cunningham.

Lt. & Quartermaster H. Bailey.

Lieutenants: N.K. Campbell, S.E. Slade and W.N. Bundock.

2nd Lieutenants: P.B. Charles, G.A.V. Lyon, D.W.A. Mure,  
T. Crisp, J.B. Kempster, P.R. Mursell,  
B.C.B. Stevens, E.H.U. De Groot,  
P.R.T. Mortimer, J.G. Colmer,  
M.J.M. Infield, M. Keeble, I.B. Hankey,  
F. Tilbrooke and J. Millbourn.

Captain Henderson, R.A.M.C,

Lieut. Pickard, R.A.O.C.

Captain The Rev. Priest, R.A.Ch.D.

R.S.M. Starkey.

All seemed to be quiet, both on the ground and in the air and this was most useful as no Battalion, Brigade or Divisional exercises had been held. There was all the space between the sea and Central Africa for training, as long as one did not try to go too far west, and once the Battalion had settled and dug itself in full-

scale exercises were the order of the day.

As might be expected, scares took place from time to time when the Battalion stood to in the event of a possible advance by the enemy to the GAZALA LINE, but to get our own back a feint attack was laid on during the middle of April ostensibly to relieve air pressure from a convoy which had sailed from ALEXANDRIA to MALTA. The 7th Support Group, which had now been re-named the 7th Motor Brigade, with all its “soft skin” vehicles and third line R.A.S.C. transport took part. The whole thing was meant to be a bluff and all these vehicles with their wirelesses going full blast set forth round the south of the Gazala Line penetrating about 20 to 30 miles into no-man’s land. It no doubt surprised the enemy, luckily however, their air forces must have been engaged elsewhere as little if any activity took place, although after 24 hours when the party returned, intercepts from the German wireless stated that a full-scale Divisional attack had been repulsed with heavy losses.

The Company wireless broadcast receivers were greatly appreciated and there were many occasions at a later date when lying under a vehicle at night “Our Middle East Correspondent, Richard ...” regaled us with the exploits of ourselves which, as far as we were concerned on that day, had been to lie under our vehicles in the heat of the day killing flies and drinking tea; he sometimes missed the occasions when we felt we had been extremely busy, but the news had not reached him.

After this interlude the Battalion returned to its dispersal area near BIR GUBI on the 1st May, “but within 24 hours the Anti-tank Platoons of “A” (Lt. Lyon) and “B” (Lt. Tilbrooke) Companies had been detached to operate with Columns in the no-man’s land between the GAZALA LINE and MECHILI where part of the 7th Motor Brigade was carrying out patrol work in contact with the enemy. This was the first phase in the Battalion taking over the whole of the Column duty from the 2nd Rifle Brigade, and in fact on the 4th and 5th of May Major Bruce and Major Low with small advance parties set out to plan the relief of the 2nd Rifle Brigade on what were to be known as March, July and August Columns -

“A” Company to March, “B” Company, to August and “C” and “D” Companies to July.

The reliefs of the 2nd Rifle Brigade were completed by the 9th May, August Column being commanded by Major Bruce while the other two Columns were commanded by Battery Commanders of our friends the 4th R.H.A. The positions of these Columns were about 40 miles west of the GAZALA LINE. The country, although desert, had its fascination as, firstly much of it had never previously been traversed by motor vehicles, and secondly there were many features of deep wadis and small hills which gave good cover and observation.

The general routine of these Columns was to move from Leaguer area about half an hour before dawn - to the uninitiated this means about a quarter to five in the morning. An immediate move was then made to take up positions which gave good observation throughout the day - this would probably be about five miles in advance of the Leaguer area with Column Headquarters in a wadi and guns about two miles further on in concealed positions with O.Ps. consisting of a Gunner Officer and two anti-tank guns on forward slopes. Further protection patrols of motor platoons or sections were dotted round the countryside with wireless sets to keep watch.

August Column the morning after they had taken over having reconnoitred the area for the two or three days previous in which they had been guests of the 2nd R.B. were obviously expected by the enemy as new tenants of the ground and an ambush was encountered which was luckily sprung before serious damage could be done. The next two hours, however, consisted of a sharp exchange between the gunners of both sides; our own, the 4th R.H.A., managed by clever methods to get their O.Ps. behind the enemy and got very good observation. When “no side” was called about 9.30 in the morning it was found that little damage had been done on either side, but there is no doubt that the enemy after this had a considerably higher respect for the Column.

The days were mostly spent in watching for movement of

enemy Vehicles and ensuring that their armoured cars did not sit on the same spot too long without it being made unhealthy for them. There was always the knowledge that a considerably stronger force might attack, but as long as there was plenty of petrol in the tanks and eyes were kept skinned such an attack could be frustrated. However, from time to time, particularly in July Column, artillery duels became quite fierce and a few casualties were suffered.

During the day when the mirage was strong little activity took place but round about 6 o'clock when the heat of the day was over and visibility became better, things began to liven up on both sides. Our own armoured cars, which at that time were manned by the K.D.Gs. and our own gunners of the 4th R.H.A., were prepared to investigate and shoot at anything moving, and there was usually a last minute gun duel at about 8 o'clock at night as the sun was setting before the Columns withdrew to Leaguer at night. It was necessary to have the whole of this operation timed to a split second; darkness came down very suddenly and one had to be sure not to be caught moving while the enemy O.Ps. could see one, but on the other hand that one's force was concentrated for the move back to Leaguer area before it became dark.

There was still much to be done before the day's duties were over - petrol, food and water and, what was more important, mail and other things of this nature were on their way up daily in the Battalion's "B" echelon being guided to a map reference on the desert. Sometimes owing to delay "B" echelon got caught in the dark and it was here that previous training in night navigation became vital; on no occasion did "B" echelons, for which Capt. Ashton, Lt. Charles and the Q.M. were mainly responsible, fail to make the grade before dawn the next morning. There were many near misses when one could hear over the wireless but in pitch darkness that one's vital supplies were within a mile: the usual scheme was to fire one tracer bullet into the air to give one's comrades an opportunity to see where one was. It was always a thankful moment when the echelon arrived, because after this orders could be given for the next day and all could then doss down

for the night. It was seldom, however, that one managed to do this before midnight so that it can be seen that the day was a fairly strenuous one unless numbered amongst those lucky enough to be able to sleep under trucks during the heat of the day.

This did not comprise all the duties to be undertaken. Division, knowing the possibility of a German attack in force, fairly soon decided that identifications should if possible be obtained. The order of the day was therefore for each Column to send out a night patrol every evening, these patrols were usually left out with their trucks concealed while the Columns withdrew to their Leaguer areas. It was always interesting the next morning when the Columns dispersed again to know whether the patrol had come back and whether they had been successful.

Sometimes no contact was made at night, but, as a typical example, on the 12th May a night patrol of "B" Company attacked a German Leaguer by taking a truck up to about a mile of it, stalking the guards - fire was opened up, grenades thrown and casualties inflicted on the enemy. Unfortunately, however, Corporal Burton, Bn. H.Q. Intelligence Corporal, who had insisted on going on one night raid was reported missing and was later stated to be a prisoner of war.

On the 13th of the month some reorganisation of the Columns took place. "A" Company from March Column was relieved by the 2nd K.R.R.C. and joined August Column, so that two Motor Companies were now available to carry out the strenuous duties which have been described above. Thus, August Column had "A" and "B" Companies, July Column "C" and "D" Companies, while the 4th R.H.A. in August Column was relieved by the 1st R.H.A.

We were beginning to feel quite at home in our positions which certainly gave magnificent observation right along the whole front, and it was with a certain amount of distaste that orders were received that August and July Columns should move to new locations further east. What it really meant was that the line was being shortened and July Column was taking over from March

Column, August Column momentarily going into reserve, but those on the spot felt that the giving up of this wonderful "outside left position" (we were I think the nearest British troops in the Middle East to England) was liable to lead to trouble - it was the key point of this area. But going into reserve was certainly a thing to be appreciated as it gave all concerned some rest.

On the 17th May, August Column was however ordered back again but was unable to get into its former position which was now occupied by the enemy giving them powers of observation very much better than our own. Nevertheless the routine was very similar although considerably greater movement of enemy vehicles seemed to be taking place. A preponderance of 8-wheeled armoured cars and tanks which could out-run and out-gun anything with which we could, oppose them began appearing here and there - it was part of the formidable Kehl Group which was known to be a band of thuggish Nazis who were adopting hit and run tactics in retaliation for our rather active patrolling. At the same time July Column at MTELEM RIDGE was having an unpleasant time as enemy artillery had ranged its positions and were making things fairly uncomfortable. A decision was therefore made to bring up a medium battery in support which gave back as good as it got.

During the 18th May there was poor visibility all round, a very heavy mirage and considerable movement of various armoured vehicles. One platoon of "B" Company acting as a flank observation post was swarmed upon by 8-wheeled armoured cars and unfortunately all captured before they could either beat a hasty retreat towards the gun positions or call up help from elsewhere. There was always the danger in a heavy mirage of not recognising friend from foe until too late.

After this set-back, however, things went on much the same as before although shelling in July Column increased considerably and enemy aircraft for the first time gave a troop of bofors attached to the Column some good shooting practice. As might be expected night patrols could not continue without some losses and three

other ranks of "C" Company failed to return on the 19th May.

We were now coming to the end of a month's Column work and all concerned, particularly the more senior ranks, were beginning to feel the strain of long hours in which it was increasingly necessary to be on one's toes in order to avoid difficulties. It was accordingly pleasant to welcome advance parties of the 2nd K.R.R.C. who were coming to take over from us.

The next few days were quiet, possibly due to the fact that the weather was extremely hot; between the 23rd and 25th of the month all our Columns were relieved and arrived back with Battalion H.Q. in the Retimo Box position just north and east of BIR HACHEIM. The position had been vacated by the 2nd K.R.R.C. who had relieved us. The last of us arrived to take up our positions about 6 o'clock of the evening of the 25th May and found little if anything had been done to prepare a defensive position; wire was still in coils, mines in boxes, no pits dug for men or vehicles, in fact - nothing. Plans were discussed that evening so that the work of really digging in could be started the next day. "C" and "D" Companies were allotted the forward positions facing south and "A" and "B" Companies in the rear of Battalion Headquarters in the centre, while the 2nd R.B. were on our left. They had had rather more time to make themselves comfortable.

It was a relief not to have to go through the usual Column routine, but such relief was very short-lived. At 6 o'clock the next morning the Battalion was ordered to man its positions as there was indefinite information that the enemy was on the move. Communications with Division were bad and no definite information was received as to the whereabouts of the enemy who had last been seen about 40 miles away. At this stage it might be mentioned that two platoons of "C" and "D" Companies which had arrived back a few days before had been sent on leave to the coast at TOBRUK to be able to get a bathe and a couple of days off<sup>5</sup> at the same time some of our two-pounder guns were being taken back to exchange for the new six-pounders which were just becoming available. All these parties were away that morning and, in fact, it

was perhaps lucky in some respects that our six-pounders had not arrived, as if they had arrived that morning they would have been full of grease and unusable.

### **Attack and Withdrawal**

The first knowledge that something was afoot was at 7.30 a.m. when our gunners began to fire - it was thought that this was merely their "joie-de-vivre" in warming their guns, but idly tracing the flight of their shells and the bursts there was no doubt there was something serious afoot, as about 4 miles away moving rapidly from a south-westerly direction there were at least 50 tanks and 1,000 enemy vehicles. Within half-an-hour the Battalion was being heavily engaged by this force supported by artillery. Things moved fast and it was not long before the enemy broke through the Box between "C" and "D" Companies and between the 2nd Rifle Brigade and ourselves; the two Companies became isolated and Battalion Headquarters was nearly overrun. After about two hours' fighting during which "A" and "B" Company carriers had tried to put in a counter-attack which was unsuccessful, it was seen that little was to be gained from continuing the engagement in view of the overwhelming enemy forces available.

"C" and "D" Companies were captured en bloc with part of Battalion Headquarters while casualties had been suffered by the two rear Companies, 2nd Lt. Lyon and 2nd Lt. Kempster were wounded and there were few if any carriers or anti-tank guns which were not hit before the order for a withdrawal was made at about 11 o'clock. "A" and "B" Companies and the remains of Battalion Headquarters moved by different routes to BIR GUBI where they were placed in Brigade Reserve to reorganise.

As a result of this day 9 Officers and 175 other ranks were casualties of one kind or another. Major Low, Captains Dickenson and Matheson being prisoners while Captain Burton and Lieuts. Bundock, Bayley and Charles were also found to be prisoners as a number of "B" echelon vehicles had been captured on their way to Divisional Headquarters which itself, with the Divisional

Commander, had been surprised.

While all this was going on the general battle for TOBRUK proceeded. The two main armoured forces had met inside the GAZALA positions and were locked together in what became known as the Cauldron. There were high hopes in all British hearts at this time that this would be the decisive battle, and in fact it nearly was, particularly after the Germans had had to break through the main wire of the Gazala Line to avoid being trapped. It was certainly touch and go!

The Battalion however was not engaged at this moment but to cheer everybody up, on the 30th May nearly all those who had been in enemy hands escaped and rejoined the Battalion. The remains of "C" and "D" Companies who had had a very unpleasant three days in enemy hands, with little water or food, were about to be marched to TOBRUK, which their captors were confident had already fallen (how wrong they were). They had only marched about six miles across the Desert when they bumped into a South African Armoured Car Patrol who turned the tables on their German captors. Although the majority had now rejoined us they were in no fit state to be considered as part of an active Battalion. There were also great difficulties owing to considerable losses of equipment which it was necessary to replace.

These were times, however, in which nobody could be idle notwithstanding the smallness of resources. The battle was very fluid and there was always the possibility of a break-through, so that on the 1st June a further task was given to us. A force called "Grey Force" under the command of the C.O. Lt.Col. Grenville-Grey, composed of ourselves and the 9th Rifle Brigade (who were also at low strength owing to casualties), was ordered to relieve the First Free French Brigade at BIR HACHEIM. It was intended that the latter should strike out northwards towards TENGEDER now that the German's main axis of attack was through the gap in the wire north of HACHEM. This, to say the least of it, was a tall order. We had no guns whatsoever while the French who had laid out the defence of the Port magnificently were in great strength

with all supporting weapons.

A small reconnaissance party went to meet General Koenig on the evening of the 1st June. We were given a great welcome having a drink with the Fort Commander in a slit trench while Stukas in what seemed their hundreds welcomed us from the air. A cursory inspection of the position made it quite clear that if Grey Force took over and was attacked it would be in a very unpleasant spot, although it was hoped that the latter would not happen, particularly as the general battle seemed to be flowing in our favour. Arrangements were made to take over the next morning and the force arrived outside the perimeter wire about 9 o'clock in the morning, while Major Hogg, Capt. Matheson and. Lieut. Slade went inside to herald our arrival and make arrangements for us to go in a few hours later.

In a short time over 10 enemy tanks decided they wanted to occupy the piece of Desert where we were. They had the upper hand and our force withdrew three or four miles to the south-west just in view of HACHEIM. Shortly after we experienced a khamsin which was a real terror, thick dust blowing the whole time and heat like a furnace. Visibility became difficult but it was discovered that a number of other enemy Columns were active in the area and a short engagement took place as we passed them in the thick dust storm. There was now no possibility of a relief taking place as the siege of BIR HACHEIM was now in its early stages. Orders were therefore received to return to the EL ADEM area, unfortunately leaving our small reconnaissance party behind.

The next few days were spent in protecting Corps Headquarters and 85 Field Maintenance Centre, while the Battalion was organised on the basis of two Companies, as there was only sufficient transport for this. The 2nd in Command was, however, busy badgering all concerned to try and rectify this position and shortly afterwards 26 trucks of various kinds were wheeled out of Higher Command, so that it was possible to really become a Motor Battalion again, although on a smaller scale. We were also helped by the return of our three warriors from

BIR HACHEIM who had managed to get out of this besieged position with, a Maintenance Column which had lifted some mines during the night and slipped through. "D" Company was therefore reformed under Major Hogg, using some of those who had been temporary prisoners of war.

It would be an over-statement of fact to say that the Battalion even on a three Company basis was really organised. A check-up of all ranks was now possible and it was found that casualties were three Officers and seven other ranks wounded and 34 other ranks killed or missing, not counting those who had been P.O.Ws. and had subsequently escaped.

Guarding Corps Headquarters and F.M.Cs, was not our cup of tea, and we were accordingly very pleased when on the 14th June we once more came under the command of the 7th Motor Brigade and formed a Column with a battery of the Essex Yeomanry under Major Gosling whom we were to get to know well in the next month. Our task was to form Columns between EL AHM and the TOBRUK perimeter. Unfortunately the last few days had not been good ones, the big tank battle in the Cauldron had been fought and many of our tanks had run up against 88.mm.guns and been destroyed. There was an air of disappointment about and rumours of a withdrawal to the frontier wire which were unfortunately true.

April Column as we were once again to be called took up its well worn position of "outside left", but this time it was to be a very much more mobile one. On the 18th June, less "D" Company who remained to guard 86 F.M.C., we were just south of the TOBRUK perimeter; some enemy mobile patrols were engaged but shortly afterwards what appeared to be one or two British three-ton trucks appeared on the horizon and were fetched in by carrier patrols, the occupants of the trucks seemed considerably shaken but after questioning it was evident that the enemy had infiltrated into TOBRUK which was likely to fall shortly with its garrison of about 20,000 men and millions of tons of stores. This was a most depressing moment as although a withdrawal to the frontier was inevitable it had been considered that TOBRUK would remain

intact.

The enemy had now got their tails up and proceeded slowly to push eastwards from TOBRUK. It was our role on the southern side of the patrol line to delay the enemy as much as possible. It was the old game of hitting him whenever he was seen, holding on to the last moment until out-numbered and then dropping back about five miles and doing the same thing over again, while at night the move back would be more like 10 to 15 miles. The pace was hot and there was little time for rest, luckily we knew the country like the backs of our hands as it was where we had been in the month of April carrying out our training.

By the 23rd of the month we had got back to the frontier wire and it was then obvious that this was not going to be our halting place. That evening a very spirited, engagement was fought, we, went through the wire in the gap near FORT MADDELENA and decided that at least we were going to stop the Germans there for that night. By last light his Column must have been at least 50 tanks and 500 M.T. strong, but we managed to disable at least 9 tanks and forced his motor transport to try for another gap to force their way through. Luckily we suffered no casualties although there is no doubt that our opponents were quite badly troubled. It was wise in view of the number of the opposition to move back and a wearisome Journey throughout the night took place.

On the 25th June we had crossed the well-known MERSA MATRUH-SIWA track, but there was no possibility of a stop for long there. Relentless pressure continued but news came through that a stand would be made at the ALAMEIN LINE, which few of us at that time had really heard of or considered, as it was near the Delta and nobody expected it to be necessary to use it.

At this time we were still further weakened by the loss of our Commanding Officer, Lt.Col.Grenville-Grey, who was posted away as Commandant of the Infantry Training School in Palestine, and Peter Ashton who became Staff Captain at Headquarters 7th Armoured Division. Major Bruce assumed temporary Command

which shortly afterwards was confirmed. Back again we went at a slow pace. The Column was about 30 miles from the coast and the going was 'simply frightful', broken springs and blown out tyres were the rule and there were few if any vehicles which had four springs intact. Nearly every morning and evening targets were engaged which showed that the enemy were still coming forward. There was no doubt they were moving at night, as their method of advance was to fire parachute flares in the sky as markers for their Columns to move on. There were many times that one looked back over one's shoulder at night to see signs of a Column of theirs nearer to the Delta than ours. It only happened once, however, that our Brigade Columns clashed in the night, we ourselves just missed it but our neighbours about a mile away had a melee in



A Typical Western Desert Scene

which a few casualties were suffered.

MATRUH itself fell after a short struggle, and it was now really a case of backs to the wall. A few days later our Brigade was concentrated on the northern tip of the QATTARA DEPRESSION and managed to catch a few of the enemy who were roaming about the Desert in captured British vehicles.

Dame Rumour being what she is we had expected that the ALAMEIN LINE would be a heavily defended position similar to the GAZALA LINE; we reached it on the 1st July and contacted elements of the 1st New Zealand Division who were in one of the three defended positions which formed the Line. While liaison was taking place between the Commanding Officer and the New Zealand Brigadier, a considerable force of enemy tanks appeared on the other side of the Box, and a further move had to be made.

It can be imagined that after about a month of action and movement covering a very considerable distance over the Desert neither side, from the point of view of ammunition, supplies or physical strength, was able to give battle.

Our most southerly Box was occupied by the 18th Indian Division right on the edge of the DEPRESSION. It soon became uninhabitable, however, as water supplies had not yet been laid on, and it therefore had to be evacuated. Accordingly it was our Job as part of the 7th Motor Brigade to provide Columns in this area to stop penetration; it was suggested that the New Zealand Division might retake this area, but this was not to be. For the next day or two the situation was critical, the New Zealand Division and the 50th Division held out, and slowly some shape began to take place, but unfortunately it was necessary to straighten our line and abandon the New Zealand Box which was blown - up this was a depressing sight as it had taken months to build and was a real fortress of concrete and wire, with even an underground hospital.

Our line then began to be established from ALAMEIN on the coast through RUWEISAT RIDGE to HEMINET, the twin pines

on the edge of the DEPRESSION, the distance being approximately 30 miles, and any advance to the Delta would have to be through it. A great attempt was made by the enemy on the 3rd of the month to force the position, particularly in the RUWEISAT area; this might be said to have been a "Green Jacket" day, three Regiments of R.H.A. and six Battalions of K.R.R.C. or Rifle Brigade, including ourselves, taking part with all their weapons available. For the whole day heavy shell fire was going and coming, but the enemy's attacks were checked although they were put in with great vigour at almost hourly intervals until last light. Unfortunately Lord Garmoyle, who had taken over command of the 7th Motor Brigade from Brigadier Renton when he had been elevated to the position of Divisional Commander a few weeks previously, was wounded; he was placed in our Battalion ambulance and taken off to our R.A.P., but unfortunately never recovered.

The Germans really meant business, as after breaking leaguer and getting back into similar positions at 5.30 next morning an engagement was already in progress; as our tanks and guns had surprised the enemy at rest. This dog fight went on for the next two days although the actions were beginning to become less fierce, particularly as there was heavy mist in the mornings, and it thus appeared that the Germans had at last shot this particular bolt, and the position had been stabilised.

We then resumed our normal activity as a separate Column in the same southerly area keeping watch on enemy patrols for the next two days and occasionally engaging them; things were however fairly quiet but on the 6th of the month at about midday the Commanding Officer was called, to Brigade Headquarters where the Divisional Commander was presiding, and by 2.30 orders had been received, and very unexpected they were.

A force was to be formed to raid FUKA AERODROME some 80 miles north-west and well behind the enemy lines. It had been suggested that this should be carried out that night, but quite obviously this was "not on" and agreement was reached that it should be done during the next 24 hours. A Squadron of the 12th

Lancers was put under command and by 4 o'clock that evening after a terrific hustle to collect the best vehicles, wireless sets and general equipment, "A" Company (Major Smith-Dorrien), four 25-pounders from the Essex Yeomanry, the armoured cars mentioned above and six 6-pounders moved off under the command of the C.O., leaving the rest of the Column to move forward about five miles as a contact force under the command of Major Gosling.

The raiding party managed to slip by any enemy patrols that might have been about and proceeded in complete darkness, with one halt, to a position in a wadi about 25 miles south of FUKA. Just after dawn the next morning while it was being debated as to exactly where we were, a visit was paid by two enemy aircraft flying low; there was no doubt that they must have seen us but it can only be assumed that they thought us friendly, as no unpleasant reaction took place.

The general plan was to try and get the whole raiding force up to the escarpment above FUKA AERODROME just before dark that night and use the 25-pounders to shoot up as much as possible any planes that might be there. Nothing however was known of the enemy positions or the intervening ground, so a reconnaissance party of the C.O., one armoured car, Major Smith-Dorrien and Capt. Spencer of the Essex Yeomanry, set off northwards to see what the form was. The party arrived on the north side of the escarpment at about midday after having had a number of scares, there were so many vehicles lying about the Desert that it was difficult to tell whether they were wrecks or occupied; four vehicles actually approached to within half a mile of us but fortunately in the mirage took no further notice of us. We saw a number of aeroplanes taking off the aerodrome below us, and the reconnaissance completed a wireless message was sent back ordering the main body to start moving northwards to meet us at a gap in some wire which we had met on the way up.

By about 5.30 in the evening everybody had got together with an approach march of about 20 miles to be made. It was an exciting moment, particularly when half-way a few figures were seen

moving on the Desert, a patrol was sent out to contact them and they were found to be 4 other ranks of the Green Howards who had been left behind in the retreat and had been nine days in the Desert. They were very thankful to find some of their own comrades willing to pick them up (although when they discovered the direction we were taking their feelings may have changed somewhat). By 8.15 that evening, after seeing a few vehicles moving about 2 miles away, everything was set, there being about 40 aircraft dispersed on the aerodrome. 200 rounds were fired rapidly over this area and damage was inflicted although it was most disappointing not to see a number of planes in flames.

The interesting moment then arrived - how to get back?

Attention was already being directed to the top of the escarpment by enemy breds and machine guns and a searchlight also added to the fun. The force reassembled complete about 2 miles south of the position and slowly began to move towards the gap in the wire. The night was pitch dark and the going was much slower than had been expected. A reaction had set in and the majority of all ranks were fairly exhausted.

Unfortunately the ammunition lorry with two other ranks decided they knew the way best and were never seen again. This was a serious matter as it brought us down to only about 20 rounds per gun. There was little plan that could be made for the withdrawal except the one of moving straight down the direct route until something happened. By midday we were in wireless contact with the rest of the Battalion who were hinting that we should go south, the hint was ill received as its adoption would have meant falling over the cliffs of the DEPRESSION - about 400 feet - to the salt marsh below.

The straight course was pursued until, as expected, contact was made with those who were awaiting our return. It is thought that they were prepared for us to be rather further north than we were, but we had taken a short cut over some very broken and what looked to be impassable rocky ground which we had remembered as

being passable when we had withdrawn through it about a month previously.

Orders were issued that two 25-pounder guns and two anti-tank guns should remain and engage the enemy as heavily as possible while the rest of the force moved as rapidly as it could in an easterly direction, if necessarily moving slightly south 88 m.m. shells began to fall fairly thick and fast, and unfortunately one anti-tank gun was soon put out of action, while the towing mechanism of the two bofors guns broke, which meant that they had to be abandoned.

However, the force slowly, or perhaps not so slowly, got back to comparative safety and collected again on the South African Armoured Car Outpost line near DWIES, where it was found that Sergeants Holland and Powell and about 8 other ranks had become casualties. We had not yet contacted the rest of the party and after having great difficulty in getting through the old defences of the Box which most unsportingly decided to blow up two of our trucks without, fortunately, serious casualties, we rejoined the rest of the Column. They were as pleased to see us as we were to see them; they themselves had had an unpleasant time, being singled out by enemy aircraft for two Stuka attacks in which one Sergeant had been killed, Capt. Mason wounded and 7 other ranks injured.

We really thought that after this we might at least get some rest, but the pace at this time was hot and the number of people to carry out the necessary work few. After a short night's rest we were once more by dawn the next morning operating as a Column and in contact with the enemy, who advanced with a tank force so that that evening under orders we withdrew a further three miles into the neighbourhood of BIR HEMIMET which was to be our location for a number of weeks.

It is perhaps worthwhile giving a description of the ground here; looking southwards from the Column position was the DEPRESSION to which a track ran close to the twin pimples of HEMIMET, it was in fact the one and only track down into the

DEPRESSION which was marked on the ordnance maps as "impassable for loaded camels". On our left front rose the higher ground of the TAQA PLATEAU which was a broken rocky mass leading on its south side straight down over perpendicular cliffs to the bottom of the DEPRESSION, while in front of us about three miles away was what was known as the JEBAL KALHAK which was only separated from the TAQA PLATEAU by a narrow Pass through which went the telephone wires to the SIWA OASIS.

It had been our aim to keep the TAQA PLATEAU out of enemy hands as it gave very good observation, but after a few days our O.Ps. were pushed back one evening by enemy tanks and armoured cars infiltrating through the wadis in the high ground. We were, however, able to keep them from penetrating any further by actively engaging any vehicle that came beyond the high ground. Our O.Ps. from the Essex Yeomanry, particularly Peter Hole, Jack Spencer and "Apple" Adam, could not have been better in pinning the opposition down.

During this period we were delighted to see Major Hogg who came up with the news that "D" Company had been reorganised and was at Brigade Headquarters together with Capt. Burton and Lieuts. Mursell and Lyon - they rejoined us soon after. We were very stretched from the point of view of Officers at this time, Lieut. Campbell was acting as Adjutant and the only other Officer at Headquarters was Lieut. Slade the Signal Officer. It was therefore a further bitter blow when "Gren" Smith-Dorrien left us to take up the well-deserved Command of 1st Battalion of the Buffs; his cheerful and audacious person was a great loss to us all. Capt. Wake took over "A" Company from him.

Enemy artillery activity varied from day to day, but anything seen moving was sure to attract attention. We were, however, unlucky on the 15th July when an 88 m.m. battery began to search our area and unfortunately one 6-pounder gun crew received a direct hit, Sergeant Field and three other ranks being killed, the remainder of the crew having to be evacuated as casualties.

The same day we were told that we were to leave the 7th Motor

Brigade, much to our regret, and join a composite force under Lt. Colonel Ackroyd-Hunt consisting of the survivors of the Guards Brigade and two Batteries of the 3rd R.H.A. Two Columns were formed from this force, the Guards Column taking over the southern position where we had been and we moving with a Battery of the 3rd R.H.A. somewhat northwards facing the northern end of the JEBAL KALHAK.

As our Column was considerably in advance of that to the south steps were taken to try and straighten out the patrol line, which was accomplished successfully, the southern Column occupying the eastern slopes of the TAQA PLATEAU. It seemed that the enemy had pushed us forward so that they might consolidate their positions on this high ground, which they had now done. In fact at this time there were static positions right from the coast to the DEPRESSION and orders came through that if possible a hole should be punched through them so that our light mobile forces could if necessary get through and make nuisances of themselves behind the lines. The first thing to do was to find out in what strength the enemy were in this area and Lt. Crisp made a series of night patrols which brought back the useful but depressing information that there was considerable wiring and mining along the whole of the lower slopes.

We had been very sorry in this reorganisation to lose our friends from the Essex Yeomanry, but surprisingly enough within three or four days they were back again relieving one Battery of the 3rd R.H.A. The same day that they arrived a conference was held at Force Headquarters which had now been taken over by Brigadier Cooke-Collis, the late Commander of one of the Durham Brigades of the 50th Division; the plan was to try and establish a Battery on JEBAL KALHAK and then for the Guards Column to sweep round over the TAQA PLATEAU so as to allow passage through to the west.

Captain Matheson and patrols from "D" Company made the first attempt. After proceeding about 4 miles from the forward leaguer area a carrier carrying the gunners' O.P. was blown up on

a minefield and the patrol came back. This information was valuable and the next night a further attempt by the whole of "B" Company (Major James) without their vehicles was made, it was hoped that contact could be kept by cable or W.T. so that if they were successful the remainder of the force - particularly the guns - could go forward in support. The attacking force was put under the command of Major James, but conditions could not have been worse, he himself was blown out of his carrier on a minefield, but the party pushed on and found themselves in the middle of the enemy gun and infantry positions mostly manned by Italians.

At 3 o'clock in the morning a very heavy fog came down cutting visibility to five yards, with the result that the cable laying party lost contact. Wireless reception as usual during the night was bad, and for the remainder of the night the party tried to find its way through the minefields assisted by Sappers from Division who had been attached to us.

By 5.30 in the morning a report came through that it was not possible to establish the party at JEBAL KALHAK before first light. "B" Company therefore disposed themselves in defensive positions where they remained in action with the enemy until they withdrew slightly late assisted by a troop of the Essex Yeomanry.

In the meantime the cable-laying party had found its way back by an unexpected route and was nearly treated as an enemy party by our own machine guns. The fog had been a great nuisance in this case but very valuable information had been received.

There was no doubt that Higher Command was more than interested in this project, and the old cry 'no peace for the wicked' arose again as orders were received that afternoon for the whole party to repeat the performance. However, late that evening after all plans had been completed, the night attack was cancelled and we were ordered to go back to our old friends the 7th Motor Brigade. We thought that those on the spot had come to the conclusion that such an attack with a Motor Battalion with so few effective people on their feet was not on. Our relief was short-lived,

the 7th Motor Brigade took up the cry again the same night and orders were received for the party to take place the next day, the 24th July, 1942.

### **The Beginning of the End**

War is at least full of surprises and instead of taking on what might have been rather a nasty task, next morning we were given orders to reorganise completely. We left our friends the Essex Yeomanry and went back to Brigade area where "B" and "D" Companies were made up to full strength in personnel and vehicles from other Companies and from reinforcements who had been waiting at a F.M.C., thus two Companies under Major James and Captain Matheson went to join our 1st Battalion in the 2nd Armoured Brigade, while the remainder were to return to the Delta for refitting.

The Commanding Officer had talks with the Divisional Commander and Lt.Colonel Consett (1st K.R.R.C.), and within 24 hours the changeover had been made, the remaining party moving the next day to 155 Transit Camp at MENA where the Battalion L.O.B. personnel under Major Dickenson rejoined us.

The general idea was that the Battalion Headquarters and one Company at a time should be reformed and trained at full strength so that "B" and "D" Companies could get some rest by exchanges. The immediate plan was to get a Headquarters and two Companies on a war footing and these were the orders received by the C.O. from the 8th Army Headquarters when he visited them on the 31st July, 1942. At the same time Capt. Goschen of the 1st Battalion K.R.R.C. was attached to supervise the reforming of one Company of K.R.R.C.

We were shortly after joined at MENA by the 9th Rifle Brigade and about 200 other ranks from the Infantry Base Depot. Rumour had it that "B" and "D" Companies were to be relieved so that we could really get down to the task of reorganisation; this was extremely good news but one had got beyond the stage of expecting

an order received one day not to be cancelled the next.

Firstly, the 8th Army told us that one Company would be returning and that we ourselves were to move to KHATATBA to come under the wing of the 1st Armoured Division; this was good news as we knew that this Division was needing a Motor Battalion badly. On the 11th August an advance party moved from MENA being followed by the rest of us on the 13th. The Camp was about 5 miles off the Cairo/Alexandria Road, near Half-way House - it could not have been further from civilisation. There was plenty to do but welcome permission for leave was given, 10% being allowed to go off for five nights at a time: those who had been almost continually in the Desert from the previous December, except for a short spell, had quite a bit in their pay books, and a right royal time was had by them.

8th Army, or whoever it might have been, once more had a change of mind. The Battalion received orders that it was to be reduced to cadre strength and its personnel used for reinforcements to other Green Jacket Battalions - we were in fact one of 12 Infantry Battalions throughout the Middle East who suffered from the same fate.

Discussions took place in the desert at 7th Armoured Division Headquarters between the C.O. and the Commanding Officers of the 1st and 2nd Battalions K.R.R.C. We intended to do the best for our sister Battalion and within a very short time Captain Charles, Lieuts. Kempster and Lyon, with 138 other ranks joined the 2nd K.R.R.C. under Lt.Colonel Heathcote-Amory, while Major Wake, Captains Millbourn, Burton and Bundock, with 66 other ranks left for the 1st Battalion. This meant that there were few of the Battalion left, so once more we set off down the Alexandria Road and arrived back at MENA to really wind up the Battalion as it stood.

It had always been felt that if there had been a proper Base Depot and Training Battalion for Motor Battalions such a fate would not have descended upon us and the 9th Rifle Brigade;

reinforcements had always been extremely hard to come by and we had on occasions been sent kilted Scots and other persons strange to ourselves, but never what we considered the right types.

Lt.Colonel Purdon of the 9th R.B. who was in the same position was then appointed at the beginning of September to command a new training depot in the Canal Zone and the two C.Os. concerned got together to ensure that the best N.C.Os. were transferred there as Instructors and that all equipment, both legal and otherwise, went with them.

The next few weeks were taken up in trying to ensure that senior personnel and in fact everybody was settled in a reasonable job. Our L.A.D. under S.Q.M.S. Owen went en bloc to the Queens Own Yorkshire Dragoons, but there was a sad moment as on that very day S.Q.M.S. Owen, who had been such a wonderful help in repairing our own vehicles, died suddenly in hospital.

The final date of the Battalions existence was the 21st September, 1942. It was in fact diminishing in numbers throughout the whole of the month, but this does not mean that those concerned did not take a very active part in the fighting both in North Africa and in Egypt; in fact "B" Company originally under Major James with Sergeant-Major Clark continued as an entity with the 1st Battalion for many months through North Africa, Sicily and Italy, and other postings to various Units were made from time to time.

It might, however, be of final interest to have some knowledge of where the majority of the remaining Officers and other ranks went to at this period. Quartermaster Lieutenant Bayley and ten other ranks including R.S.M. Starkey, Pioneer Sergeant Richards, C.S.M. Lee and Sergeant Cooper returned to England as part of the cadre for the new Battalion. We all felt in our hearts that this would not be reformed during the war, and this was true. Captain Stevens was also posted back to England as part of this contingent, but on a separate boat, it was most unfortunate that the ship was torpedoed off Durban and as a result of exposure he died in hospital

shortly after.

Major Hogg and Captain Dickenson were posted to the Middle East Training Centre and Middle East O.C.T.U. in Palestine as Instructors. Major Low was at this time still in hospital and soon after went to the Staff College, and after serving with the 2nd Battalion K.R.R.C. rose to the dizzy heights of Brigadier on the General, Staff of a Corps in Italy.

Our old friend Orderly Room Sergeant Garnell was immediately snapped up by 7th Motor Brigade as their Chief Clerk - they could not have made a better choice - while such well-known specialist characters as Sergeant Nice carried on his duties of keeping the Officers' Mess happy, with the 11th K.R.R.C. Captain Mason who had recovered in hospital returned to his old Battalion. This left a party of one Officer, Lieut. Infield, and 90 other ranks who with the 9th Rifle Brigade moved to GENEIFA to establish the 2nd Infantry Training Depot.

It had always been felt that this would not really be the end of the Battalion although it might remain in suspended animation for some time. It was reformed in 1946 and there could be no better first Commanding Officer than Lt.Colonel Boileau who had been with it for so many years.