

Extracts from TANK  
April 1941  
Feb, Aug 80

### EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF MAJOR DAVID LING, MC, A Sqn, 44 RTR, WESTERN DESERT

The background is the period June 1941/July 1942 in the Western Desert. 1st Army Tank Brigade, consisting of 8th, 42nd and 44th RTR sailed for the Middle East on 21 April 1941 via the Cape and Suez. The 44th's carefully prepared Matilda II's, loaded onto a Clan Line transport, were in mid-voyage re-routed through the Mediterranean to Alexandria to re-equip the 4th and 7th for the largely abortive June 'Battleaxe' offensive, so that the Regiment (Bn in those days) arrived at Sidi Bishr tankless. Clarification may be needed of some of the names and terms used: 'Boomer' - Brigadier H R B Watkins (Cmdr, 1st Army Tank Brigade); Bill Yeo - Lt Colonel H C J Yeo, DSO (CO, 44th RTR); 'Stump' - Major E H Gibbon, DSO (OC A Sqn, 44th RTR); 'Ants & Maggies' - now outmoded Gunnery School terms for anti-tank and machine guns.

23.6.41

The CO's casual announcement the evening before that we are to proceed up the line in about a fortnight's time and take over the 5th Bn tanks has set us agog with excitement.

We take precedence over the 8th and will be the first TA battalion in action. The news of Germany's attack on the USSR takes second place in importance to this new and tremendous point in our history. Our appetites are further whetted when we are told in the morning that we move up to Matruh on Thursday, in three days time. Hastily we call kit inspections and complete men to the last detail; conferences are held to decide what to discard, what to take with us - the guiding principle being 'travel light'. This we have been told by other units who have experienced before what is new to us. We benefit by their knowledge.

Only two squadrons of the 5th are in Matruh at the moment, their C Sqn is here at Sidi Bishr completing their equipment before moving up themselves. Now this will not be - Geoffrey Leeds' squadron is to remain behind and the two C Squadrons will exchange tanks - they will follow the remainder of us in a week or so.

We have tanks again! No longer are we to fill bomb holes, carry out endless drill parades and generally waste time. The chagrin that so quickly descended on us when we learned at Suez that all our lovely tanks had been filched from us, has as suddenly been lifted. We will return to our own tanks because we know more of Matilda and her whims than the 5th Bn. We ourselves *knew we knew* more, not only than the 5th Bn but any other battalion - can it be that this is recognised now by the Brass Hats?

We are going 'up the line'. This one fact dominates our lives at the moment. Officers apply for permission to proceed into Alex to buy shaving sticks, soap, razor blades, aspirin and all the what have you one immediately realises we will require. QM stores, Tech. stores are being compressed into a few crates, the remainder put in store. Bignell, always hard working, works as he has never done before - we are all glad we are not the QM.

27.6.41

Our arrival in Egypt heralded the appearance of many strange maladies among the officers in particular. Many to whom illness of any sort was quite strange went down - the commonest complaint being 'gypsy tummy'. None of us could explain what to put the cause down to - all of us had the same symptoms and pains. To you who have never been to Egypt, who have therefore never experienced gypsy tummy, I give the heeding now of what to expect. Mentally the effect is one of sluggishness and lethargy. At the same time one gets a violent pain in the pit of the stomach almost making it difficult for one to straighten the body. The worst effect is one which the reader can quickly find out for himself by taking full doses of Epsom salts, syrup of figs, senna pods, calomel and no. 9 at one and the same time. The

officers' latrines were situated some 100-200 yards from the tanks, and daily could be seen the pitiful procession travelling to and fro these points - much like the thin procession of ants one sees making the journey between home and foodstore. To make matters worse no one could offer a cure and one had to bear the malady until time, the only healer, had played his part.

Sidi Bishr camp at this time was ridden with sand fleas - agile little beasts who thought nothing of surmounting such an easy obstacle as a camp bed, who penetrated with ease a valise and blanket and who escaped detection with the ability of a Houdini. Flea bites were commoner than mosquito bites by far and some officers, particularly Lookman and Benson, had such a belt of bits around their bellies that sleep for them was almost impossible.

The great day for the move into the desert was upon us before we realised it and at 0800 hours on that morning at Sidi Bishr station could be seen many tired officers and men entraining for their uncomfortable journey west. They were tired not so much from the additional and hurried work of the last two days but as a result of imbibing too much liquor in the hectic parties each squadron held the night before in Alex, returning to camp only a few hours earlier on the same morning.

The Egyptian State Railway is much like its counterparts in Europe. It is uncomfortable, dirty and unreliable. We had already experienced it in travelling from Suez to Sidi Bishr and realised fully what to expect. Now we embarked once again, with high hearts for a journey of 180 miles which was only to take ten hours - normally units less fortunate than ourselves had a 20 hour journey. Our farewell was considerably enlivened by the appearance of Miss Eve Bewsher, daughter of the Alex Area Commandant, who fulfilled a promise made the night before and arrived at the station in a decrepid 1930 Austin 7 well before the train was due to leave. Of the train journey the less said the better - the carriage windows HAD to be kept up for the agile Egyptian fly could move faster than our ponderous train and had no difficulty in flying into the compartments in thousands. Suffice to say we arrived at Matruh whose flat-topped one-storey white houses were looking very scarred from constant bombing at 1900, some five hours before we were expected. The fifth battalion from whom we were taking over had arranged meals and transport into the desert for the battalion at 2200 hours. Now they were suddenly asked to produce these immediately. The promptitude, energy and good heartedness which accompanied everything they did for us earned our real gratitude. The 5th Bn at this time had been refitted with I tanks and came up to Matruh only ten days before - all of them light of heart at the prospect of again coming to grips with Jerry and full of hope of giving the lie to unfounded rumours of themselves which were then current in Alex. Consequently to be told after such high hopes to give up all their tanks and return to

spoke and thanked the  
successful reunion.  
Fraser for providing over 20  
Arms Hotel, Lansdowne,  
the lovely buffet, to the  
of Westover Club for their  
to Bob and Mrs Rogers, and  
nemouth & Poole Branch  
Mrs Fraser in running the  
Gunnery School, Lulworth

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Cairo with little chance of coming up again, perhaps for some months, must have hurt the men to the core. But the generous and spontaneous way in which they handed over everything they had, equipment they had 'won' in addition to that on establishment, won the gratitude and admiration of us all. Never was a handover carried out under more adverse conditions and yet with such wholehearted generosity. The hand-over was completed in two days and the little parties held respectively by the two A Sqs and two B Sqs, on that last night, when, in a small lamp-lit tent some 200 miles in the desert, each drank the health of the other, were as genuine as they were spontaneous.

Work now had to be carried out in checking and inspecting our newly won vehicles and this went on at full speed. Our fondly imagined pictures of the desert culled from Hollywood's presentations of endless sand dunes, an occasional palm with a small pool under it (the whole known as an oasis) sheiks, Arab ponies and soldiers wearing telegraph boys' hats with a piece of cloth hanging down at the back, bangled snake hipped houris — all these were to be rudely shattered. The Garden of Allah was a stony dusty and endless track, sparsely covered with dry scrub and heavily populated ants of infinite variety, the largest spiders, snails, white, and evidently extremely fertile, the unpleasant scorpion, much more pleasant chameleons and lizards, occasional snakes, centipedes, great lumbering black beetles and the one great pest that surmounted the unpleasantness of all the others tenfold, the filthy persistent Egyptian fly in their millions. We had had drummed into us consistently since we left England all the wise precautions to take to decrease the possibility of disease caused by carriage of the germs by flies. Food was to be covered, refuse burnt, latrine lids provided — we were to make ourselves as fly-

proof as possible. No 2 Troop taking the exhortations to heart rather more than others decided that there was a certain danger of the ever daring and exploring fly to enter our field made commodes during the period it was in use and when the seat cover was up, due to an ill and unscientifically designed opening in the seat. To overcome this the troop sergeant, Sgt De Gay, decided his troops latrine would be made to measure. Looking around him Sgt De Gay chose the unfortunate Tpr Heim as having an average sized and normal shaped posterior and he was made to sit on a seat, trousers down, while a pencil was run round to the shape he produced, violently expostulating while three or four others held him down.

Our camp was within one mile of Charing Cross, the point at which the Siwa, Sidi Barani and Matruh roads meet and this was fortunate for us as it meant that we had unlimited supplies of water. Charing Cross being a water point, and receiving its supplies by pipe line from Matruh to which it was shipped by tankers. Later however, and after we had left this spot, our supplies were to be cut down drastically and for the first time in our lives we were to know what a precious thing water can be. The water holes or 'birs' in the desert are fairly numerous but the great majority have been dry and unused for many years and those that did contain water had mostly a brackish, greenish coloured filthy liquid with a liberal helping of camel dung dissolved in it. Those films we have all seen so often in which our hero staggers up to a well having plodded wearily for days through soft sand and, throwing himself on his belly, eagerly scoops up with his hands the cool clear liquid, quickly reviving with each scoop, are so much hokey. The true presentation would show the hero taking a mouthful having first contrived to get the water up from 10-15 feet below the ground. The next shot would

show him lying on the ground undergoing a further accel-

We had been but five days in the area Bir Abu Madi. The battalion was ordered to move in the area Bir Abu Madi. The gators of the battalion to practice all they had learned. The battalion practice party went out and the light. The battalion marched in open formation, to its new Sqn arrived to find B in a convinced that the battalion altogether and that the bir was not Abu Madi. The march continued for many days in the CMP for the area desert district. One day a petrol lorry and on it in large letters was last to the CO's satisfaction were supposed to be.

Normally working hours civilian experienced at home. The first few days in the desert these hours was impractical making tanking difficult if it changed — we were to work at 1200 and work again from 50% lay in the shade of the tent. The nine mile journey to Bathing in Matruh must be the shore was covered with which gave the water a lily-dazzling as almost to hurtling of white sand, blue sea and the yellow mosque and on ground, was such that if accused by the uninitiated. This was one of the few words. Dorothy Lamour it make the whole the ideal.

Those who stayed in camp to bathe the next day usually had a persistent and promptly each day at 1400 hours. The area in which usual having a small dune side of every scrub and would be whipped up till that one could merely turn one's back until once more all emptying all one's belongings for it got everywhere — a battalion were useless after

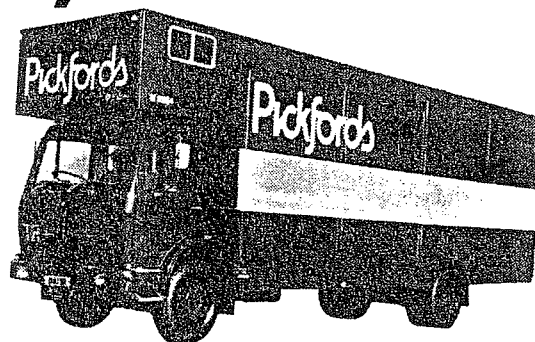
27.7.41

We were part of the 4th and 78th Battalions in strength. These Bns had the Sollum area soon after we back at Matruh minus the them having been lost to meant that we, who were premier battalion on the was concerned should Je-

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show him lying on the ground writhing with pain, and undergoing a further accelerated death.

We had been but five days at Charing Cross when the battalion was ordered to move to an area some nine miles away in the area Bir Abu Madi. Here was the chance for the navigators of the battalion to prove their worth and put into practice all they had learnt on board ship. The reconnaissance party went out and returned, the following day at first light. The battalion marched under Sqn arrangements and in open formation, to its new camp led by the navigators, A Sqn arrived to find B in its area while the CO was firmly convinced that the battalion was in the wrong place altogether and that the bir that could be seen in the distance was not Abu Madi. The arguments as to where we were continued for many days and was not finally decided until the CMP for the area decided to signpost every bir in its district. One day a petrol box was firmly planted on our bir and on it in large letters was painted Bir Abu Madi settling at last to the CO's satisfaction that we were actually where we were supposed to be.

Normally working hours had been much like those the civilian experienced at home, but working a seven day week. The first few days in the desert showed that to continue with these hours was impracticable, the heat of the afternoon making tanking difficult if not impossible. So the hours were changed — we were to work from 0700 to 1130, have lunch at 1200 and work again from 1700 to 1900. In the afternoon 50% lay in the shade of the bivouacs while the other 50% made the nine mile journey to Matruh by truck for a bathe. Bathing in Matruh must be equal to the finest in the world for the shore was covered with the purest of snow white sand which gave the water a lighter and brighter blue colour so dazzling as almost to hurt the eyes. The contrasting colouring of white sand, blue sea, glistening brown bodies, with the yellow mosque and occasional palm trees in the background, was such that if reproduced on paper would be accused by the uninitiated of being cheap garish and gaudy. This was one of the few spots that out-Hollywood Hollywood. Dorothy Lamour in her sarong only was needed to make the whole the ideal tropical island paradise.

Those who stayed in camp and whose turn it would be to bathe the next day usually had a fairly unpleasant time. The wind had a persistent and pernicious habit of springing up promptly each day at 1400 and continuing for three or four hours. The area in which we were living was sandier than usual having a small dune of fine red sand on the windward side of every scrub and stone. At this hour the red dust would be whipped up till the air resembled an English fog and one could merely turn one's back to it, shut one's eyes and curse until once more all subsided. Then came the task of emptying all one's belongings and shaking them free of dust for it got everywhere — at least 75% of the watches in the battalion were useless after two weeks life in the desert.

27.7.41

We were part of the 4th Armoured Brigade with the 4th and 78th Battalions making up the remainder of the strength. These Bns had only just completed fighting in the Sollum area soon after we arrived in Egypt, and were now back at Matruh minus the majority of their tanks, most of them having been lost through mechanical defects. This meant that we, who were completely equipped, were the premier battalion on the Western Desert as far as defence was concerned should Jerry decide to advance. Matruh was

heavily defended — barbed wire, anti tank ditches and obstacles, pill boxes, minefields surrounded the town; we all shed a silent tear for the old Mediums surrounding the town, dug and sandbagged in and acting as pill boxes — such grand old warriors deserved an end more fitting than this. South of the minefield which stretched down as far as Bir el Agram and north of the Minquar Sidi Hamza escarpment was the gap which the battalion was responsible for, and now our training concentrated on first getting to know this part of the desert like the back of our hands, and secondly the use of the I tank in this most open type of warfare. Many schemes were held most of them being carried out with trucks as tank mileage HAD to be kept down. Gradually we became accustomed to these new conditions and, feeling fit to take on anyone and anything, just yearned for the day of action.

The squadrons, in turn, marched to Bir Khiema just west of Minquar Sidi Hamza for a two days practice shoot. In this way all guns were tested and gunners taught themselves to judge distance at different times of the day when heat haze and mirage played tremendous tricks or, one's ability to do so.

Jock Lucas' death was so sudden and unexpected that it was not for some days that we realised the extent of the tragedy, or our loss. He had been acting as umpire on a three days scheme and was travelling back to the camp again on its conclusion when by some error in his navigation he took a course some 20° to 30° west of the true one. This brought him straight on to the minefield of which we had been continually warned, which formed a part of the Matruh defence. Here Jock hesitated as a single strand of wire ran around the minefield some 12 inches above ground; he however did not know that this was the reason for the wire. He stopped, got out of his truck and checked his bearing, declaring it to be correct and ordering the driver to continue. Six hundred yards inside the wire the near side front wheel struck a mine, which detonated, nearly severing Jock's left arm. His driver and batman were unhurt and while one returned along the wheel tracks for help the other tended to Jock. Fortunately there was a stock of morphine with them and a tourniquet on the wounded arm soon stopped the bleeding. But suffering from severe shock Jock died within two hours. He requested a Jewish burial before dying and this was carried out on the following day. Jock, in the 15 months he had served with the 44th Bn had, in addition to being a most efficient soldier, been the leader of all that was funny in the Officers' Mess. His ability to draw led to a veritable stream of caricatures from his pencil, of the officers around him and the incidents always taking place. In odd moments he was always to be seen pulling a scribbling pad from his pocket and starting to sketch the various thoughts that entered his head. His sense of humour was most mischievous, his sense of the ridiculous was inbred. He organised and ran all the red letter parties we had ever held — no one considered having one without first saying 'Let's get hold of Jock' for his absence almost meant the party falling flat. It was he who was the genius behind the Dish Club — it was he who invented the sketches Ze Zeppelin and Ze Submarine. His miming of Hitler, his impersonations of senior officers were howling successes. Always in Jock's mind was the birth of an idea — to pull so and so's leg, to make a skit on that incident, to ridicule to the utmost heights somebody's unfortunate folly — and yet never was the humour cruel or vindictive. With Jock's death such a lid has been clamped down on the laughing life in the Officers' Mess



## EMPLOYMENT

**Married Couple Required for  
Country House in Dorset**

A vacancy has occurred for a married couple to work in a pleasant country house near the sea in Dorset. The husband to look after small garden and wife as cook-housekeeper. Accommodation provided. Would suit WO/NCO about to leave the Regiment, with or without children.

Reference E/O/422

**Steward —  
Midland Bank Residential College  
in Surrey**

A vacancy exists for a Steward at the Midland Bank Residential College in Surrey. The duties are a combination of Hall Porter, Security Man and Bar Steward. The salary would be in excess of £4,000 per annum plus full board and lodging and is pensionable after a minimum of five years service.

This attractive vacancy would suit an unmarried Junior NCO about to leave the Regiment.

Reference E/O/423

**Caretakers for Property  
in Central London**

A well known firm of Chartered Surveyors is looking for a Senior WO/NCO and his wife to act as Caretakers for a group of inter-connected mainly office buildings in Central London. Accommodation is provided and the rates of pay for husband is in the region of £90 per week. This is an excellent opportunity for a WO/NCO about to leave the Regiment.

Reference E/O/389

For further particulars apply (quoting reference Nos) to:

Regimental Secretary,  
RTR Association,  
HQ RAC Centre,  
Bovington Camp,  
Wareham,  
Dorset, BH20 6JA

that we shall be lucky once more to regain the same devil may care hilarity of heretofore.

Leave to Cairo was started but only a small percentage of the battalion's personnel was allowed away at any one time and therefore to increase the number it was arranged that one truck would travel to Alex each week ostensibly to pick up 'training equipment' and on this truck would travel one officer and a handful of OR's. In fact this truck carried the dirty washing of the battalion and it was the duty of the officer accompanying it to hand it over to a local dhobi who laundered it in time for the lorry's return to Matruh at the week's end. Generally this officer had a harassing time. In addition to wrangling with the dhobi about ineffective laundering, lost shirts, he had to check over every item in the washing list and acted as shopper for all his fellow officers. There was always a long shopping list — we ran out of razor blades, soap and films, we wanted stocks of books, there were always the spools of negatives awaiting development and the collection of those that were handed in the week before and which were not ready at the end of that week. Nevertheless the opportunity to go to Alex with the 'washing truck' was one that no one missed and the competition to get one's name at the head of the list of those to go was keenly contested.

But leave to Cairo and excursions to Alex on washing trucks soon took second place to the short spells one had at the Battalion's Rest Camp certainly in number and sometimes in popularity also. It was the CO's brainwave to alleviate the same monotony of the daily desert routine and to prevent boredom he instituted at GERAWLA a small camp on the Mediterranean's edge. Situated amongst sand dunes the camp consisted of nothing more than a few bivouacs, a cookhouse, a canteen situated in the open air and selling beer, canned fruit, cigarettes and chocolate from a few packing cases, and a 15 cwt truck — this to replenish the canteen stocks, to draw water from the conveniently situated water point at Gerawla and to deal with any unforeseen circumstances. Squadrons each sent about a dozen men to the camp for a three day spell of lazing, bathing and eating after which they were replaced by a further 12. In addition to these one officer was sent who became in charge of the party and whose duty it was to carry out the small amount of organisation necessary — appointment of a canteen keeper, ordering of stocks, arranging sports, etc.

During the three days stay personnel were at liberty to do exactly as they pleased. Here was no discipline, no routine, no orders, no guards, no supervision. One arose when one saw fit — to bathe in the small sandy bay around which our bivouacs nestled — to breakfast on increased rations with liberal supplies of canned fruit provided by the unexpected largesse of PRI. After breakfast saw more swimming, or sun-bathing; some got down to serious reading (there being a small library in the camp) while others preferred to stroll along the beach. The afternoon for most was given up to sleeping. In the evening sometimes a game of cricket was arranged — or football, while after supper and sundown the whole camp would congregate around the canteen for the inevitable evening singsong and story telling over many bottles of lager. And this for three days.

Its effect was amazing, its popularity terrific, and the CO had shown wise discretion in deciding the stay should be short, for a lazy holiday such as this can quickly become boring but after three days we would all go back to the unit regretfully.

It was decided to hold a John Weland gave birth to the With a certain amount of ingenuity laid in the open sea and the gable because the RC of S were along the railway extension their stock of telephone poles by one. After much preparation arrived — the course was reformedly imbued with a patriotic and the spectators in 3-tonner trucks. The officer were quickly collared for the every type of sports meet starters, etc. The CO was splashed themselves to a fine greasy pole was in progress soared into the arena and, pa CO.

The CO on reading it annotated and everyone would immerse reason, he stated, was that a morning crossed the wire. everyone in various stages of his clothes and hurriedly put while that he would be in at Gerawla camp which had disappeared completely in 3-tonners touched unknown Abu Madi.

The rest of the day was spent was not until very late that conference that we were informed morning to our battle station out for the first time in its his march and made its way through previous night, to Abu Sheikh up facing west. Crews remain for the expected orders for were informed that Jerry had and that the Bn was to move stages. At the time our equipment and Mark II's and it was transported by Scammell trucks only six available — these the service between our start going very much overtime the S difficult programme allotted return journey in two days. Meanwhile the remainder of marches of approximately formation. After each two days maintenance. In this way, a tanks arrived up without serious being cracked suspensions with the tanks concerned continued there were stragglers. They are sorts of unearthly hours. The nomadic conditions; being in dropped out. They were rare Battalion. As for the BTA it disappeared completely. We occasionally that he had been Blank heading in a south east

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It was decided to hold a Battalion swimming sports — John Weland gave birth to the idea and became organiser. With a certain amount of ingenuity the various courses were laid in the open sea and the greasy pole event became possible because the RC of S were erecting a new telephone line along the railway extension and one day they found that their stock of telephone poles had mysteriously decreased by one. After much preparation the great day for the sports arrived — the course was ready, unwilling swimmers were forcedly imbued with a patriotic spirit for their squadrons and they and the spectators arrived in force from Abu Madi in 3-tonner trucks. The officers were there in force. They were quickly collared for the various jobs that accompany every type of sports meeting — judges, time-keepers, starters, etc. The CO was there. About two events had splashed themselves to a finish and the first round of the greasy pole was in progress when a dusty despatch rider soared into the arena and, panting, produced a note for the CO.

The CO on reading it announced that the sports were over and everyone would immediately return to camp. The reason, he stated, was that a large force of Germans had that morning crossed the wire. The effect was amazing — everyone in various stages of undress was rushing back to his clothes and hurriedly pulling them on, visualising the while that he would be in action before the day was out. Gerawla camp which had been in existence for some weeks disappeared completely in as many minutes, as the 3-tonners touched unknown speeds in their hurtle back to Abu Madi.

The rest of the day was spent in a state of alertness and it was not until very late that night after a protracted CO's conference that we were informed we would move the next morning to our battle station. At dawn the Battalion moved out for the first time in its history as a complete unit on the march and made its way through camps, deserted since the previous night, to Abu Sheiba where it halted, deployed two up facing west. Crews remained waiting throughout the day for the expected orders for action. However by evening we were informed that Jerry had returned to his original area and that the Bn was to move some 100 miles west by easy stages. At the time our equipment was a mixture of Mark IIa and Mark IIa's and it was decided that the the IIa would be transported by Scammell transporters of which there were only six available — these therefore would have to do a ferry service between our start point and our destination. Working very much overtime the Scammells managed to fulfil the difficult programme allotted to them — that of doing the return journey in two days, and this repeated three times. Meanwhile the remainder of the battalion was making daily marches of approximately 25 miles in a one up open formation. After each two days march one day was spent for maintenance. In this way, and by exercising this care, all tanks arrived up without serious trouble, the chief casualties being cracked suspensions which did not prevent, however, the tanks concerned continuing on the march. Of course there were stragglers. They arrived in our night leaguers at all sorts of unearthly hours. The fitters trucks lived under real nomadic conditions; being in the rear to deal with those that dropped out. They were rarely seen by the remainder of the Battalion. As for the BTA in his pick-up truck — he just disappeared completely. Vague reports reached the CO occasionally that he had been seen three days ago at Bir Blank heading in a south easterly direction at full speed.

Anyway it was not until we had been firmly established in camp for some days that Allan Leigh rolled in one day to state that all tanks were in.

Our destination had been Bir Ramadam and here we settled down in a tactical disposition — the Bn 2 up and widely dispersed. B echelon was brigaded many miles back and we all walked on our flat feet to and from the various HQ's and tanks. As the distance between vehicles was some 300 yards it will be seen this was no joke.

In view of the larger scale raid made by the Germans on September 14th and also the possibility of another such raid, the Bn was assigned a defensive role to counteract and destroy any — ?

I have completely lost track of the calendar and therefore cannot date this diary but I will write something each day so that when any one day is established the rest automatically falls into place.

We were some 20 miles east of Gambut on the dawn of the day we attacked it. Moving out of close leaguer at dawn the Bn steamed north for seven miles to meet up with the 4th Bde NZ Div and reached them an hour later. Our job in the advance west from that point was to provide an advance guard of one squadron, the other squadron's job being to accompany the leading infantry battalion. Our squadron being the one deputed for the former role deployed three up on a wide front, my troop being the leading left hand one. All went smoothly. The NZ Div Cav in front, mounted on Bren carriers and occasional light tanks, moved off with Benson accompanying them to give us early information of any opposition met. We travelled along the bottom of the escarpment running from east to west with another escarpment dropping away on our right. The going was fair. The Libyan desert appeared quite different from what we had known in Egypt being much less stony and sandy and covered with clumps of camel thorn — these made driving of wheeled vehicles difficult for it meant that drivers had to avoid the clumps as each one housed a mound of earth. Reports throughout the march came in via Benson who was in contact with the enemy's forward elements. On the top of the escarpment to our left could be seen vehicles and I presumed them to be our flank guard for surely no commander could be so unwise as to travel underneath without seeing that the top was clear. I suppose some 10 miles had been covered when I noticed that shells were bursting all around my troop — some within 5 yards and looking up at the escarpment I could see flashes coming from it. This was reported to Stump Gibbon who ordered the squadron right, effectively getting 2 Troop and myself out of range. Then we halted. The light tank reported the Div Cav were being held up by enemy tanks and would we come through and deal with them. Meanwhile 4 Troop being on the right of the edge of the norther escarpment was having grand fun reporting enemy transport along the main road and taking pot shots at them. The halt seemed interminable and we of the tanks were all fuming at not being allowed to push on and brush Jerry aside but the infantry commander would not allow it and was holding us back until a flank guard got into position on top of the escarpment on the left. At last the time came and off we scuttled, through the cavalry and on to Gambut which was appearing in the distance. We saw three German Mk III tanks set out at high speed across the front of the aerodrome. The attack, well carried out, was a fiasco for Gerry had already evacuated the place. My troop was given the role of travelling up the

southern side of the aerodrome and dealing with all tents, vehicles, huts and emplacements there. I met with no opposition excepting fairly futile machine gunning from the top of the escarpment. My only bag was when belting a truck, two Germans ran out for a trench from which they waved a hastily mocked up white flag — we went straight towards it. As we got near the poor devils dropped the flag and I saw a pair of shivering hands held aloft — then as we drew up they came out hands held high. They looked very white. I cruised around for a bit looking at every tent and giving it a burst for the joy of it and then we rallied. Spasmodic shelling started from the road below carried out by a few stalwart German tanks and this indeed continued all night.

The Bn leaguered for the night on the south east edge of the drome in the usual triangular formation.

Gambut early morning. Having dispersed from close leaguer at 0530 hours we waited and waited. Jerry was still on top of the escarpment, and he gave a certain amount of trouble with his guns. Our artillery was firing back very accurately and we spent our time idly watching the duel. The gunners were enjoying it for it was one of those rare occasions on which they could see their rounds burst. The two I tank FOOs went forward towards the winding path up the bluff to get better observation — the Germans were immediately above. We watched them leaving us in a cloud of dust getting smaller and smaller until, when 1500 yards away, an 88 opened up on them. They in their turn fired at the enemy's transport. Later they came back — one with a huge hole through his turret and the remains of his operator inside who took an 88 through the chest. Not so good. At

last we moved off — late in the afternoon to travel to 442408 between Ed Dbana and Zaafran. C Sqn were advance guard and my troop with 2 Troop guarded the right flank. I nearly gave birth to twins when after three miles running I saw a good 300-400 enemy transport away to my right some three miles. I reported this over the air and was told 'We know about them — don't let them see you'. Strange war! Why don't we go in and hit them? The march was uneventful. C Squadron in front reported many enemy MET and just as light was failing and we reached our objective, a tank battle on the left between the 8th and some Mk IIIs. We were just too late to join in. It was getting dark quickly so hurriedly we got into line ahead and turning into the middle of the NZ column, leaguered for the night in double line ahead, it being too late to get into the usual triangle — an intricate operation taking time and unless one was on one's own, apparently useless. That night we saw the QMS for the first time for three days — the most important event of the day. We were getting worried, only 40 miles of fuel left and the first day's emergency rations and water had gone. And he brought for the evening meal Machonochie's M & V — hot in the tin — most excellent. We sat in the staff car, which was carefully blacked out by throwing a tank sheet over it, until quite late — 10 pm — and drank a bottle of gin and smoked until the small atmosphere was so smoke laden that I could not open my eyes for the smarting. To bed then and orders next morning at 0515 hours. We were to proceed out at 0545 hours to the front of our FDLs and covering a front of 1200 yards we were to secure a line running almost due north and south and just west of the track, for the NZ Bde. Four troops up this time with John Mosley in reserve with No 2. I was left centre troop. Moved off according to programme. Had nearly reached track when some 300 Germans springing from nowhere gave themselves up. Tom Baynam jumps out of his tank to win a Luger — a driver in his troop seeing this does the same. Silly. The NZs following up behind take over the prisoners while we move forwards and sit on the ridge on our left and also overlook the escarpment in front. Tom and Matthew on the latter job poop off at long range at enemy MET below. On the ridge I am on the right with Joe on my left. Stump moved up and joined Joe. They were fired on quite hard and I collected the overs. This firing Stump blamed on C Squadron who had now also come up on the ridge further east but it was in fact Gerry ants nicely dug in and only 100 to 400 yards away. Our task done we withdrew with Joe's tank pretty groggy. Meanwhile Geoffrey's squadron was collecting a packet. John White was killed with an AP projectile through his cupola and head — a couple of other tanks were knocked out. One of these was Sgt Hamson's which was set alight. The crew remained inside until the flames and exploding 2 pounders made it unbearable and they got out and made a run for it. But a maggie got one in the lungs. To his credit Hamson went back to the now well ablaze tank, climbed inside and returned with the first aid kit to tend to the wounded boy. He died.

Geoffrey's tank was penetrated killing gunner and operator and badly smashing his left forearm and hand. He got the tank out of action and managed to climb out of it himself before collapsing.

Meanwhile A Squadron had rallied behind the NZ infantry and were called on to the ridge again — by the blockhouse, as the Germans were advancing here. Stump was anxious to use us but was not allowed to do so and the Hun was repelled by artillery.

That was all that day except and with £3 of Stump's b which I distributed. The Y kept for the officers — the were almost sick of the u

It was a pity about C Sq put it down to bad wireles: say 'Follow me' as he could also to just brimming ove

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Matthew on my right coming up the ridge as across our front. A fair a it is NZ. Matthew fires away from us. He colk Everything is quiet — I d down left flank and ar from the CO this time, n starts whistling around Gerry MG nests within the turret to Besa them stuff goes by. The de scanning in all direction on the air for support ar put in a flank attack wt immediate reaction. I o down down a black wor quite clearly that I was d was not such a painful black space.

When I open my eyes and the turret is very blk set tuning dial balefully for the first time realise side of the 2 pdr Cpl Hill

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That was all that day except that I found a mobile YMCA and with £3 of Stump's bought a lot of chocolate and fags which I distributed. The YMCA guy gave me a cake which I kept for the officers — the finest cake I had ever tasted. We were almost sick of the unaccustomed richness of it.

It was a pity about C Squadron. They were badly shaken. I put it down to bad wireless which led Geoffrey to having to say 'Follow me' as he could not get orders over the air — and also to just brimming over with no support.

Leaguered in columns again that night — the accepted thing now.

We were informed that we were moving that night to form a column of all arms to go forward at 0430 hours and consolidate and prepare for a counter attack on Belhamed which was being attacked in the dark at 2100 hours by the 4th Brigade. The 6th Brigade were doing the same at Sidi Rezegh. Formed the column at 2100 and went to bed a little elated.

Awakened at 0500 for orders and told that the NZs were on Belhamed but had failed to neutralize everything — there were the odd pockets of maggies and ants still there. We would move at 0600 hours to deal with them but were given strict warning not to use our guns until fired on as the troops in the area were primarily NZs.

Moved as arranged in the dark — three up. I on the left with the job of getting on top of the escarpment. Felt very scared as the rising sun silhouetted us on the high ground and we were fired on by guns far away, their flash pointing at us. Didn't like the dark at all and breathed a sigh of relief when we halted for half an hour while the CO went back for orders. It was light when we moved again. I crept up on the ridge, sat hull down, waited, then moved on top. Thank God! Nothing happened. The pleasing sight of many hundreds of Gerry prisoners coming back in a close wedge with a 3-tonner front and back and large guard. Then another such wedge but smaller. Things can't be so bad. The day is becoming bright and glorious and now before the sun has risen to its hot fury I am reminded of a dewy English spring.

Matthew on my right and Mosley, beyond him start coming up the ridge as we advance for it travels diagonally across our front. A fair amount of stuff in front and I assume it is NZ. Matthew fires at a truck in the distance travelling away from us. He collects a rocket and is told it is NZ. Everything is quiet — I don't like quiet. Am told to go further down left flank and am doing so when another warning, from the CO this time, not to use guns is given. Maggie fire starts whistling around my cupola so I get down and see Gerry MG nests within 100 yards. Just as I begin traversing the turret to Besa them the woosh, woosh of large anti tank stuff goes by. The devil of it is that in spite of careful scanning in all directions I cannot see the blighter. So I ask on the air for support and just hear Stump telling 2 Troop to put in a flank attack when I stop one. I cannot explain the immediate reaction. I only know that I was sinking sinking down down a black world and I knew I was dead. I remember quite clearly that I was definitely dead and that death after all was not such a painful experience — just a numb sinking in black space.

When I open my eyes I find I am at the bottom of the turret and the turret is very black with the pearly glow of the No 11 set tuning dial balefully looking at me. I grope upwards and for the first time realise I am not alone for there on the other side of the 2 pdr Cpl Hill is groping up also. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes, I'm all right, are you?' 'Yes, I'm all right'. Bucker my gunner is dead. With his head thrown back he slumps in his seat with a red gush of blood like a water tap from the huge hole in the back of his head. It pours on to me and I must have many pints of blood soaked into my clothes. I push his head forward and my fingers go into the hole. Hill has cuts on his face and hands and we get busy with the first aid kit. My eyes sting very badly. Suddenly the engines burst into life. Good lord we had quite forgotten the driver. 'Are you all right Ennever?' 'Yes, I'm all right'. 'Bucket is dead — get into reverse and get to hell out of this.' I ring up on the air what has happened and the tank grinds backwards. My eyes hurt quite a lot. I know I must get into another tank and take charge of the troop again but am still too silly to feel any fear. So I stop the tank and as quickly as I can scramble out of the turret and make the wild dash to my ack tank. The distance is about 150 yards and all goes well for the first 100 — but then the maggies open up on me and that isn't so good. I can't be quite so silly now for I certainly feel a little scared. Leaping on to the tank I suddenly become conscious of the fact that they are closed down and cannot see or hear me. I scream my head off at the tank clinging to the side of the turret which appears safest from the maggies whose bullets ziss-ziss by me. No one hears me. So I put my hand over the driver's periscope. He must think I am a big buck Hun for he goes the faster. Bending my head low over his flap I scream again. This time with results, for he hears me and I tell him to get back so I can change over with his commander. He does so and the cupola flaps open. Then I realise that I have been wasting my time, that I cannot see and so cannot take over the tank. My eyes are definitely US.

Meanwhile, and unknown to me, the squadron has been withdrawn. Three other tanks are knocked out after me but they were much more unlucky for of their crews of 12 only two are now living.

(to be continued)

#### MEMBERS' ADVERTISEMENTS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

It has been agreed that past and present members of the Regiment may submit advertisements and announcements of a private nature for publication in *Tank*. Advertisements of a business nature are also welcomed but their publication may have to be referred to our agents.

The rate will be 5p per word. Minimum charge £1. Box numbers cannot be accepted.

Births, deaths, engagements and marriages will continue to be published free of charge.

For publication dates see the preamble to Editorial Notes on the first page of the journal.

## EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF MAJOR DAVID LING, MC, A Sqn, 44 RTR, WESTERN DESERT

The background is the period June 1941/July 1942 in the Western Desert. 1st Army Tank Brigade, consisting of 8th, 42nd and 44th RTR sailed for the Middle East on 21 April 1941 via the Cape and Suez. The 44th's carefully prepared Matilda II's, loaded onto a Clan Line transport, were in mid-voyage re-routed through the Mediterranean to Alexandria to re-equip the 4th and 7th for the largely abortive June 'Battleaxe' offensive, so that the Regiment (Bn in those days) arrived at Sidi Bishr tankless. Clarification may be needed of some of the names and terms used: 'Boomer' — Brigadier H R B Watkins (Cmdr, 1 Army Tank Brigade); Bill Yeo — Lt Colonel H C J Yeo, DSO (CO, 44th RTR); 'Stump' — Major E H Gibbon, DSO (OC A Sqn, 44th RTR); 'Ants & Maggies' — now outmoded Gunnery School terms for anti-tank and machine guns.

(continued)

### November 30th

Was informed by Stump at night in close leaguer that Boomer and the CO were going into Tobruk and that he would be taking over the Bn. As such he would have to give over the fighting side and look to administration and direction. I was to command the tanks.

Felt a great sinking inside about my ability and the responsibility — and spent quite the worst night of my life enduring a physical and inward pain not so much of fear but because so much was dependent on me. Stump went to 4th Bde HQ taking with him Sgt Flower and Gutteridge in the Dodge — I have not seen him since.

That night we were heavily shelled at regular intervals and I was awakened constantly to answer the nearby installed phone. I was informed of enemy tank movement along Trigh Capuzzo just over our ridge — travelling west.

### December 1st

No sign or order from Stump so I dispersed at first light making sure that vehicles were at least 200 yards apart as I wanted no repetition of the previous day's shelling. NZ HQ was next door and their dispersion was appalling so they collected all that was coming. I moved out with the tanks to the ridge where they had been the previous day but did not go so far East. I formed a very good position where a small rise came out North from the ridge. In getting hull down on this I could cover the E. and S. easily and in fair safety.

I had been there about one hour and saw little to report. The tanks of the previous day were not visible on the plain. Ted Robert's two crows I held back with A echelon and they were not out with me. I was then informed that Belhamed was being attacked from the South and I was to proceed there immediately calling at Bde HQ on the way. I refused to go there by way of the top of the ridge as ordered but came along line ahead and through the NZ transport at the bottom. 4 Bde told me that some 19 tanks were in the Belhamed area one of which was towing a naval gun. I presumed this to be the 88mm being towed by its usual tracked vehicle. I received orders to move up and on to Belhamed and asked for artillery support — I was referred to our own battery of the 8th Field Regt. Other ANTS were also reported as being in the Belhamed area and I deemed it unwise to go over the crest. Then I linked up with 2/Lt F.O.O. of our own battery and instructed him to follow me. With tanks still in line ahead I worked my way around the major escarpment and then came up hull down on Belhamed from the N.E.

There was no sign of any friendly troops in the area and German infantry were streaming across the feature and digging in on the Northern slope — we Besa'd them. The whole of Belhamed was a mass of black smoke from the burning NZ Div HQ and amongst it in the centre could be seen some six Mark III and IV tanks at 1800<sup>+</sup> range. We fired at them and they, after a certain amount of very

accurate fire, sheered off excepting one who watched us out of range and behind some burning vehicles. My tank received a direct hit on the mantle and was made US for firing. I decided to remain in it and control the firing of my other tanks. The FOO could not help a lot as he had to conserve ammo and was only allowed to fire at concentrations of German vehicles. I saw one control vehicle with a long aerial hiding behind a sangar 1500 yds away and told Sgt Goodall to blast away the sangar with 2 pdr and then get the vehicle. He did so very effectively and the vehicle was soon ablaze. Mortars got our range but they were not shelling heavily which was thankful as my position was precarious for I was unable to manoeuvre, having the backs of the tanks on the edge of the escarpment and ANTS to my front and right. I could only move with safety along the narrow path up which I had come. We remained in our position until 1615 hrs during which time we were continually using our guns on any target we could see and were harassing the enemy infantry as much as we could. At that time I was ordered to proceed to Zaafran whence our own A echelon had gone together with NZ HQ as a tank attack was developing from the East. Our ammo was running very low and I had arranged for a truck to meet us in the wadi where we could replenish. This was being carried out while I returned in my US tank to Bde HQ for orders. When nearly there Willy rang up to say that 15 German tanks were approaching from the plain below and were nearly on top of them. I told him to get hull down on the crest and engage them. Sgt Lobb put smoke down in front of the tanks still replenishing and the squadron then moved on to the crest.

The Jerry tanks retired very quickly and Willy remained on the crest firing at various targets. Within 5 minutes heavy enemy shelling started on our position.

At 1715 when the light was very bad and the sun was in our eyes the same tanks with infantry attacked and our position was heavily shelled. They halted when 1500 yds away and would not come further. Meanwhile, the NZ Div was forming column 1 mile E. of Zaafran and I was told to form the head of the column and act as frontal protection. I gave Willy orders to withdraw on me but it was now dark and many Verey lights had to be used to get him in. Henry Lee explained to the NZ's the position and the march was delayed to allow Willy to break off the engagement. I was informed that the night march was to be 40 miles and was given the route. One of the tanks was unable to move and so I had the wireless set, Besa breech and 2 pdr striker case removed and then pushed it over the cliff. (I later was told that this tank bounced down some 150ft of nearly vertical escarpment and was last seen proceeding in a northern direction on the plain below).

Not sufficient time was given to me to form up in my correct position but I managed to get to the right flank and remain there. I had A echelon behind with the instructions to halt at any broken down tank, demolish it and pick up its



crew. This unfortunately happened to one which broke down after 3 miles and the instructions were carried out. On reaching Pt 192 (456401) the NZ column halted to pick up a 5A supply column and I applied to be allowed to drop out as the pace and distance were both too great. This was OK'd and we formed close leaguer.

#### December 2nd

At first light a column of Support Group inquired who I was and the CO told me to wait where I was for further orders while he got in touch with his HQ. At 0800 I was ordered to march to Bir El Mcheizen where HQ Support Group was situated. There I asked to proceed to my correct destination whence Henry Lee had gone with the NZ's in order to look after our interests. I had arranged that we would call each other at 0800 hours each day. It so happened that from the first we failed to make contact and Henry's actions during the next few days make another story.

My request to proceed to Bir Gibni was refused and I was ordered to remain for the time being at Bir El Mcheizen. At 1500 that day I was told to proceed immediately for 18 miles on a bearing of 192°. I started right away pointing out that I had no water or rations and only just sufficient fuel to make the journey. The distance was covered by 2100 hours the last few miles being at 2 mph as some vehicles were cracking up badly. Formed close leaguer.

#### December 3rd

Dispersed at first light with one guard tank on duty while I scouted around to see where I was. Soon found Battle HQ of 7 Armd. Div. They provided me with POL, water, rations and 3 Scammell Transporters to pick up the crocks. I was told to proceed to ADW at Pt. 172 (459341) and was instructed to hand over 5 3-tonners to 62 FMC nearby and attach my men to 22 Armd Bde while the tanks were repaired at ADW. Made the journey arriving at destination at 2000 hours.

#### December 4th

Made another scout around and discovered ADW some 10 miles South at Pt 178. Moved the unit in. Officer I/c ADW said he could carry out no repair work being fitted out with A15 spares and equipment only and most busy. Went to 62 FMC for water, rations and any information I could glean and with great luck found Capt Denmead of 6th Bn who told me 1 ATB was very close.

Contacted Freddie Green and informed him of my instructions re the 5 3-tonners and men which I was most loathe to carry out as I was afraid we would be completely split up and lose our identity. He suggested ignoring them — I thought so too. That night he was instructed to move to 529323 by way of the El Beida Gap and told me to follow.

#### December 5th

1 ATB moved off at 1030 hours and left me to come at my own speed, being much slower. The 3 Scammells were withdrawn from me but fortunately Norris was with 1 ATB and lent me 5 Scammells. Moved off at 1300 hours and reached 5 miles East of El Beida before forming leaguer for the night. At Pt. 158 (484333) found a Gerry ammo dump. Soaked it in petrol and then blew it up with Besa and 2pdr. fire.



David Ling MC

#### December 6th

Made for Conference Cairn (528330) as Army Workshops were there and contacted Norris again. He instructed me to leave 4 Matildas there for evacuation and I proceeded South with the other 5 and joined 1 ATB and our own B echelon. Started centralised cooking immediately. Went with Norris to Rear Army HQ and arranged to pick up 26 Matildas from TDS which with my 5 now being repaired by LRS and one fit one there already gave me 2 complete Sqns.

#### December 7th

Sent Scruffy, Ted Roberts and Pat Tate with 50 men in 5 3-tonners to TDS to wait for and pick up 16 Matildas — the other 10 would have to wait. Willie and I started reorganising our Sqns. — kit checks, crews, pay and all that. Sent Dodwell to join B Sqn. at Sidi Omar.

#### December 8th

Army order to 1 ATB demanding many transport and drivers for same. As a result A and C Sqns are now very dilapidated, A being left with four 3-tonners and one 15 cwt and ten less men. C are a little better off. Repair of tanks going along well but one has to be cannibalised to put the other 4 on the road. It is being evacuated. Instructed that we are moving back to TDS and Freddie who is going down there tells Scruffy and party to remain and not return. Rumours that Boomer, the CO and 600 of 1 ATB are

on the way from Tobruk and we should meet up with them the next day.

#### December 9th

Trucks sent out scouting for the missing 600 and have no luck. The move to TDS on December 10th is postponed. Little doing and I let the men take things easy. Spend my time writing to the next of kins of A Sqn dead.

#### December 20th

Tom to Spanish Farm — Benny to Acroma — new boys to Bir Lefa — all in search of tanks. At end of day I have 10 but some are U/S. Informed that we are moving next day to Sidi Aziez taking two days. Apply to come on my own a day late because of tank state. Granted. Get a load of poor wrecked vehicles thrown at me to make up by B echelon.

#### December 21st

Bn leaves at 0845 hours and while Benny goes in search of tanks and the others do maintenance, I to Tobruk and get water, stamps, POL, stationery etc. Had chicken lunch with RAOC officer — V. G. Nichol of 42nd breezes in and then disappears to find his Bn. and bring them Bardia-wards.

#### December 22nd

Move Sqn out at 0830 for 1st leg to join Bn ie to Bir Chleta but do 40 miles and halt for night. Lose 1 light tank at beginning and have to notify LRS — delay. Father McKenna comes in for a meal cheerfully announcing he has been scraping dead men from tanks all day and burying

them — he goes into unnecessary details. Everything goes fine but I am in a bad mood.

#### December 23rd

Complete move, arriving at Bn at 1230 hours. Hear that we are to attack Bardia — oh hell! Joe Connor and crew arrive back from Derha — fine!

#### December 24th

Christmas Eve but who would believe it! Maintenance of tanks continues and new ones join us — I now have a complete Sqn. Further news of the Bardia attack — the first phase to be carried out by the 8th Bn whose job is to clear the eastern perimeter and put the inf. on the main road facing West. We, on 2nd phase attack from there westward to Pt. 180 and at night. I spent a troubled night as a result. Rained hard that night and got soaked.

#### December 25th

Christmas day — ie ½-hour longer in bed, sausages in lieu of bully for lunch — fresh meat ration — brandy and rum ration — PRI finds the small opening to its pocket and gives all 1 beer, 1 tin of fruit, 20 fags — and work as usual. The Padre holds a service.

#### December 27th

Der Tag is postponed to December 31st as B Sqn is travelling flat out on the way from 110 miles short of Benghazi.

#### December 28th

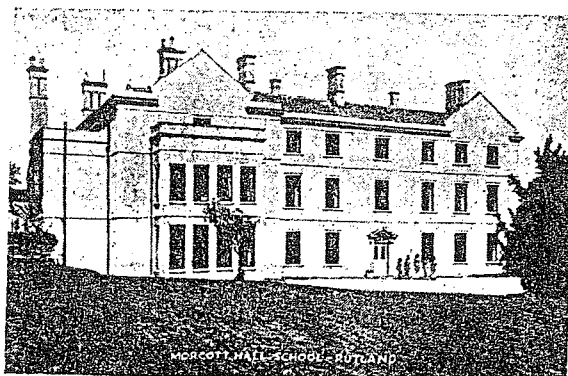
B Sqn arrive. Plenty of conferences — Booze up with local RAF.

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**December 31st**

New Year's Eve — we hope that Bardia will be ours by 1942. Stand to before light. The 8th have gone and soon the fireworks start with a hell of a barrage. I pray inwardly for the 8th who appear to have the stickier job. News begins to filter in later that everything is OK and we move in line ahead C. HQ. A. B. to Gap 2 in the wire at 1430. Progress very slow and it is dusk when we reach the wire and we are mortared rather half heartedly. C. Sqn go straight to their area while A remains with HQ on the eastern end and close to the sea. MQMS Bartram wandering over to a wadi to relieve himself is startled by 30 Italians giving themselves up. A long long wait — it is obvious that everything will have to start much later than intended.

The moon shines down a fierce white and visibility is huge. I shall be very glad if the show is postponed. The CO calls a conference at about 2100 to say the show is postponed, that it will go in on the following night and that I right now must take A Sqn to the head of wadi (518391).

The show is postponed because the SA have failed to hold line of the road as planned. The 8th put them there but enemy mortar fire made the untrained untried Kaff Rs run. In all the 8th put their inf. on objective 4 times during the day. At one point the Kaff Rs lost their CO and all company commanders which worsened their plight. Now during the night they were withdrawing to the line of the track 2,000 yds East of road and consolidating there.

I moved A Sqn laboriously in the white moonlight line ahead — Peter in front tracing a corkscrew trail to avoid the wadis. By midnight we at last wound our way into the correct place — it was raining and we were fed up. Bedded down for the night in the wadi while Peter tried to contact the infantry to say we were here. Little luck — they said they would come and see me that night but didn't.

**January 1st, 1942**

Stood to — all engines running. ½ hour before dawn. When light came I saw that the inf. were right in front of me, mostly bored and asleep. I re-disposed the squadron as my night dispositions did not look so good by day. I contacted all inf. cmdrs.

Sporadic indifferent stuff all day — contacted two OP's who wanted to help — one was Polish and right up with foremost infantry. He told me that that was his OP and when I said "Good, I know where to find you then," he answered, "Ah but this is my REAR OP. I may be here or at my forward one over there." And he pointed to our right front and across to the Jerry indicating a place 1,000 yds ahead and behind Jerry's foremost troops. Sand blew up badly helped by RAF bombings and came straight at our faces. This enabled the enemy to move closer which he did and so as to hearten our shaky friends, the inf., I let Marr come up from turret down to Besa them. Mortar and shellfire around and about us, at one period, was annoying.

Called to orders outside Gap 2 and to be there by 1600. Off I went in a shower of rain leaving Tom in charge. A long long wait in the CO's car with the other Sqn Cmdrs for the arrival of the SA Brigadier. His arrival and the commencement of orders was 1730. Orders for the night attack muddled and befuddled — I could scream. Over at 1830 and I made the long trek back through the Gap and switch wire — had great difficulty in finding my way and did not reach the Squadron until 1945. Hurried orders in the

back of a 3-tonner I changing the while into warmer clothes — 3 prs. socks, 2 long prs. of under trousers and many jerkins and jerseys. A long and burning rum issue. Old John Mosley was there — just arrived back after weeks of searching etc. Said he wanted to go in so I gave him one of Marr tanks. Ditto Sgt Mjr Taylor. As I was to find out later Bevan the mechanist Sgt went in as a driver.

Moved line ahead in the dark to the startline — Willy already there getting into position. No battalion net which was a bugger but did our best by asking HQ to give us long calls. Inf streamed in like long black lines of ants.

Spoke to one or two telling them it was a cinch — they didn't think so and weren't too happy.

Zero — away went Willy by the left. A long hiatus before my right troop moved. We got right under the barrage which was plastering the road area, and waited. B Sqn shoot us up a bit with their overs and monopolise the air. Crossed road after barrage lifted, on very narrow front — wadi on right and wire on left leading us into a defile. On the other side we try and shake into our open formation again covering the whole front — a buggers muddle as B Sqn is always on the air and jams us. I have to get out of my Matilda to go to each in turn telling him where to go. We move off again and promptly lose C Sqn who disappear down Wadi Scemmas together with Joe Connor hanging on like grim death — it was his job on the left to keep touch with them. Tom B. is hit and killed at 10 yds range but we get the gun that did it. Result is Sqn moves down to the left again in a heap. Can't get on the air because of B's monopoly so once more I stop the Sqn and go around on foot getting them into a nice line. Make contact with C by Verey light. Off we go again covering now only 1,000 yds between the two of us. John Mosley hit and catches alight — he runs to the next tank for Pyrene which is also promptly hit — by mortar which is dropping all around us. He collects a packet in the leg and SSM Taylor does very stout work during the whole night tending him on the back of his tank. Sgt Grainger, Bruce and Jackson killed.

Interminable time creeping forward with a fair amount being flung at us until at last Willy announces we are there. Thank God! Mortars open up again and get direct hits on Bleaden's and Beasley's tanks. We arrived at objective at 0230 hours. Unending dragging wait for 2nd wave to reach during which I am cold and sleepy in spite of all the extra clothes. At 0600 when it is quite obvious the inf WON'T reach us and when daylight is only 60 mins off the CO tells us to rally back to the SL. We go back line ahead and find Benny by Verey lights who guides us right back. Sqn in a bad state — most of those tanks not knocked out are U/S for fighting — mine won't steer. So I inform Michael we are getting right out and proceed for Gap 2. While passing there I hear of the armistice and see the pompous little Jerry commander steaming up to HQ flying the largest white flag ever — an off-white bed sheet. We get down to feeding, breaking into emergency rations and have one hell of a feed.

*(to be continued)*



THREE

TANK Feb 81.: 33-36

# EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF MAJOR DAVID LING, MC, A Sqn, 44 RTR, WESTERN DESERT

The background is the period June 1941/July 1942 in the Western Desert. 1st Army Tank Brigade, consisting of 8th, 42nd and 44th RTR sailed for the Middle East on 21 April 1941 via the Cape and Suez. The 44th's carefully prepared Matilda II's, loaded onto a Clan Line transport, were in mid-voyage re-routed through the Mediterranean to Alexandria to re-equip the 4th and 7th for the largely abortive June 'Battleaxe' offensive, so that the Regiment (Bn in those days) arrived at Sidi Bishr tankless. Clarification may be needed of some of the names and terms used: 'Boomer' - Brigadier H R B Watkins (Cmdr, 1 Army Tank Brigade); Bill Yeo - Lt Colonel H C J Yeo, DSO (CO, 44th RTR); 'Stump' - Major E H Gibbon, DSO (OC A Sqn, 44th RTR); 'Ants & Maggies' - now outmoded Gunnery School terms for anti-tank and machine guns.

## EXPANDED VERSION OF THE "BELHAMED" ACTION

If the morning had been colder I don't think we would have managed to squeeze into our Matildas at all. A turret four feet in diameter, and chock full of the claptrap of war - 2 pounder breech, wireless set, ammunition, etc. is not conducive to easy entering. Swathed as we were in greatcoats and leather jerkins, the operation was one requiring time and skill with much final shrugging and twisting to bed down into a position of comfort.

It was still night and the red glow of the radio's warning light was the only tiny splash in the spacious darkness around us, as the engines individually snorted into wakefulness merging their tones with each other till the air vibrated to a monotonous buzz.

We were ready to advance. Yet only ten minutes earlier we were asleep, huddled by the sides of our tanks, fully clothed and with the stiff and heavy tarpaulins over us. Now, the vapourings of our dreams were replaced by the crude shock of our purpose and speculations of what was to come.

It is natural that a false excitement and desire should suffuse the warm blood of those who will meet action at the throat of the enemy for the first time. So it was with us on that cold night of November 21st, 1941. This excitement had been ever growing, each day becoming greater, more anxious, as in the van of the New Zealanders we pushed along the desert shelf between the Bardia-Tobruk coast road and the Trigh Capuzzo. Gambut aerodrome into which we roared, sitting on the tops of our turrets oblivious to danger, and from which we could see, as we approached, the breathless frantic fleings of the last of the enemy, sharpened that excitement. The saucy field guns that, in full view, fired at us from the height of the escarpment, planting yellow dust balls amongst us, was only adding piquancy to our mission.

Now, with Gambut far behind, we had reached a point in the desert where a stone shack, no larger than a small domestic garage, perched itself on the barren escarpment. This was Sidi Resegh. Close by ran the Trigh Capuzzo, the dust road that the Italians had scraped on the hard desert floor and which pushed its choking way from El Adhem to Fort Capuzzo.

Our particular spot of desert was named Zaafran while immediately in front of us was a similar area - Belhamed. Separating Zaafran from Belhamed was a small rise which formed one bank of a puny dry wadi.

It was on Belhamed that the enemy were firmly entrenched and it was our purpose to shovel him out, for beyond again were our friends holding hard to a rise called Ed Duda. They were the Tobruk forces who had battled thus fast and ours was the stirring mission of relieving them. We were to join with them and form a flexible corridor through a sea of shell bursts and vicious bullets.

This same cold night had seen an attack on the New Zealanders on Belhamed - an attack that failed in its high hopes of sweeping clean the enemy but which succeeded in

clinging to its outer defences. At dawn the infantry tanks of my regiment were to complete the task.

My troop was on the left flank and because the rise in front of us ran diagonally to our line of advance it fell to me to climb it first, to leave the reasonable safety below and confront with our massive bulk the slender barrels of the anti-tank guns, dug in and out of sight but waiting.

The grey dawn, icy, unfriendly, was streaked to the east with the vivid slashes of colour that only a desert awakening knows. The occasional infantryman, flattened against the damp earth, gave a roll as we clattered by, and smiled and gave an encouraging wave. Slowly I approached and climbed the gentle rise, my other two tanks a hundred yards away, to the flanks and rear. While still turret down I strained through the lessening grey for a sign of the men whom I had come to kill and finding none continued cautiously into the open.

I was very careful. I could see no gun flash, no tripping machine gun trace as the bullets pink and pretty, follow so close in their dainty arc. Only silence and stillness.

I was very scared. Not knowing quite what to expect, I was afraid of the unexpected. But this fright was as nothing compared to the fright I was to know in later battles - fright backed by knowledge of the previous fright.

Corporal Hill, my loader operator, feared my caution. "Don't go so slowly, Sir." "Keep moving, Sir." - as I, to use my glasses with greater surety, would command the driver to slow down. His agitation became uppermost. "For Christ's sake, keep moving, Sir." But I must use my eyes and I had my other two tanks to protect me, to pounce on the gun who fired at me.

We were all on the ridge top now, crawling in an agonised slowness. Still no sound, only the sun in the desert distance behind us, streaking our shadows into and through the Germans in long parallel lines. No sound, no movement. Our formation was lovely to behold, of textbook exactness - we moved as one machine controlled by a single mind.

The whoosh of a shell close to my head surprised me and I redoubled my efforts to find a target. There should have been a trace of the gun after firing. Dust should have been kicked up and - whoosh, whoosh. Where the hell was the damned thing.

I was reporting to Stump Gibbon, who commanded the squadron, that an invisible gun was disturbing my tranquility when the next effort of a singularly poor enemy gun-aimer was successful and from a range of 100 yards he succeeded in hitting me on the fourth attempt.

The well was reminiscent of Alice's only it was blacker, of greater girth and infinitely deeper. In falling down it I was glad that I was not turning over and over but kept a reasonably even keel as I sped on my downward journey. I was lying on my back facing upwards and should, by all the laws of nature, have seen an ever decreasing disc of white daylight as the well's rim receded. But there was no

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ould like to add that 3rd and eventually became ivision on its formation, rt, but also in Italian East Longworth got through ependent Tank Troop, n of the Island seemed : it went down fighting, ough this time the colour

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## TANK

daylight; all was blackness and I fell with an even but fast speed.

I wondered if there was a bottom and whether I would be brought up with a jolt but this did not worry me and I did not believe it would happen. Probably I would be gently slowed up. After all, to be stopped instantaneously after such a fall must kill one and that was ludicrous because one cannot be killed twice and I was already dead.

Of that there was no doubt in my mind and it was in fact the only lucid truth I knew. I was dead, positively dead and presumably speeding to wherever dead people go. I had no knowledge of why I was dead or how I had died. I merely accepted it as a commonplace fact and one that should give rise to no excitement, speculation or regret.

I was dead and I didn't seem to mind. I was aware that this was the beginning of a new journey and I remember reflecting that death after all wasn't so bad as I had imagined and there did not seem to be any reason to be afraid of it. Fortunately the thought did not occur to me to compare the remarkable similarity between this fall and that of Lucifer from Heaven.

The humming which had started as a soft whisper grew to a gentle murmur and the moon had pushed its way through the clouds becoming faintly visible and then growing slowly to a pearly brightness. I was still falling when I became aware of a star close to the moon, that was ruby red. Its brightness drilled into me, boring away the shroud of black that encompassed me and simultaneously re-vitalising my easy death to uncomfortable life.

The star was the radio's warning light while the moon dissolved and took the shape of the illuminated tuning dial.

I lay still, as clarity sanity and reality came back. I was comfortable and in no pain. I knew now that I was huddled on the floor of my tank, that we were not moving, that the engine had stopped and that my last clear memory was an urgent call on the radio that some big gun was trying to hit me. Obviously it had.

It was black inside the turret and the air was full of black smoke. With difficulty I peered across the two feet of space separating me from the face of Corporal Hill. We must have received shocks of equal intensity for he also was beginning to move. I reached to him, clutched his arm and groped his face; and he returned my grip.

"Are you all right, Hill?"

"I'm all right, Sir — are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

I did not ask the same of Trooper Bucket, my expert and lovable gunner who used always to make my biscuit bergoo and brew my char. He could impart to those warming concoctions a flavour which, like the shining efficiency of his guns, others could not match.

Now slumped across his little adjustable seat he sprawled backwards and downwards. His head, split in twain, was poised over my chest while his hot blood poured over and through me, a black glistening stream from the back of his crushed skull. His suntanned face turned half sideways was closed and white with death, shining clearly in that black murk.

I remember I struggled to get up and Hill struggled also. We were entangled and I had to move Bucket. I remember I stretched up my arm to push him forward and away — and that two of my fingers went through the hole in his skull, into the warm softness within. I wiped my hand on my blood-drenched clothes.

The good soldier is the well trained soldier. That is why the

Hun is good and why the Guards Brigade better. Their training is more thorough and longer. The good soldier has less need to think because a textbook answer presents itself to him on most awkward occasions — automatically and without effort.

My training was thorough. Years of drill, learning and manoeuvres had fitted me for just this moment. I wish I had been a worse soldier for then I could have applied reason and acted very differently from the way I did. As it was; I repeated my text-book teachings. I was a Commander and being out of action, it was my duty to dismount and assume command from another tank. As simple as that.

I told Hill of my decision.

And then I remembered my driver, Corporal Ennever, for the first time. In contemplating our own troubles we had both forgotten him. We both yelled to him and he, also returning from the land of Nod, assured us he felt fine. He tried his engines and they burst into life. This was grand and made me feel less like the proverbial rat in the sinking ship. With instructions to them to turn about, and after sighting through the periscope my nearest tank I bid these two adieu and awkwardly clambered out.

The warm sun, the bright clear air, the hard clean ground on to which I toppled and crumbled, contrasted dazzlingly with the black cylinder smelling of hot oil from which I had emerged. The world was startlingly clear and vivid, filling me with elation. Picking myself up and gathering around me my wet greatcoat I stumbingly started on the run to Sgt. Bleadon's tank. He was my troop sergeant and on another day and in another battle I was to see him stained and grimy with his left eye nearly gouged out and resting quivering on his cheek bone while he tried desperately to thumb it back.

The distance between our two tanks could not have been more than a hundred and fifty yards, but ever growing as his tank slowly pulled away and into the battlefield. My period of unconsciousness after the hit must have been brief for Bleadon's tank during this time had moved no more than three hundred yards.

Feeling a little panicked I ran too urgently and without looking. I stumbled continually in my straining effort to make more speed. Once I fell headlong. My fears are merited and I had but covered half the distance when the sis-sis-sis of machine gun bullets about my feet told me the obvious, if I had only paused to reason, had happened. An eternity and boundless space separated me and the safety of my objective and I redoubled my desperate attempt in what seemed so forlorn and pathetic a hope.

That some unseen mind guided me, that some invisible will encircled me, only, can explain the impossible fact that I gained the side of the tank without a single hit registering on me. Although it cannot be denied that I must have presented a most comical sight to the enemy, a mad Englishman swaddled in the thickest woollens on what was now a broiling day, careering and tripping in crazy fashion between tanks in a desert battle, and that this sight may have affected his aim, I prefer to believe Fate protected me.

Leaping onto the broad back of the Matilda, with no difficulty for her pace was no more than 3 mph I put the turret between me and the area from which the machine gun fire seemed to be coming. This had little effect and the fire continued spasmodically and seemingly from all directions making life decidedly uncomfortable. Whilst manoeuvring thus, I was shouting and screaming through the five inch steel skin to Bleadon for God's sake to open up and let me in. But although my lungs are powerful I would need the bellow

of a hundred bulls to overcome the fearful noisiness of the turret when in action — crack of her cannon, the machine gun. This was not to have dawned on me had I not having acted up to the tank, how the hell do you

I had the answer, of course. I worm my way around the turret and waving my hand through the signal that I was there

But it wasn't the answer I needed, in fact too easily a possibility that ensured I knew my enemy infantry had moved. The Matilda was bumping and tossing and the turret's edge a hand grenade thrown in. I sa at the turret's edge a probably trying to throw it

I was scared — very excitement and high activity. The Matilda was bumping and tossing and the turret's edge a hand grenade thrown in. I sa at the turret's edge a probably trying to throw it

Sgt. Bleadon's driver, I almost overhanging the turret. I sa at the turret's edge a probably trying to throw it

Bleadon, unaware of my stopping, was yelling so loud. "What the hell have you got a move on — there's a Jerry and get moving."

Fearing I might be ignored the lad to take no notice of me was one of those moments and no sensible thought is

But I won the day and my tank turned around, slowly our start line. Safety was which we climbed an age a face of Bleadon popped out. His mouth dropped and sm were friends.

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overcome the fearful noise and clatter within a Matilda's  
turret when in action — the engines' roar, the ear-splitting  
crack of her cannon, the insistent clouting of the Besa  
machine gun. This was the second episode which would  
have dawned on me had I reasoned before acting — namely,  
having acted up to the textbook and reached your second  
tank, how the hell do you get into it.

I had the answer, of course — in a few moments. I would  
worm my way around until I got near the commander's  
periscope and waving my hand in front of it would give him  
the signal that I was there.

But it wasn't the answer. Sgt Bleadon saw my hand quite  
easily, in fact too easily and not unnaturally concluded that  
enemy infantry had mounted him. And he was too wary a  
soldier to be silly enough to open the cupola latch and have a  
hand grenade thrown in. He did the right thing by ignoring  
the trick and instead speeded up and started to jerk —  
probably trying to throw me off.

I was scared — very scared, and it was only the  
excitement and high action which prevented pondering the  
possibility that ensured I kept my mind on the job and not my  
emotions. The Matilda travelling now at an increased pace  
was bumping and tossing further and further into the  
enemy's defences while I continued to cling by my eyebrows  
at the turret's edge and while bullets still whistled  
unpleasantly near. I saw occasional German infantry  
outstretched, pressing themselves into the hard desert floor  
and trying to shrink themselves behind twigs of camel  
bloom. Their fears of the approaching, roaring tanks  
lessened my own danger.

Sgt. Bleadon's driver, a ginger haired lad whose name I  
forgot, had a periscope perched between the tank's horns  
and now I edged towards it on my belly. Head first and  
almost overhanging the tank's nose I pushed my face in the  
periscope's field of vision and — Glory be — the tank  
immediately slowed down. I was recognised. I shouted  
instructions to turn about and return sufficiently far to allow  
of opening up so that I could get in.

Bleadon, unaware of me and the cause of the tank  
stopping, was yelling so loudly that I could plainly hear —  
"What the hell have you stopped for! For Christ's sake get  
a move on — there's a Jerry on us. Start up, you bloody oaf,  
and get moving."

Fearing I might be ignored I returned to the fray yelling to  
the lad to take no notice of his commander and obey me. It  
was one of those moments when everyone loses his head  
and no sensible thought is possible.

But I won the day and ignoring the curses of Bleadon the  
tank turned around, slowly and noisily, and made back for  
our start line. Safety was not reached until the ridge up  
which we climbed an age ago, appeared. The purple raging  
face of Bleadon popped out of the cupola as it burst open.  
His mouth dropped and smiled — "Oh, it's you, Sir," and we  
were friends.

The weight of my anxieties suddenly removed, brought  
me sharply to my own condition. The day was clear and hot  
and the white sun was well on the way to its zenith. But I was  
aware of this dimly and as I tried to climb into Bleadon's  
command position I knew that I saw but dimly too! After all  
that effort it was only now that I pondered whether I was fit  
to command — I wasn't and the effort had been needless.

After my accident the gun had got three more tanks in  
quick succession. Stump turned the squadron into line  
ahead and moved away to the right and as more trouble was

## FINANCIAL PLANNING

ITS PURPOSE is to make the best use of Income, Capital and  
other Assets, to prepare the way for the individual to achieve  
financial aims. These may include:

FINANCIAL PROTECTION	—against the effects of possessions lost or damaged
FINANCIAL SECURITY	—for present or future dependants
HOUSE PURCHASE	—immediately or in the future
EDUCATION EXPENSES	—for present or future children
COMFORTABLE RETIREMENT	—based on an adequate continuing income backed up by an adequate capital reserve
TRANSFER OF ASSETS	—to the next generation

WE ADVISE on the use of savings from income, the investment of  
capital, the use of other assets where applicable, insurance against  
ill health and the insurance of possessions. We help clients to lay  
the foundations of sound plans, to develop existing plans and keep  
them up to date, and then to make the best use of resources when  
the time comes to meet commitments.

GOOD INFORMATION is the basis of sound planning. The more  
clients take us into their confidence the better we can assist them.  
Please let us have full details of existing resources, your ability to  
save, and any expectations. Please also tell us all you can about  
commitments with which you expect to have to cope. We, of  
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encountered the attack was called off. This was reported to me whilst I paused to collect my wits and my strength and I thanked God I did not now have to climb into that tank. For today, anyway, it was all over.

Instead, sitting on the engine louvres with my back resting against the turret, I was taken away on Bleadon's tank to Doc Macaulay, our strangely eccentric but lovable and brave MO. His RAP was snugly below the high bullet stuttering Belhamed and there, dimly aware of others around me and my eyes now quite unseeing, I waited and shivered. I remembered Peter Pike of the New Zealanders shocked at seeing my condition came over and chatted happily. He was a big bespectacled fellow whom I had got to know well during our long training together.

In spite of the high desert sun and the thickness of clothes that swaddled me, I felt cold — icy penetrating cold. I was most uncomfortable and said as much more than once, and at each repetition by further blankets were thrown around till with seven of them I had become almost buried and was yet still cold.

The blood of Trooper Bucket soaked through me and caked my face, my neck and hands. Passing my hand over my face I found my moustache, eyebrows and eyelashes had gone — seared off. The hair that showed below my stained black beret was burnt into an acrid, crumbling crust that broke away, denuding me, as I touched it.

They say my face was a pleasant olive green and so enthused was Doc Macaulay at seeing when he later told me was a perfect, orthodox illustration of severe shock that I suspect that he lost no time in pointing this out and lecturing his orderlies and all and sundry he could find, before the effects were neutralised by the returning red.

I lay in a darkened ambulance centred in our tank leaguer now mostly composed of crocks — holed in action but capable of limping home under their own steam.

I felt cool and comfortable. My eyes smarted but the pain had been considerably eased by Doc who has inserted little cocaine pills in my eyelids. I don't think I had any special reactions of emotions excepting a feeling of anger at being a crock and unable to take further part in the action for a time.

The ambulance door opened and a cheery voice, unmistakably New Zealand, said: "Here you are, Sir, I've brought you a cake. They told me you had caught one, so I took the cake from the Naffy truck as I thought you'd like it." Indeed I would, and I thanked profusely the voice which I recognised as the Naffy truck's attendant's. I had met him two days before, gaily dishing out tuppenny Cadburys and Mars bars, to the NZ forces and not a half mile from the fighting, unaware of the drama about him and his incongruity. I had asked for some and although it's against the rules, he said, he handed me down the chocolate.

The cake, with roasted almonds atop had a rich moist feel and its segment the limpet touch of sliced raisins.

I felt very happy and lay still and contented while my chagrin at the thought of what I had been missing faded and died.

A whole day passed with bitter but futile fighting. So clawed and savaged had we been that only twelve tanks remained and few officers. B. Squadron fighting on their own at Sidi Omar had suffered worst.

Maurice Ricketts, David Mellor, John White, John Donaldson were dead. Geoffrey Leeds, pale and exhausted, had been lifted from his tank, trailing from the bleeding stump, his hand and forearm gone.

Donaldson had died well. His tank hit and raging with

flames, he told his crew to evacuate as the ammunition exploded and bit into their legs and bodies. Out went the radio operator and Donaldson, demanding to go last, passed his gunner over him with all his strength and heaved him up, badly wounded. They fell to safety to see their commander lift himself and fall back into the spluttering steel, his last strength spent. This was at Sidi Omar.

Stump Gibbon now took command of the twelve Matildas, combined as one squadron. No corridor to beleaguered Ed Duda and Tobruk had been made and our hopes of so doing looked increasingly lean.

The idea of using our tanks by night was Bill Yeo's. Our teaching had always been that tanks could not be thus used for fighting. The normal hazards of obstacles, wire, mines, trees, mud, etc. which a tank had to meet are bad enough to cope with during the day. Add darkness to turn the driver's periscope and the gunner's telescope into black discs and the job becomes impossible. But ours was a desperate position. We had failed to break through with our full forces and now we had only 12 tanks — less than 25% of a battalion up to strength. With each succeeding casualty our chances became less.

Bill Yeo realised that in our bit of desert anyway the obstacles were very nearly absent — Belhamed was a perfectly flat area — and although the tanks guns could not be used accurately at night the engines' roar might succeed in unnerving an enemy unable to see what was the shattering clatter advancing towards them.

The plan was approved and as dusk thickened into night the twelve tanks formed up in a tight arrowhead at the same start line — the slight bank between Zaafran and Belhamed. The bright moon filled all with forebodings. If the enemy could see them soon enough and fire then the chances were indeed slender. The whole attack was to be based on surprise.

(to be concluded)

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Aug 81

# EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF MAJOR DAVID LING, MC, A Sqn, 44 RTR, WESTERN DESERT

The background is the period June 1941/July 1942 in the Western Desert. 1st Army Tank Brigade, consisting of 8th, 42nd and 44th RTR sailed for the Middle East on 21 April 1941 via the Cape and Suez. The 44th's carefully prepared Matilda II's, loaded onto a Clan Line transport, were in mid-voyage re-routed through the Mediterranean to Alexandria to re-equip the 4th and 7th for the largely abortive June 'Battleaxe' offensive, so that the Regiment (Bn in those days) arrived at Sidi Bishr tankless. Clarification may be needed of some of the names and terms used: 'Boomer' - Brigadier H R B Watkins (Cmdr, 1 Army Tank Brigade); Bill Yeo - Lt Colonel H C J Yeo, DSO (CO, 44th RTR); 'Stump' - Major E H Gibbon, DSO (OC A Sqn, 44th RTR); 'Ants & Maggies' - now outmoded Gunnery School terms for anti-tank and machine guns.

March 25th

## ORRIBI HOSPITAL, PIETERMARISBURG

These notes are all I remember of the scuffle in the 150 Brigade box. A very long period of hospital operations, on the dangerously ill list, leaves me somewhat befuddled.

I remember A Sqn being hull down on a gentle slope and, on my left, C Squadron similarly so under Willy's command. After Tom Baynham's death at Bardia, Alan Brown joined me as 2 IC "A" Sqn. In the distance we could see with binoculars a considerable number of tanks spread over a wide front. I had effectively taken over command as Reggie R was not in contact.

Later the enemy tanks, across the front moved slowly towards. At about the same time, to my amazement, a number of personnel under a young captain arrived and spread themselves, with old Vickers tripod machine guns, right along our front and over the rising slope. Quite suicidal and of no value in engaging tanks.

I dismounted and, with Allan, talked to the young officer in command of his folly. He said he had his orders and refused to listen to us. I feel they were Cheshire Yeomanry but am not sure now.

The advancing tanks were now becoming in range and their machine guns would quickly wipe out the men in front of me and I discussed with Allan turning 90° right then, in line come upon the right flank and then to turn right together so that, in line, we could cross the T and engage them from front and rear. This was one of the sillier manoeuvres we had learned long ago with the old Mediums we had at Ashton Court. Official tank tactics between the wars were all proving useless.

(An equally silly manoeuvre was making leaguer for the night in a triangular formation, all tanks pointing out. We quickly learned this was idiotic and adopted the parallel line close leaguer introduced by those who had preceded us to the W desert).

When battened down, and using periscopes, tanks soon lose their sense of direction and tend to play "follow my leader". I always flew a large yellow flag to enable my troops to adjust according to the Sqn commander's tank - but it had its drawback of making one a prime target. Before implementing the T attack a HE shell burst on my turret and I knew no more.

My decision to leave the hull down position came from the heart and not the head. I feared for the machine gunners and in doing so put my own men at risk. It was a sort of gallant snap decision - a sort of death, or a VC, or both, decision. In all previous engagements I always was cautious and somewhat in fear. The right amount of fear makes a prudent commander. I was very foolish and pray that I am the only casualty in A Squadron on this particular engagement.

I came round I do not know when, on a stretcher on the desert floor in the South African box. A 12 x 12 feet hole, depth 6 feet was an operation theatre, a dug slope leading to it. In it a trestle table, a couple of buckets of water and three

MO's in blood soaked shorts were performing fast temporary action and amputations to allow the injured to get to Tobruk for further treatment. I was in and out like a flash, heavily swathed with wads and bandages. The desert above was littered with wounded on stretchers, waiting.

Next, I remember being on the top right hand bunk in an ambulance. Then it stopped, and Sgt M Buck Taylor (can this be right?) entered the ambulance to say we were one of a convoy of 12 ambulances and we had stopped for a brew of tea. Then the noise of aircraft and we were machine gunned. I saw the holes on the ambulance roof and did not realise one bullet had gone through my left arm. All of us were well morphine doped. I was told 4 ambulances had gone up in flames; again by my SM (am I right? What would he be doing there?). At Tobruk, night had fallen, stretchers were laid in rows by the docks and RAMC orderlies spiked anyone moaning with morphine.

The ship that took me from Tobruk to Alex was loaded with stretchers by use of its derricks with a large platform that could take two stretchers at a time swinging them on to the deck.

I only have vague memories as I was sedated so much. They told me a piece of metal had gone through my left eye and I was to go by hospital train to Cairo where they had a bigger magnet - Alex one not being powerful enough. In Cairo they discovered that the metal was part of a copper rifling ring and it was too close to the brain to dare surgery. I was not in fit shape to move soon and a number of operations were needed before I could be moved to Port Said. Everyone was pushed along the trail to Orribi as soon as possible from hospital or a marshalling area, to keep beds available for further casualties. From Port Said by hospital ship to Durban and it was only on that ship that I knew pain for the first time, as sedation was eased.

At Durban, by hospital train, up the mountains to Pietermaritzburg and here to Orribu Hospital - a vast sprawl of huts, rapidly erected, and at this moment, I am told, the largest hospital in the world.

I am lucky to be alive after an HE shell explodes 2 or 3 feet away. I may be that my cupola flap saved me. There is a long time to go before saying goodbye to hospitals for much has to be done back home. I received a compound fracture of my skull, loss of left eye, compound fractures of my shoulder and left arm and, as they term it, "multiple gunshot wounds" in my chest.

I had been blinded on Belhamed when I made that wild dash to Sgt Bleadon's tank. This blinding was from an instantaneous flash of great heat within the turret, burning all expose hair and searing the surface of the eyes, even though the projectile did not pierce the armour. This strange phenomenon had happened to many others. The cause was not known and was worrying the powers that be. It was thought that the impact under certain conditions, sparked the fuel fumes and the aluminium interior painting in the turret. It was not long lasting, at least not in my case. Doc

Annual Arras Dinner.

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7 Cumbrae Terrace, Kirkcaldy, Fife each month in Kirkcaldy United

nce. The Branch has been , but since changing our day, more members are joined us last month: Don don and Rab Elrick, all ex o have you.

May, with over 80 sitting by Kirkcaldy British Rail Major C Lavender and his he way from Hampshire. it. Our friends from Edin were delighted to have is newly formed Glasgow

bertens, Lt Moseley, Sgt regson, all of 4th RTKS. Jack Lightfoot MM, and

rt for the 4/7th reunion, and our thanks go to Bill team for a marvellous ip in touch more often in shes to all serving and ex

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Entertainments Centre, our main guest being Major Christopher Davey, who so nearly made the transatlantic crossing by balloon, I am sure that he, like ourselves, thoroughly enjoyed the evening.

Our other occasion was the annual dinner of the 44th, held at the Artillery Grounds in Whiteladies Road, not quite the turnout of last year, but it was nice to Maj Gen 'Gerry' Hopkinson up in his usual place at the top table, complete with new hip joints, and as always concluding his after dinner speech with a 'I expect you've all heard this one, but I'll tell it anyway!' Brigadier 'Bill' Yeo, our first CO, and well loved old friend, keeps those advancing years well in check, always managed to have a word or two with every

present. A very pleasant surprise that evening was the news that Capt David Ling, MC of S Oqn, who was very badly wounded in the Knightsbridge box in 1942, had kept a diary of his desert days, and had several copies made for distribution among his old comrades. One glance at a copy was fatal, everywhere one could see the old 'Rats' finding a quiet place to read it in peace. Written with considerable flair and clarity, it brought back the atmosphere and events of those days so long ago, as if it were but yesterday. I only hope that one day it can be published in *Tank* as it deserves a much wider audience. (Ed — Can you send me a copy?)

stroke of good fortune, for he was a Regular RSM before taking Holy Orders, and was immediately at home amongst us and enjoyed himself hugely at the Saturday night proceedings. In the long term, we now know that the church will be maintained and will be available for special services so that there is a reasonable expectation that our own close connection with St Thomas the Martyr will be allowed to continue. Certainly we could not wish for better friends at court than The Archdeacon and Herbert Griffiths.

But we are still at table on Saturday night, about 130 of us, not counting a few more who will creep in for the drinking a bit later. Now is the time to remark on the phenomenon which seems to repeat itself each year, this time in the shape of Bill Hanson from Brighouse, WC Chilvers from Liverpool, Frank Sagar from Clayton-le-Moors, and Tom Spring from Bristol, all of whom were showing for the first time in at least 30 years. If ever we decide to strike a post-war medal it would be hard to know whether to award it to the men who never miss, or to the man who has the courage to show his face after a lapse of 34 years.

As ever, there is a remarkable list of nearly fifty messages and letters from well-wishers who cannot come, and then before we drink the toast to "Absent Friends" there is the melancholy moment which we cannot now escape as we listen to the names of those who have gone since we last met; Archie Page and Ron Graham of "HQ", David Shute, Freddy Collins and Bill Howarth of "A", Arthur Brooks and Alfred Brady of "C". May they rest in peace.

Before we drift away to the bar there is the ritual raffle and auction of the bottle of whisky, given to us each year by the daughter of Harry Edwards, late lamented Medical Corporal. Since early evening Sid Hallam has been filling everyone's pocket with little coloured tickets, and now his efforts result in a splendid total of £130. With donations of £122, any loss on the dinner is well covered with enough in hand to send Bill Creese laughing all the way to the Bank on Monday morning, though how we come to trust him with all that money would be hard to explain.

One of the most remarkable stories circulating in the bar, concerned the late Harry Hampson, DCM MM, whose well-won medals recently came up at auction. Bill Green, who happens to be a collector, made a determined attempt to stay in the hunt in the hope of keeping the gongs "in the family" but had to drop out when the bidding reached £1,000.

The highlight of the evening arose from a recent contact with Major David Ling, MC, who was badly wounded in the 150 Box on the Gazala line, and in recent years has been living in Jersey. At the bottom of some forgotten trunk he found parts of a diary which he had kept from the first days in the Desert and through our first battles in the "Crusader" operation up to the time he left us as a serious casualty in May 1942. Much of it is missing but what remains is sufficient to build up a vivid picture of what it was really like.

Knowing that the Reunion was in the offing David had the manuscript typed and a few copies made for distribution among the desert survivors of those days. They were in great demand, and an instant offer by a good man with access to a copier to produce some extra sets was most welcome. We could only regret that this material was not available when we were putting the Regimental History together some years

There is no point in denying that the bar closes down a



AN ACCOUNT BY CAPTAIN L.H. LEEBS, 44 R TANKS, ON HIS  
MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVITIES BETWEEN 30 NOV. and 6 DEC.41.

At dusk on the 30th day of November, 1942, the 44 Bn at BELHAMED was ordered under command of the 4th N.Z. Inf Bde. Upon orders from Col. Yeo I moved from the leaguer area of the battalion to make contact with the Bde. I also understood that Col. Yeo himself would be coming to Bde. later that evening. I contacted Bde. and they ran a telephone line back from their leaguer area to the Bn. leaguer some two miles away. There was nothing further to be done that evening and at approx. 2030 hrs I went to bed. The Colonel had not arrived and Captain Hussell, whom I had seen about 2000 hrs told me that the Colonel had been ordered into TOBRUK.

At 0530 hrs on 1 Dec. 41, I was awakened with a message that Capt. Ling wanted to contact Major Gibbon and did I know where he was. I got in touch with Capt. Ling on the telephone and it appeared that the Colonel had gone into TOBRUK. Major Gibbon was then in command of the remainder of the battalion and had gone to Bde. the previous evening and had not returned. A search was instituted by me at 4 Dnf Bde and Captain Ling at battalion, but no sign of Major Gibbon or the vehicle in which he travelled could be found. Captain Ling, therefore, assumed command of the battalion.

At 0630 hrs the enemy put in an attack on the BELHAMED feature and the tanks were ordered to counter-attack and save the infantry on that position. I got in touch with Captain Ling and told him the position and he immediately came to Bde area with all available tanks (7). By that time the position was acute and the infantry on the BELHAMED position had been beaten back and had surrendered. Captain Ling was still ordered to go on to the BELHAMED feature and drive the enemy out. I pointed out that if the tanks went up there they would be knocked out and the enemy would then be able to break through. Captain Ling and I then held conference and we decided the only possible thing was to go forward to hull down positions and there remain holding that front. This he did.

At approx. 0830 hrs the 4 Inf. Bde H.Q. was coming under intense shell fire and heavy machine gun and rifle fire, so it was decided to retire and to try and conduct operations from the ZAAFRAN feature behind us leaving the tanks and gunners in their present position. Captain Ling had with him then a F.O.O. and battery working under command. The bde H.Q. then retired to the ZAAFRAN feature and from that time communications and control of the tanks and gunners by Bde ceased.

At approx. 1100 hrs a whole mass of vehicles were seen approaching the ZAAFRON feature from the south at high speed. It appeared as though they might be enemy and I ordered Bn "A" Ech up to the N side of the ZAAFRAN feature and assumed command and control of the show. Then it transpires that the approaching vehicles who came onto the feature were the remnants of the 6th N.Z. Inf. Bde in retreat. I was in communication with Captain Ling forward on the wireless and kept him informed as to what was happening and the position behind. One of his tanks, commander Lieut. Martin had mechanical trouble and came back to me on ZAAFRAN. I then had with me at ZAAFRAN three crock 'I' tanks and three light tanks. I then heard that Captain Ling's guns had been put out of action but he was remaining forward in control; also they were being threatened by some 15 - 20 German tanks who had drawn off when they realised they were against 'I' tanks. They continued, however, to harass and put up long range fire on our tanks.

wire and moved East of EL RABTA. I continuously tried to establish communication with Captain Ling by wireless but failed. That evening I arranged with Brigadier Ingles of 4 Inf. Bde for a search party of N.Z. div. Cav. and myself to go back and search for the party the following morning.

The next morning I went to a conference with Brigadier Ingles at N.Z. Div.H.Q. There General Freyburg informed me that the Div were moving to BAGUSH starting in 1 hour's time. I informed that I had organised a search party to search for the tanks and asked permission for the N.Z. Div Cav to take part in the search. He refused, stating that his Division was ordered East immediately and the Div Cav were to go North to SIDI OMAR. I pointed out in no uncertain terms that as a result of the magnificent rearguard action fought by Captain Ling and his tanks the N.Z. Div had escaped capture and said that he should do something about searching for them. He refused stating that they were sure to be safe by now. I argued with him but to no avail, and the N.Z. Div moved off, leaving me alone.

It was obvious to me that Captain Ling and his party had to be found - they had water and rations for about another two days. Knowing that B Sqn 44th Bn were in the SIDI OMAR area, I went there to try to organise a search party. I arrived there in the late afternoon and could only contact the B.T.A. of the 42nd Bn. I learned from him that B.Sqn. and the 42nd were in the CONFERENCE CAIRN area.

I stopped at LIBYAN OMAR that night and decided that the only thing was to get the assistance of the R.A.F. to find Capt. Ling and his party. Next morning I set out for FORT MADDELENA where I knew that there were landing grounds. That afternoon I contacted near MADDELENA landing grounds of 258 wing, R.A.F. They treated me well but could do nothing that day as it was too late. I stayed there that night.

The next morning Wing Commander Honour, whom I had previously met at BAGUSH, agreed to sweep over the area during his daily sweeping and try to locate them. A dust-storm was blowing and at early morning the planes could not take off. Later the planes took off but could bring back no satisfactory information as visibility was very bad and there were many wrecks in the district. I decided to go to R.A.F. group near Army H.Q. and attempt to get a special plane sent out for the job. I set out that afternoon, contacted the group and asked the group captain there to organise a search by special plane. This he refused to do as there were so many wrecks in the desert, and it would be impossible to identify Capt. Ling and party. He also stated that they should be safe under protection of 30 Corps. No amount of persuasion could make him change his mind. I was nowhere near satisfied that the party was safe so I decided to go to Army H.Q. I arrived there the same evening and saw Colonel Belcham, told him my story and asked for his assistance in forming a search party. He said he could do nothing and told me to report to Colonel Hawthorn, at T.D.S. and organise my search from there. T.D.S. was some 50 miles away. I decided not to go there but to go to the CONFERENCE CAIRN area to try and find B.Sqn 44th and 42nd Bn and organise a search party from there. I spent that night camped in the desert and set out next morning.

By that time it was obvious to me that if Captain Ling and his party were to be got back safely they had to be found quickly. Fortunately on my way to CONFERENCE CAIRN I met 1st Army Tank Bde Rear H.Q. and there much to my joy found Captain Ling and his party quite safe. They had arrived some minutes before me.

(Sgd) L.H. Lee, Capt.

# TANKS' HEROIC LAST STAND

THE heroic last stand made by the crews of a number of damaged tanks of 42 and 44 Royal Tank Regiment has been revealed by the mute testimony of death and destruction discovered on the battlefield by one of our reconnaissance patrols.

After the capture of Omar Nuovo, some fifteen tanks of the above units were under repair by a Light Recovery Section ten miles west of Libyan Omar. None of them could move and many of them had jammed turrets.

In such a condition they were an easy prey for Rommel's raid to the frontier wire towards the end of November. Nothing was known of the action until all was over; then the tragic but inspiring story was revealed all too clearly to one of our patrols.

In spite of the tremendous odds against them, and their inability to manoeuvre their tanks or even to swing the gun-turrets of many, it was evident that the crews had fought to the end with the utmost gallantry until every tank had been destroyed. Nor had their heroic action been in vain. Within a few hundred yards of the smashed British tanks were the wrecks

of three German Medium machines, completely shattered, and many more must have been badly damaged.

On the field where they had fought so well these brave men were given honoured burial by the Senior Corps Chaplain.

No better example could be found of fulfilment of the standing order to all units of the Royal Armoured Corps that every tank is to be fought to the last under all conditions, unless it is set on fire by enemy action.

## Dr. J. Friedman

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