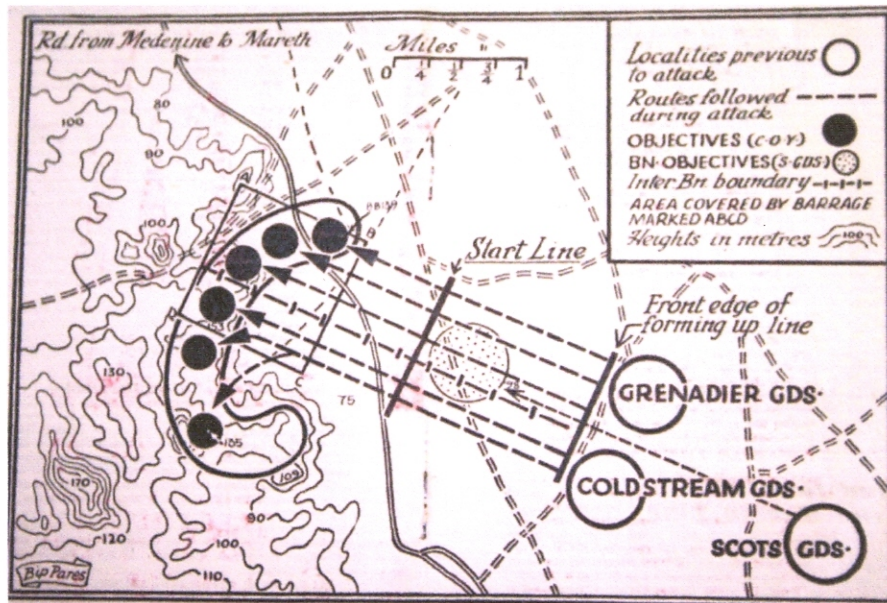


## The Battle of the Horseshoe

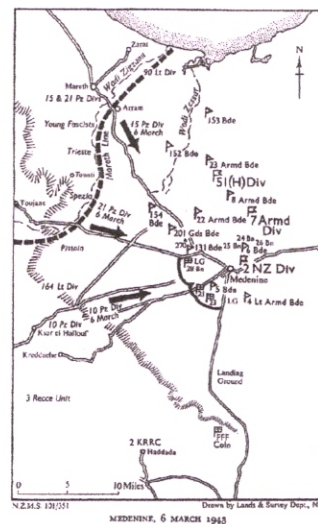
*Jonathan Forbes, former Grenadier Guards, recounts a visit to Tunisia in the footsteps of his father 64 years earlier.*



On a warm and cloudless day in early March 2007, I clambered up a rocky escarpment and looked out across the site of the battle of Medenine. On the same day, 64 years earlier, my father, then Adjutant of 6 Grenadier, was finalising preparations to fend off an anticipated German attack. As Brigade reserve, the battalion was deployed between the two prominent Jebel Tadjera features, Kbir (big) and Srrhir (little), astride the main road between Medenine and Mareth to cover the approach from the north. 3 Coldstream and 2 Scots, the other two battalions of 201 (Independent) Guards Brigade, were dug in on the expected enemy axis west of Kbir, their anti-tank guns concealed in the dead ground at the base of the Jebel with a wide arc of fire across the plain to their front (Fig 1).



Figure 1 Scots Guards view of battlefield



At dawn on 6 March 1943, the Germans launched their attack: 15 Panzer Division with 90 Light moved southwards from the Mareth Line towards the main Allied front while 21 and 10 Panzer came from Toujane and Ksar Hallouf in the west. Supported by 164 Light, 21 and 10 Panzer's thrust centred on the Coldstream's position but clever use of a dummy minefield succeeded in diverting them both northwards across 2 Scots' front and southwards past 2 New Zealand Division. Between them, these two formations lost over 50 tanks, a catastrophe for Rommel, who ruefully admitted "the attack had been launched about a week too late". He described how "a great gloom settled over us all", as he realised that this had been his last opportunity to disrupt Montgomery's preparations for the attack on the Mareth Line, 30 kms to the north. He was right. The previous week, 201 Guards Brigade was still over 300 kms away, just west of Tripoli.

The Brigade had left Qatana on the slopes of Mt Hermon, South-west of Damascus, at short notice on 7 February. Despite an unseasonably harsh winter, it had been able to undertake limited company training<sup>1</sup> and perform a Brigade-size strategic deception – Operation "Pretend-to-be-an-Army" – through the northern parts of Syria and Lebanon to dissuade the Turks from entering the war on the Axis side. Significantly, Brigade HQ had not envisaged a need to be battle ready until early April; thus, Brigadier Julian Gascoigne's timetable intended that February should see the start of battalion and brigade battle training. Hence, on completion of its arduous 3,500 km drive to link up with 8 Army three weeks later, although the Brigade arrived in excellent order, it was by default untrained and with one battalion, 6 Grenadier, without combat experience.

On 9 March, Montgomery gave orders for Operation Pugilist, the Allied attack on the Mareth Line. This was a series of French built fortifications which stretched from the coast well into the Matmata foothills some 45 kms inland. Ironically, the French had begun constructing the Line before the outbreak of

---

<sup>1</sup> Only one battle simulation per company

World War II to counter the threat posed to Tunisia by the Italians in Libya. Monty's plan was to feint in the centre, attack simultaneously on both right and left flanks and then exploit with his reserve Corps along whichever flank showed most promise. 201 Brigade was part of 30 Corps commanded by General Oliver Leese, whose responsibilities included the centre feint and right flank.



Figure 2 View of objectives from start line.

As a preliminary operation to 30 Corps's main advance, Leese ordered 201 Guards Brigade to capture a vital outpost on a hilly feature (Figure 2) – The Horseshoe - to the east of the main Axis defences at Wadi Zigzaou. This ground, situated on the west of the road, was high enough to give the Germans warning of movement to the south and east of the Mareth Line, the top of Jebel Tadjera being clearly visible some 12 kms away. In addition, it dominated the main Medenine/Mareth road where it crossed the Wadi Zess, a route that was essential for supplies and movement in support of any subsequent advance of 8 Army. Once cleared of Axis troops, 7 Armoured Division was to occupy it in order to support the left flank of 51 (Highland) Division in their forthcoming frontal attack on the Mareth Line to the north.

A morale-boosting talk from the Army Commander had left the Guardsmen in good spirits for the forthcoming attack – *“Now this is your first major battle in 8 Army. All I have to tell you is that it is going to be easy. All my*

*battles are!*” The assault was planned for the night of 16 March, but it was not until two nights before, on 14 March, that the Brigade reached its assembly area in a wide wadi, roughly 2.5 kms southeast of Wadi Zess. This gave the battalions little time to ascertain enemy strength and obstacles to their front; crucially, maintenance of surprise took priority over last-minute intelligence gathering. Air photography showed craters on the Wadi Zess road and intelligence estimated enemy forces of approximately two unidentified infantry companies.<sup>2</sup>



**From L to R: Gascoigne, Montgomery, Erskine, Archer Clive**

However, the importance of holding the Horseshoe had not been lost on General Messe, the Italian officer who had taken over command of Axis forces from Rommel, and General Von Arnim, his German counterpart. Its security was crucial in order to buy time to reorganise the Mareth Line defences, so they gave the task of holding it to the seasoned German 90 Light Division<sup>3</sup> commanded by the immensely able and experienced Lieutenant General Theo von Sponeck. Furthermore, unbeknown at the time to 201 Bde, surprise had been lost when two nights before H-hour, a British officer had been captured with a marked-up map, revealing the date, time and place of the imminent attack.

On my visit to the battleground, observing the terrain from the Germans viewpoint, I began to fully appreciate the awesome courage and sacrifice of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Battalion intelligence log.  
<sup>3</sup> And elements of 164 Light as well.

Guardsmen of 201 Brigade on a night that was to prove so costly. It had started calm and clear, with the Brigade moving out of its FUP at 1930 hrs to coincide with the rising moon. During an uneventful advance to the Start Line, just short of the Wadi Zess, the battalions covered broken ground, passing occasional olive trees and aromatic scrub – “with a freshness from the wild flowers especially the rosemary”<sup>4</sup> – and arrived in good order and on time at 2030 hrs. Ominously, a German light aircraft suddenly appeared and dropped a massive flare which lit up the forward battalions.

Whatever surprise remained evaporated at 2045 hrs with the opening of a 250-gun creeping barrage over a 2,000 meter frontage. The deafening noise and psychological effect of the barrage (over 24,000 shells were fired by the gunners during the 15 hour battle) might well have broken less resolute soldiers than the 90 Light Division. But they were trained to dig deep in the rocky ground for adequate overhead protection, lie low during the barrage, and then emerge and fight in all-round defence once it had ceased.



**Figure 4 Wadi Zess**

At 2100 hrs, the two forward Battalions (6 Grenadier on the right, and 3 Coldstream to the left) advanced to cross the Wadi Zess. Up to this point, they had moved on the east side of the Medenine/Mareth road but, with the exception of the right hand Grenadier Company (No 3), all Company objectives were on the west of the road between 1.5 and 2.5 kms away. The wadi itself posed no

---

<sup>4</sup> Nigel Forbes

great problem for those on foot, but its steep banks soon presented a significant obstacle to the motorised support (ammunition, anti-tank guns and reinforcements) so vital to the consolidation phase.

On the flat ground to the far side of the wadi, the companies continued their advance until they hit a second unanticipated obstacle – two dense, unmarked minefields. All manner of mines, whether anti-personnel or anti-tank, confronted the advancing troops and took an horrendous toll on men and vehicles, totally eliminating the prospect of support weapons and ammunition being brought up to the companies on their objectives. German heavy mortars rained down on their DFs. Nevertheless, the surviving Guardsmen forged ahead.

When I reached the top of Pt 153 (Sidi el Guelaa), I was staggered that so many Grenadiers and Coldstreamers had made it to their objectives. Sidi el Guelaa (when looking South-east) is the pivotal feature that protrudes from and hence dominates the open ‘U’ of a horseshoe shape over 3 kms wide. Not only is it the highest feature, but the frontage facing No 1 Coy, Coldstream Guards, is almost a sheer rock face near the top - I had had to use my hands to complete the climb. Having seen the formidable trench system that still contours the hill, I was overwhelmed by the fortitude and dash of those Coldstream guardsmen heroically led by Michael Wills who had succeeded in taking that barren hilltop.



Figure 5 German view of battlefield

It was also apparent to me how important the German strongpoint on Pt 117 (about 700 meters to the East and supported by Pt 153) (Figure 5) was in the context of the advance. Somehow it had been by-passed by the advancing Grenadier companies as they emerged disorientated from the minefields. Eliminating it would have prevented the havoc wrought by the ten German machine gunners on it, who fired with devastating effect into the flanks and rear of the advancing Grenadier and Coldstream Guardsmen. The other factor which became apparent from Pt 153 was that the Horseshoe feature formed a near perfect area ambush, with the killing zone being the low ground through which the Brigade so heroically advanced.

As I gazed down from the summit of Sidi el Guleaa, it was easy to imagine the steel-helmeted Guardsmen in their battle-dress, many wearing leather jerkins as limited protection against anti-personnel mines, moving through the terrifying inferno of that night; a night where, in the noise, smoke and uncertainty of battle, confusion reigned supreme. Communications broke down and radio operators, with their newly issued Mark 18 man-pack sets, reported consistent malfunctions. Carrying only a limited amount of ammunition for their .303 rifles and Bren Guns (grenades and bayonets for close combat), re-supply quickly became necessary owing to the length and difficulty of the attack. The companies only had support from their 3" Mortars. Where possible, casualties were evacuated, often at huge risk to the rescuers. The likelihood of 'blue-on-blue' was high amidst the disorientation of a night attack, especially when advancing close behind a creeping barrage.

All four objectives were reached between 2230 and 2320 hrs. It was a magnificent feat of arms. After a brief lull, the survivors endured a night of bitter hand-to-hand fighting as they fended off German counter-attacks before the Brigade was finally forced to withdraw at 0525 hrs, just as dawn was breaking. Brigadier Gascoigne had earlier decided it would be futile to reinforce the surviving remnants of the forward units with the Scots Guards.

Could there have been another outcome? I considered what might have happened if the battalions had rolled up the wings of the 'U' of the horseshoe, rather than moving into its open jaws. Probably the casualties and loss of life would have been little different, given that the support vehicles would still have been unable to link up with their forward companies. Furthermore, a sizeable German reserve waited in the broken ground to the north and could have been quickly deployed in a major counter-attack.

This almost super-human attack on the night of 16/17 March may not have been a victory, but it was a success in so far as the Germans sustained considerable casualties and such was its ferocity that, even after spotting Freyberg's left flank advance on 18 March, Axis commanders decided that they had to hold this ground rather than retire to the Mareth Line itself. The casualties the Brigade suffered in those few hours were appalling; over 38 officers and 500 men were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. Officers and Guardsmen from the Grenadiers and Coldstream bore the brunt of these casualties, the Grenadiers having the highest number of fatalities, including 14 officers. It was hardly surprising that tears were streaming down the face of the Grenadier Drill Sergeant when he *formed up* a Drumhead Service for the fallen.

Whatever the reasons, no criticism could be levelled at the conduct and heroism of the Guardsmen. Indeed, the only critical comment made by the Corps Commander was that the young officers had exposed themselves too much in their eagerness to set an example to their soldiers. Senior officers were dismayed by the failure to identify the minefields. In a letter of 19 March, Leese wrote, "*if I thought they would have come up against minefields on this scale, they would have tackled it differently – it's easy to be wise now. One can think of a hundred things one might have done differently. I blame myself very much.*" Montgomery, who had quipped with the Brigade after Medenine "*when I give a party, it is a good party...and this is going to be a good party*", noted "*the operations on 16/17 March were on the whole a great success...tell the men this.*"