

On our way to the Western Desert we again spent twenty-four hours at Qassassin, drawing some essential stores. Also, whilst there, I paid a brief visit to the Royals who were encamped nearby. They had just been withdrawn to re-equip after fighting in the desert. I arranged to see briefly my two brothers-in-law, Jack and Desmond. Sadly, it was the last time that I saw them.

After leaving Qassassin, each day we covered about 150 miles when going through the Western Desert. Usually we would stop some time between 1600 and 1700 hours each evening, and then after a good meal we would bivouac for the night. The whole move proved to be most interesting, because we went either through or near so many places that became well-known during the North African Campaign. We passed El Alamein where Monty had recently won his famous battle. Here we saw burnt-out tanks, lorries and other vehicles, mainly German, which had become casualties during the battle. The sight of a substantial number of German tanks and guns put out of action gave us considerable cheer, especially as we had been told we must be ready for immediate action on reaching the 8th Army. After El Alamein we passed Mersah Matruh, Bug-Buq, Tobruk, Derna, Barce, Benghazi, Agedabia and Sirte. We went on past Tripoli, and it was to the considerable credit of the Battalion that we arrived at Medenine on 2 March without having lost through any cause any vehicle during the marathon move from Syria.

The drive had taken us over 2,200 miles through vast desert country the whole way, except for the few inhabited areas where there were usually trees such as olives and date palms, and also near inhabited areas where one often found some cultivated ground. Somehow the desert was by no means monotonous, as it was full of interesting features. At times our route would take us near the coast and, on two occasions, we leaguered for the night near the sea, so that everyone was able to take a refreshing dip in the warm Mediterranean. Throughout the drive across the Western Desert we saw signs of the long ding-dong conflict that had already taken place. There was everything from burnt-out vehicles, destroyed dumps, aircraft casualties, to crosses marking graves. Nights in the desert were often ice-cold in contrast to the scorching heat of the days which sometimes were made oppressive by the wind. One essential for everyone was water, to prevent dehydration. We had small canvas water sacks which we filled with water. The sack was then hung on the outside of one's vehicle, usually on the side mirror support. By this method, owing to evaporation through the canvas, the water kept cool.

On reaching Medenine, we were ordered to take up defensive positions at once as a German counter-attack was expected. The Coldstream and Scots Guards took up positions to the west on hills overlooking flat ground, whilst we were to be in reserve, in an area like a large basin to the rear of them.

Sure enough, on the morning of 5 March the Germans launched their counter-attack with three of Rommel's Panzer Divisions, across open country towards the Coldstream and Scots Guards who excelled themselves by destroying enemy tanks as they trundled towards where the two Battalions were dug in. Meanwhile we were having a tantalising time, as from our area in the basin behind the hills, we could not see what was going on. We could hear gunfire, and from time to time we could see clouds of smoke going up into the air as German tanks were hit, and we could also hear reports of success on the radio. At one moment I managed to walk up to some higher ground from where I could get a glimpse of part of the battle. Later that afternoon the Germans withdrew leaving fifty-two tanks knocked out by the Coldstream and Scots Guards - a truly magnificent result.

After the battle of Medenine, the Battalion sent out a patrol to ascertain just how far the Germans had withdrawn. Also at this time the Commander in Chief, General Montgomery, visited the Brigade to say how pleased he was that the Germans had been so successfully repulsed at Medenine. He said

that now the plan was for the 8th Army to break through the Mareth Line, a defensive position constructed by the French to guard the approaches to southern Tunisia.

Prior to reaching the Mareth Line the plan was to dislodge the Germans from their outpost positions on the hills of Sidi El Guelaa, about three miles to the south, and this operation was to be undertaken by 201 Guards Brigade. Monty, as he often did before a battle, visited the Battalion. He stood on the bonnet of his jeep and told us he never launched an attack until he had the necessary troops and equipment to bring about success. He ended by saying, 'Now this is your first major battle in the 8th Army. All I have to tell you is that it is going to be easy. All my battles are!' The plan was for the 8th Army to break through the Mareth Line, and then join up with the 1st Army in Tunisia. The Mareth Line consisted of a series of fortifications extending from the coast to the Matmata Hills, about 22 miles inland to the south. I have never seen soldiers leave an address by a Commander with such high morale as all ranks did that day. The thoughts and dread of battle had been put aside by Monty's confidence. It was all very moving.

Later, I found that many who had not served directly under Monty criticized him for being a showman. What they did not appreciate was that this showmanship was all part of Monty's technique that produced his great leadership. He would at once get everyone's attention, and then explain how victory was to be achieved. Nobody was left in any doubt that they were part of a victorious army and, furthermore, everyone knew the outline plan of battle. He was greatly respected by officers who served under him and was revered by his troops; he was both boastful and abrasive at times. Monty made it clear that now he had got both the troops and equipment and it was just a question of going on and on till the Axis troops were forced out of North Africa.

Julian Gascoigne, the Brigade Commander, decided that he would make a night assault on the German positions when there would be a full moon on 16 March. His plan was that the 6th Battalion would lead the assault, and from intelligence reports available it was not anticipated that the Brigade would have a very formidable task. How wrong this turned out to be!

Patrolling was carried out during the night of 14/15 March and it was during that night a Gunner Officer of the 51st Highland Division was captured whilst doing a reconnaissance to locate a suitable observation post, from where artillery fire could be controlled during the assault. However, what was not known at the time was that the captured Officer had marked maps on him, so that the Germans knew just where and when the artillery barrage would come down. This gave away the whole battle plan, and there is no doubt that during the 15 and 16 March the Germans greatly strengthened their defensive positions. Little did we know that the surprise of a night attack had been lost, before the attack began.

The area occupied by the Germans' crack 90 Light Division was where the desert gave way to more broken ground. In between the Battalion start line and the high ground of Sidi El Guelaa, held by the Germans, was the now dry Wadi Zess. The Wadi had a steep bank on our side, and consequently it could only be crossed in a few places, unless prior excavation was carried out.

During the somewhat tense afternoon of 16 March our Padre, Reggie Leadbeater, a heroic little man, went round the Battalion holding short services wherever a number of officers and men were gathered together, preparing for the night assault.

At 1930 that evening the Battalion moved silently by moonlight up to the start line, previously marked by Douglas Phillips the Battalion Intelligence Officer, and Edmund Vaughan. The air was still, with a freshness from the smell of the wild flowers, especially the rosemary. It was just as the various units got to their markers at the start line that a German aircraft came over and dropped a flare, which lit up the whole Battalion area. This episode again confirmed the fact that the Germans knew about our plan - which was that it would be a two Battalion attack with us on the right and the

Coldstreamers on the left. The Scots Guards were in reserve.

Battalion Headquarters was located near the start line. My task was one of communication both forward and backward. For this I had in the command vehicle, which looked like a rectangular box on wheels, two radios, each on a different frequency. With one I could communicate with Brigade Headquarters, and the other was on the Battalion frequency. With the latter, I could hear the talk going on between the Commanding Officer and the Companies, and I could also contact the Commanding Officer with any orders which I received from Brigade Headquarters.

The leading Companies of the Battalion then proceeded to cross the wadi, which they did with very little opposition. Indeed they were able to reform on the far side of the wadi for the final assault as had been planned, but then soon ran into trouble as the Germans' 90th Light Division reinforced by a Battalion of Panzer Grenadiers, had laid minefields in thick belts. Mines were exploding all around the leading troops. In spite of the very heavy casualties sustained in crossing the minefields, the Battalion objectives were reached, but pockets of Germans had been passed in the advance. These Germans had either been stunned by the barrage, or had decided to lie low. During the assault, the supporting artillery fired barrage after barrage - in all some 24,000 shells were fired. At Battalion Headquarters we were on a piece of featureless ground, overlooking the wadi, with the artillery right behind us. Later in life, it was not surprising that my hearing became impaired and I have little doubt that this was due largely to the Mareth artillery barrage.

Unfortunately the assault had passed by some German positions, and these now began to counter-attack our assault Companies from the rear. The Companies were very depleted, having already suffered heavy casualties. To add to their difficulties, many of their radios had become defective during the fighting, making any form of communication extremely difficult. This resulted in the Companies being unable to ask for further artillery support. At Battalion Headquarters we did not dare request Brigade Headquarters for more artillery support, as we had been receiving insufficient information from the assault Companies, that we did not know the exact position of all our troops. We might have brought the barrage down on some of them - such was the fog of war.

At this stage the few remaining Officers and men of the three leading Companies were virtually surrounded, and to make matters worse our carriers, as well as our anti-tank guns, were being shot to pieces as they attempted to cross the Wadi Zess, in order to reach the forward Companies through the minefields. Mines had proved an obstacle to the infantry, but they spelt disaster to the vehicles. The banks of the wadi were anything from 5 to 30 feet high. Vehicles which were set on fire by enemy action, lit up the whole area, with the result that the carriers and anti-tank guns became easy targets for the Germans.

At about 0300 Battalion Headquarters began to come under mortar and rifle fire and, to guard against a German counter attack, Billy Kingsmill the Battalion second-in-command told Bill Anson and I to organise a defensive flank around the Headquarters. The battle continued. The forward positions were becoming untenable so the Commanding Officer asked Brigade Headquarters for two Companies of the Scots Guards to help hold onto our Battalion objectives, but probably wisely this was refused as they might be needed to cover a withdrawal. For this their support could be vital.

All this time at the Regimental Aide Post the Medical Officer, Captain Anthony Winder, and the Padre, worked ceaselessly tending the wounded, and at times were under heavy mortar fire. Later on in the campaign in North Africa the Padre, with some Guardsmen in his vehicle, was trying to rejoin the Battalion, and lost the way. The next thing they saw was a German armoured vehicle. On seeing the German vehicle the Padre turned to the driver and said- 'I think we need a little help from above'. They got it as the German vehicle turned and fled leaving the Padre with his party to extricate themselves and reach the Battalion.

Peter Evelyn, who had been a Master of Foxhounds, rallied his Company by blowing his hunting horn; alas Peter, my best man at our wedding, and a very gallant Officer, did not survive the battle. Communication was becoming more and more difficult, and in the final stages of the battle the aerial of my control radio was shot away. This severed the link with the Commanding Officer and the Companies. Luckily, this happened just after I had radioed the Commanding Officer to say I had received orders from Julian Gascoigne at 0525 for the Battalion to withdraw. Once the aerial had gone, all I could do was to communicate with Brigade Headquarters by means of the rear link radio.

The battle weary remnants of the Battalion, on orders from the Commanding Office, withdrew under cover of a smoke screen put down by the artillery to near our original start line. During the course of the battle the Commanding Officer had been wounded; in addition 24 Officers and 255 men were battle casualties. Of the Officer casualties, no fewer than fourteen had been killed on the battlefield. To have taken part in such a battle and to have survived was indeed an experience, and one that will not be forgotten. The leadership shown by the Commanding Officer, Archer Clive, was superb. Throughout the battle he had been up with the leading troops. He was awarded the DSO.

For the remainder of the North African Campaign the Battalion was little more than a skeleton fighting unit, as there were not enough reinforcements readily available to bring it up to the strength of a fighting Battalion. Owing to the shape of the terrain held by the Germans, the battle became known at the time as the Horseshoe Battle. There is little doubt that, had the Germans not been forewarned of the attack, the outcome could have been very different. Even so, Monty praised 201 Guards Brigade for drawing so many German crack troops to the Horseshoe area and thus enabling him to out flank the Germans holding the Mareth Line with the New Zealand Division. Once outflanked von Arnim, who had taken over from Rommel, was forced to continue to withdraw his troops westwards. Some time after the battle of Mareth I received this letter from Captain A.H. Penn MC, our Regimental Adjutant -

Regimental Headquarters
Grenadier Guards

29th April 1943

My dear Nigel

I have thought of you very often during the damnable month now behind us, for I know how deeply you will feel the loss of many friends to whom you were devoted and it is not easy to face the gaps. Nobody will feel them more than the Commanding Officer and yourself, for if he is the father of the Battalion, the Adjutant is certainly its elder brother, and both of you have contributed so much to the quality of the Battalion.

All Battalions of the Regiment have different characters, though they all know only one standard. Yours, I think, partly because all its members joined together, and partly because it has had very few changes since, has always given, far more than most, the impression of a most happy family, and such, indeed it was. I doubt if any of those who will fight no more have ever had greater contentment than whilst they were with the 6th Battalion.

Yours

Arthur

Arthur was absolutely right. The 6th Battalion was a most happy family. Indeed the comradeship amongst all ranks was absolutely superb.