

The Journey of Trooper Francis Leonard Rea



By Simon Harrison.

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October 1941 – March 1946



Introduction

This is the story of my Grandfather and his journey in World War 2, based on the paperwork I received from the Army Personnel Centre (APC) in Glasgow, and a number of books, including the histories of the 10th Hussars and 1 Armoured Div. It contains a number of educated (informed) guesses where the records are incomplete or illegible. I have marked each section with an event recorded on his service record, with some explanatory description. Any notes in italics are by way of historical background.

20 October 1941 – Attestation Taunton

Frank Rea was attested into the British Army as a Voluntary Enlistee for the duration of hostilities willing to serve outside the United Kingdom with a Recruiting Officer, Major Edmund Sexton, in Taunton. He was 19 years old and working as a Drivers Mate on an Excavator. He passed a medical and was deemed fit to join the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC). As a voluntary enlistee he would have had the opportunity to say where and how he wanted to serve rather than the lottery of compulsory enlistment where he could have been sent anywhere. He may have selected the RAC as he had friends serving with them as there were RAC Regiments from the west country such as the North Somerset Yeomanry and 44RTR. Alternatively, the Recruiting Officer may have suggested that his experience with an excavator, the RAC would be the place for him!

11 December 1941 – Posted 52 (Heavy) Training Regiment RAC, Allenby Barracks, Bovington

52 Trg Regt RAC was one of 12 RAC Training units across the UK at that time, and was located in Allenby Barracks, Bovington in Dorset. It conducted what we would call today Phase 1 Training (or Basic) – drill, physical fitness and the theory and practice of working with Armoured Vehicles on an individual basis. At that time, it was known as Primary Training.

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By all accounts life at Bovington was hard, but not brutal, with few creature comforts. The men lived in Nissan Huts (which were not well heated) in groups of 30 (as a Troop with a Training Officer and supporting NCOs), with the day starting at 0630, Breakfast at 0730, then kit inspections, drill or PT from 0830 and lectures or practical demonstrations after lunch; Initially in fixed training vehicles to gain familiarity, then driving under instruction around a square, then out on the training area with firing exercises at the range 5 miles away at Lulworth Cove. In the evening, after dinner, men would read up for the following lectures and cleaned their kit with lights out at 2200. This was the routine Monday to Saturday lunchtime, with sports on Saturday afternoon, church parade Sunday morning and “free” time Sunday afternoon. Soldiers Under Training had limited opportunity to go off camp (the nearest village was 2 miles away) but there were basic facilities for them to use such as a library, writing room and NAAFI that served non-alcoholic refreshments. The aim was to turn civilians into soldiers and to determine whether they had an aptitude to be in the RAC, to influence how they would be employed. This lasted approximately 10 weeks.

Bovington has been completely redeveloped since the 1940s and is now a smaller site but it remains the home of the RAC and is where all Armoured Training occurs.

24 February 1942 – Posted 57 Training Regiment RAC, Swinton-Elles Barracks, Warminster

Swinton-Elles Barracks had been opened in 1938 (named after the then Head of the RAC (General Swinton) and the Founder of the Royal Tank Corps (RTC) (General Elles) when the decision had been made to rename the RTC the RAC and expand it by mechanizing many of the County Yeomanry Regiments and some Territorial Infantry Battalions. It was a purpose built site to train both officers and soldiers (separately and together) in large numbers.

57 Trg Regt RAC conducted what we today would call Phase 2 or Trade Training to enable a soldier to be posted to an Armoured Regiment in a specific role. There would have been less drill and PT and more emphasis on all aspects of vehicle training under instruction, then as part of a crew in single vehicles, moving to Troop (3 Tanks) and Squadron (15+ Tanks) exercises. Soldiers would have trained in many of the crew roles – Driving (including map reading), Gunnery, Radio Operator and basic mechanics; the British system sought to give soldiers a range of skills that allowed the unit they were posted to decide where to fit them in. German training was much more role specific from the outset. I visit Warminster frequently and, although the site has been developed, you can still see the original guardroom behind which there is a Y junction. To the left is the School of Infantry and to the right there are still the red brick vehicle maintenance buildings, hard standing to park vehicles on and the lecture theatre largely unchanged. Keep following the road and it takes you up onto the Salisbury Plain training area ending at the abandoned village of Imber.

The British Army move out of Warminster in 1943 and US Armoured units moved in to make use of the facilities and training areas. They remained until 1945, when the British Army returned and it resumed its role as a training establishment. The site was renamed the Land Warfare Centre, for advanced and specialist Infantry training in the 1970s with an Infantry Battalion (currently 2 Yorks) based down the road in a Demonstration and Experimentation role. Since the late 1990s Warminster has been used for simulator and synthetic based Armoured Training with Tank and Armoured Infantry units at the Combined Arms Tactics Trainer (CATT). In 2015 the site was renamed Waterloo Lines. Warminster has also grown as a town and the housing has expanded out to the southern edge of the camp.

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11 June 1942 – Granted Weekend Privilege Pass (WPP)

Trooper Rea obviously stayed out of trouble as he was granted a WPP towards the end of his training at Warminster. This would have allowed him off camp for a weekend, from a Friday lunchtime to Sunday night. He would have been able to get a Great Western Railway train from Warminster to Bristol and thence to the West County.

Trooper Rea passed out of 57 Trg Regt towards the end of June, with a full parade, as a Driver Operator (DO) Class III earning the princely sum of 3s 9d a day (possibly rising to a maximum of 5s 6d), less any deductions for food, damages etc. and any money he sent home. As a DO he could drive any tracked vehicle and was competent to undertake other roles with the tank.

1 July 1942 – Posted 52 (Heavy) Training Regiment RAC, Allenby Barracks, Bovington

Fighting had resumed in the North African Desert in late May 1942, and the British had been getting the worse of the tank battles. As a result, there was an urgent need for replacement Tank Crews to be dispatched to make good losses. Trooper Rea would have been posted to Bovington to form part of a draft of replacements (in groups of approximately 100 soldiers, NCOs and Officers) to be shipped to the Middle East. Whilst at Bovington there would have been further training to hone and improve skills, attend briefings on the latest tactics, vehicle recognition et al.

12 July 1942 – Proceed to Port of Embarkation

Trooper Rea (and others) left Bovington to a port (probably the Clyde) to board a ship to sail to the Middle East. He was part of Draft Serial RWKOG.

The journey would have mostly likely been on a converted merchant ship, out into the Atlantic, then heading south past Gibraltar, down the west coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope, up the east coast of Africa and into the Red Sea heading to the southern end of the Suez Canal. (The quicker route through the Mediterranean Sea was not possible due Italian and German airpower.) This was on a fast convoy, taking approximately 8 weeks, so Trooper Rea is unlikely to have had the chance for any shore leave in South Africa that occurred with slower convoys. While at sea there would have been little to do except sleep (probably in hammocks or on deck), play games such as "Housey-Housey" (Bingo), draughts, chess or Ludo, read and attend educational or practical lectures on the Desert.

They landed at Port Tewfik (universally called Tuffick to arriving British soldiers) in the city of Suez at the southern end of the Suez Canal on 1 September 1942, he had arrived in the Middle East!

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The Middle East and North Africa – 1942 to 1944

2 September 1942 – Disembarked and moved to Middle East (ME) RAC Depot

The RAC personnel disembarked and were moved (by train and lorry) to the Middle East RAC Depot at the town of El Ballah on the west bank of the Suez Canal, to the south of Alexandria. At this time, he was classed as X4 or x(iv) unposted to a unit or awaiting posting.

The RAC Depot was a holding and acclimatisation camp for all personnel or units arriving (or departing) the Middle East Theatre of Operations. Here the arrivals would have been medically checked, issued desert clothes and equipment, been briefed on the particulars of desert warfare and (possibly) had the chance to operate a tank in the environment. The men lived in small tents and whilst there was a NAAFI on site, as individual replacements they would not have been allowed off camp to visit Alexandria. Individual Replacements would have been held here until called forward to join an RAC unit.



This picture shows black South African members of the RAC preparing a newly arrived tank at the ME Base Depot for delivery to a unit

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14 September 1942 – Posted to HQ 1AD (x(i) from x(iv))

Trooper Rea would have been one of an unknown number of men now posted to HQ 1st Armoured Division (1AD) – the Charging Rhino's - as a replacement. The x(i) indicated that he was assessed as being fit for duty and had been taken on strength by a unit. On the front page, top right, of the Service and Casualty Form there are three unit stamps, 52RTR and 57 RTR and then 10H (10 Hussars) who were part of 1AD, hence the assumption that is who he served with for the remainder of his time in the Army, less one short detachment.



1AD had been in the Middle East since December 1941, and consisted of 2nd Armoured Brigade (2 Arm Bde) and a Support Group with Infantry and Artillery. The British Armour had gotten the worst of the fighting in the desert in the summer of 1942, being pushed out of Libya, the loss of Tobruk and the retreat to the El Alamein line, and as a result the British had shuffled men, equipment and sub units around between Regiments and Brigades to try and maintain fighting power. This resulted in many units being split up and scattered between other commands, men without vehicles being held back awaiting equipment or shipped to units who had more vehicles than men. By the time fighting petered out along the El Alamein line in August, the morale of the Armoured Corps was low and units had lost their organisational structure and cohesion.

On 13 August, Lt General Bernard Law Montgomery assumed command of the 8th Army and set about visiting as many units and formations as possible, to assess the situation and restore morale with his unique style of man management and charisma. At an early stage he started to withdraw the armoured units to rest areas where they could be regrouped and "tidied up" to absorb replacements and new equipment. 1AD moved to the town of Khatatba north of Cairo, with its Armoured Regiments following as they were relieved and released.

2 Arm Bde consisted of three Armoured Regiments, The Queens Bays (Bays), 9th Lancers (9L) and the 10th Royal Hussars (Prince of Wales Own) (10H) (all of whom were pre-war regular army units) and a Motorised Infantry Battalion, the Yorkshire Dragoons (YD), a Yeomanry Regiment converted to infantry. 10H had been detached from the Brigade to the southern end of the El Alamein line with another Brigade, and were the last to arrive at Khatatba. On 10th September the 10H handed over their remaining tanks to other units remaining at the front and the men were moved to Khatatba where they received some 50 replacement personnel (to make up for recent losses), the Commanding Officer having driven to the RAC Depot to collect them, and new tanks: American Sherman's for A and C Squadrons (Sqn) and British Crusaders for B Squadron.

From later events I believe that Trooper Rea was posted to C Sqn, most likely as a crew made up entirely of new men. The British had learnt that breaking up existing crews or mixing old and new soldiers, unless absolutely necessary, damaged morale, so keeping soldiers who had been conscripted at a similar time, then trained and travelled together made sense. Given the pressing need to maximise the British numerical superiority in tanks, it is very difficult to be imagine that a trained RAC Trooper would not have been sent to a front line posting.

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At full strength, an Armoured Sqn was made up of 5 Troops, each with 3 tanks (with a crew of 4 or 5) led by a junior officer or Senior NCO. Inside a tank everyone called each other by their first name, and quite probably within the Troop (except on formal occasions or inspections) except of the Troop Commander who would have been Mr (if he was an officer) or his rank if an NCO. In addition, the Sqn Commander (OC – a Major) and the 2nd In Command (2I/C – a Captain) would have Tanks, giving a total strength of 17 Tanks. There was an HQ Squadron to run the Regiment, with support tanks and a Recce Troop and a “B” Echelon with the lorries carrying the spare parts ammunition and food, along with mechanics and cooks to keep all the vehicles and crews going.

A full strength Armoured Regiment had 32 Officers, 650 NCOs and Other Ranks, and over 150 vehicles. 10H still retained a large percentage of pre-war Regular Army personnel, with many of the Troopers and Junior Officers being under 25, the NCOs in their late 20's or 30s, the Captains and Majors under 35. Perhaps the biggest difference inside the Regiment was between those who were pre-war professional and territorial soldiers, and saw themselves as cavalymen (Corporal of Horse et al) and wore Field Service Caps, while the citizen soldiers conscripted for the duration of the war, who saw themselves as RAC Soldiers or Troopers, who could have gone to any RAC unit and wore the black beret associated with the Royal Tank Regiment.



Sherman Tanks of 2Arm Bde (Bays) Egypt

The weeks leading up to the Battle of El Alamein would have been filled with training, initially getting used to the Sherman (accompanied by US liaison officers), which had a different drive system and a bigger gun than British tanks. Crews then have practiced driving in formation by day and night, finally tactical training to rehearse the planned attack. On 3 October Lt General Montgomery visited to watch the Brigade training, and then gave a morale raising speech to each Regiment.

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10H Soldiers posing on a Sherman

As the date of the British attack drew near, 1AD moved forward at night, to the front line and then lay up under various camouflage measures during the day so the Germans didn't realise they were there. This would have been hard and uncomfortable for the crews who had to sit inside their hot airless tanks, or adjacent to them all day, only moving around after dark. On the night of the attack, once it became dark they would have made sure their tank was fully fuelled, checked all the ammunition and taken on supplies of food and water before moving forward.

23 October – 4 November 1942 Battle of El Alamein

The plan for the 8th Army's attack was for the infantry, supported by massed artillery to attack the German and Italian positions at night, to allow Engineers to clear lanes through the extensive mine fields through which the tanks could pass, to engage and defeat the German and Italian tanks. 2 Arm Bde were to attack in the north behind the Scottish Battalions of 51st (Highland) Infantry Division, with 10H in the lead.

The attack started at 2200 on the 23rd, but the Infantry of 1 Gordons were held up by enemy resistance (German Soldiers had been moved into the area to bolster the Italians) and as a result work on clearing the minefields, that were denser than first anticipated, was slower than planned, delaying the creating and then widening of the planned lanes. As the sun was coming up on the 24th 10H (and other Armoured units) found themselves strung out and vulnerable in columns unable to manoeuvre. The 10H CO (Lt Colonel Archer-Slee) decided to push on regardless, with A and C Sqns making a dash for a defensive position (a low ridge) to join the infantry. They made it without loss, but the remainder of 10H and other elements of the Brigade had to withdraw to their starting point.

Partially hidden behind the ridge, the 10H tanks were hard, but not impossible, for the Germans guns to hit with artillery, anti-tank guns or their own tanks – C Sqn lost 3 tanks.

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The 75mm guns of the Sherman's made it possible to keep the Germans and Italians at distance (1000+ yards) enabling infantry and engineers to secure the location. Attempts to move beyond the ridge exposed the British tanks to German fire, and this was when most losses and casualties occurred. During lulls in the firing British tanks would move back to "dead ground" where they couldn't be seen by the Germans for the crews to dismount to stretch legs and brew tea or coffee before returning to the battle. If they couldn't dismount they would have eaten oatmeal biscuits or crackers with cheese, jam or much sought-after marmalade from Australia or South Africa

As it became dark the remainder of 10H came forward and the crews received food and water and the tanks replenished with fuel and ammunition and any minor repairs made; it would have been a physically and emotionally draining day for Trooper Rea in his first day under enemy fire lasting almost 20 hours. Crews who had been forced to abandon their tanks would have been evacuated and tanks that could be repaired and moved, taken back through the minefields. 10H remained in this position until the night of the 28th (C Sqn personnel handed their remaining 5 serviceable tanks to A Sqn on the 25th and were then evacuated) having destroyed over 70 Tanks or guns, when they were pulled back and replaced with another armoured unit.

There was now a short rest and 10H were issued new or repaired tanks (many that had hit mines were easily repaired) before preparing for a fresh attack early on 2 November (Operation SUPERCHARGE). This attack took place further south and would be supported by New Zealand Infantry and 9 Arm Bde. Although the Infantry seized their objectives, the armour was held up by minefields (real and suspected) and confusion caused by dust and smoke, so did not start to push on into open ground until daybreak. However, the ground was overlooked by the Tel El Aqqaqir ridge that ran north to south and bristled with German guns. 9 Arm Bde had 75% of its tanks destroyed or disabled.

When 2 Arm Bde cleared the minefields, they began to methodically attack the German positions at long distance, tanks pulling back to take on additional ammunition numerous times during the day. In the early afternoon, they beat off a major German armoured counter attack with heavy losses to the Germans that broke the back of the German armour and morale. There were further infantry attacks on the night of the 3rd and then the 4th, but by then Rommel had realised the battle was lost and had decided to retreat. On November 4, 2 Arm Bde crossed the Tel El Aqqaqir ridge and pushed westward against scattered opposition, capturing General Von Thoma, Rommel's deputy, in his forward HQ trying to organise the defence. The greatest risk came from poor communications with other advancing British units. More than once the Nottinghamshire Yeomanry, in the adjacent Armoured Brigade, opened fire on 10H vehicles mistaking them for German. Fortunately, no vehicles were hit or men injured and the only loss was of temper between the two units! The following day the Brigade pushed on, now in pursuit again against scattered rear guards and hundreds of Italians seeking to surrender, having been abandoned by their German allies who had commandeered their vehicles.

With the Battle of El Alamein won, 10H had suffered approx. 90 casualties, the 8th Army now pursued the beaten enemy, but was stymied by supply problems, heavy rain, sand storms and confusion as to who was in the lead: 2 Arm Bde went first to El Daba on the coast then inland to Bir Khaldia cutting through the supply trains of the other Divisions. Nevertheless, by 12th November 2 Arm Bde had crossed into Libya; the same day that Tobruk was recaptured. By 15th November 1AD had reached the town of El Adem, south west of Tobruk, when it was decided that the Division would be "parked" to reduce the strain on supply system, while other units pushed on.



The map illustrates the Mediterranean Sea region, showing the Mediterranean Sea, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and parts of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. The map includes a scale bar (0 to 800 miles), a north arrow, and various cities and locations marked. Key locations include Tunis, Tripoli, Benghazi, and the Great Sand Sea. The map also shows the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Suez.

1AD was now spread out in small camps on the coast road west of the port of Tobruk to minimise the impact of any air attacks, however sporadic given the RAFs dominance of the air. 10H were based at the small town of Timimi approximately 60 miles west of Tobruk which had previously by the location of Rommel's Headquarters and a now abandoned hospital and airfield that was largely intact. 10H took full advantage of the German and Italian facilities, including what the previous occupants had left behind, as well as their own tents; German tents were particularly prized. The weather was unseasonably poor with heavy rain and sandstorms, that would have required the vehicles to be checked frequently; two of the older Crusader tanks suffered so much water and sand damage that they were deemed beyond the unit's repair and were sent back to Egypt. When the sun did shine, the sea would have been pleasantly warm for bathing, a bonus for men so far from home.

Bays 1 - 10H 1

10H 2 - YD 5

10H 1 - 9L 0

Bde HQ 1 – 10H 0

10H 4 - 12L 0 (12 Lancers were an Armoured Car equipped unit)

With all the results recorded in the 10H War Diary for posterity! There were also visits by Free French Colonial units who wanted to see what tanks could do, and reciprocated with a demonstration of infantry weapons, and the NZ Division who were looking to create their own Armoured Brigade. On 26 November the Division Commander, Major General Briggs visited with the Corps Commander, Major General Herbert Lumsden, who would be sacked by Montgomery a few days later and sent back to Britain, to be replaced by Major General Brian Horrocks who made his first visit in early December.

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When off duty the men could listen to the radio (BBC for news or Axis Sally from Rome for music) or records, read (a library was opened in Tobruk or there was "Crusader" the 8th Army Newspaper or copies of the Egyptian Mail), play cards or Housey-Housey or write home (as post had caught up with them!) and there were regular runs to collect stores, comfort parcels from home etc. As Christmas approached the CO sent men and lorries to Egypt with Regimental Funds to purchase extra food and drink. A Court Martial centre was opened in Tobruk and there was an opportunity to catch up with the backlog of proceedings, although none were serious!

On Christmas Day 1942 every man in the Regiment enjoyed a full Turkey Christmas Dinner, with Christmas pudding and beer served by the Officer and SNCOs, followed by amateur theatrical entertainments, a game of football between the Officers and NCO (it ended 2-2) and visit from HRH The Duke of Gloucester, the Colonel in Chief of the Regiment. On 27 December 10H was visited (as was every unit in the Brigade and Division individually) by Major General Horrocks, and formally congratulated for their performance at El Alamein with a number of men and officers decorated for gallantry. Little happened during the New Year and early part of January, other than the weather was deteriorated. Replacement personnel from Britain arrived, as well as men returning to duty to make good losses and a training regime was initiated (weather permitting) until 10H was instructed to relinquish most of its remaining tanks to be given to the armoured units leading the pursuit further west.

7 January 1943 – Assigned to 656 General Transport Company (GTC)

In January to help ease the general supply situation, 1AD created a temporary Transport Company with lorry and tank drivers, with each unit contributing men and vehicles; from 10H mainly men from A and C Sqns. The unit's nickname was "The Tobruk-Benghazi Haulage Contractors Limited" and they moved supplies and replacement vehicles that were landed at Tobruk, up to the forward supply depots some 600 miles away, starting on 9 January. Whilst this activity was ongoing, the remainder of 1AD moved forward to be located closer to the port city of Benghazi.

On 23rd January, the 8th Army moved forward and captured Tripoli, which was a major port and the capital of Italian Libya. The remaining German and Italian Forces retired into Tunisia, where other forces were fighting a combined British, American and French force pushing into Tunisia from Algeria which had been invaded in November 1942.

19 February 1943 – Re-joined 10H from 656 General Transport Company (GTC)

By mid-February the supply situation had improved and 656 GTC was disbanded and the men returned to their parent units. 10H also received replacement personnel to bring them up to full strength, many from the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars, a Territorial Army unit, who had been disbanded due to losses after El Alamein. The 10H also started to receive new and reconditioned/repairs tanks to replace those relinquished. At the end of the month the 10H moved forward to areas south of Tripoli, and promptly had to hand over their newly received tanks to other Armoured units! While they awaited new vehicles 1AD took over responsibility for the staging areas being set up around Tripoli for the forthcoming offensive; the city itself was out of bounds. On the night of 3 March, a downed German Airman wandered into the 10H camp believing it was German! He was medically checked before being escorted to a nearby POW holding camp.

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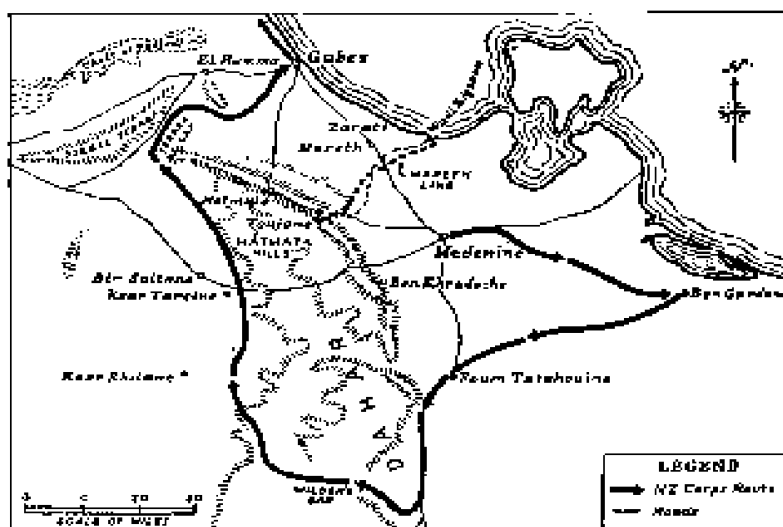


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The remains of the German and Italian forces had now retreated into the French colony of Tunisia, occupying the Mareth Line, a system of fortifications built by France in to defend Tunisia against attacks from Italian Libya (They are still there today and some have been refurbished and occupied by the Tunisian Army in light of the troubles in Libya. In 2015 and 2016 training teams from the British Army visited the area to assist the Tunisian Army). The line ran for approximately 30 miles from the coast to the Matmata Hills inland, taking advantage of higher ground and deep dry river beds (Wadis). The defenders had had the opportunity to bolster these defences despite limited supplies.

Montgomery's plan was for the Infantry launch attack at night to force a breach in the Mareth Line through which the Armour of 1AD and 7AD (Desert Rats) could then pass and push north. But as a secondary plan, the New Zealand (NZ) Division, supported by British Armour was sent on a wide flanking attack around the Matmata Hills. On 14 March Monty visited the units of 1AD and spoke to them men of his plans for the forthcoming attack and his confidence in them.

The British attack on 19 March (Operation PUGALIST) was repulsed after heavy fighting, so Montgomery now dispatched 1AD and then 7AD on a long drive through the desert and across the Matmata Hills to join the NZ Division. Despite the terrain and sand storms 1AD joined the NZ Division in less than 48 hours driving in convoy without being detected before going straight into the attack in a series of columns pushing NW initially, before turning towards the coast to try and trap the defenders of the Mareth Line. In the early stages of the advance the 10H were protecting the flanks and support vehicles of the Brigade and Divisional HQ.



Left Hook round Mareth Line

The initial advance was slowed by intense sandstorms and rain squalls that limited visibility, coupled with a lack of maps and sporadic enemy and friendly fire. When the weather cleared the column would stop to allow the vehicles that had dropped out to broken down to be recovered and then refuelled and rearmed, the men a chance to rest, eat and pinpoint where they actually where!

The further north the advance, the more the organised resistance, and as it turned north east towards the coast, the Germans and Italians managed to set up defensive lines. However these were only to delay the British, and in the poor weather the British often found themselves on top of German or Italian Soliders before anyone was hurt and they would surrender. When 1AD reached the town of El Hamma

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they found that the Germans had managed to prepare defences and repulsed the attack of 9L. It was now decided that 10H would replace 9L in leading the advance. The Axis forces now retired north to the steep Fatnass hills overlooking the Wadi Akrait (a wadi being a dried river bed, often with steep sides). This positions was flanked on the east by the sea and to the west by salt flats that were impassable to tanks. 1AD spend several days probing for a way forward but were unable to break through (the COs tank was hit and he had to bail out!), and after a confernece with the Divisional and Corps Commanders it was decided that an infantry attack would be needed. As a result 1AD was pulled back out of range of German guns to rest and prepare to resume its advance. On 4 April then men were read a letter from Montgomery congratulating them on their recent successes and "historic achievements".

10H now had a few days rest and were spread out in laagers across a wide area. The attack on Wadi Akrait (Operation SCIPPIO) commenced at dawn on 6 April, and 1AD were ready to move out at short notice once the road norther had been opened. At some point during the day, despite the supremacy of the RAF, there was a surprise German air raid on C Squadron 10H caused a number of casualties – 1 Officer, 1 NCO and 9 Troopers. There is some confusion about the event and apparently no vehicles were damaged or destroyed which suggests that the men were not in their vehicles when the attack occurred. Trooper Rea's name doesn't appear in the Roll of Honour on the 10H official history, which may indicate he was taken ill or else was injured as a result of the attack but not by it. Captain Dorman, the 10H Medical Officer was awarded the Military Cross for his prompt actions as a result of the attack

The attack caused no hinderence to 10H as along with the rest of the 1AD there started moving north early on 7 April.

7 April 1943 – Admitted to Field Hospital as x(ii) (Evacuated beyond unit, unfit for duty)

It's the timing of the admission to a Field Hospital and the casualties suffered by C Sqn (and no other unit in 10H) that make me believe Trooper Rea was part of C Squadron. However it is possible that he had fallen ill or been injured (as a result of an accident) in another way. Because 1AD was all packed up and ready to move the less seriously injured were trasnported to the closest Field Hospital, the more seriously injured were flown by light aircraft to Tripoli. Because no identifier is given for the medical unit I have been unable to chase down greater detail.

Field Hospitals were small mobile hospitals (think MASH) operating under tentage or any available buildings, capable of treating some 300 men with various degrees of wounds or injury. In the British Army Field Hospitals were normally a Divisional or Corps asset.

17 April 1943 – Discharged to No 7 Forward Depot

By mid April the fighting had moved north and the 8th Army had linked up with the 1st Army (the name for the combined British, US and French Force coming from the west) pushing the Germans and Italians back into north eastern Tunisia. On his discharge, Trooper Rea was held at No 7 Forward Depot until there was space on a supply convoy for him to be returned to his unit. Whilst at the Forward Depot he would have been employed loading lorries or other light duties as his medical status permitted.

On 16 April, 1AD had moved westwards to join 1st Army (which may explain the delay in rejoining 10H) to be again used to exploit Infantry attacks on the shrinking bridgehead, This would have been quite a culture shock for many of 1AD, moving form the generally flat and barren desert to the green hills and valleys of Tunisia. There was also a differnece in attire between then men of 1st Army and the Desert

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Veterans with their scruffier appearance! The offensive began on 20 April with 1AD supporting the 46 Infantry Division (part of IX Corps) attacking along valleys and up hills. Progress was initially slow as the Germans had defensive positions on high ground that was difficult to force them out of. The Allies were, however, attacking all along the 75 mile front line.

6 May 1943 – Returned to Unit x(i) Fit For Duty

Three weeks fighting had exhausted the defenders reserves of ammunition, food and fuel, and when 1AD resumed its attacks on 6 May, they discovered many Germans and Italians had either retreated or only wanted to surrender; some 250 Germans were captured by 10H alone on 7 May. On 8 May the port cities of Tunis and Bizerta with their large airfields were captured, and it became a matter of rounding up prisoners. The last shots were fired by 10H on 10 May in a skirmish with German tanks and on 13 May all German and Italian forces in North Africa surrendered, ending the campaign in North Africa. The GOC visited on 14 May and authorised leave parties to visit Tunis and the coast for bathing and swimming.

(The entries on the Service Record for 16 May and admission to Hospital and then cancelling it are confusing, I sense they are a mistake).

On 20 May 1943 there was a victory parade in the city of Tunis which 1AD participated in before moving back into the Libyan desert south west of Tripoli at a town called Azzizia. In the summer heat this was not a pleasant spot, although the men could visit Tripoli with its cafes, restaurants and baths, they were expensive. This was also the chance for the routine of Army life with departures, arrivals, returns, promotions, medal ceremonies and lectures, as well as catching up on paperwork to come to the fore! On 31st May the full range of messes opened although alcohol was limited. Individual training was also reintroduced with talks and lectures on a diverse and eclectic range of subjects; "Bulgaria", "Yugoslavia's role as an Ally", "The war in the USSR to date", "Crime in the Diamond Trade", "The process of freezing meat and vegetables" and "The Beveridge Plan and what it will mean".

General Montgomery visited 1AD and all its units on 15 June to thank the officers and men for their efforts and agreed that they should move to more pleasant surroundings on the coast. On 21 June, King George VI (Codename General Lyon) visited 1AD and all the Armoured Regiments as the Colonel in Chief of the RAC, taking the opportunity to speak to as many men as time permitted. After this visit the 10H and the rest of 1AD moved to the coast west of Tripoli in camps along the shore. Although the weather here was still very hot, often over 110F (each man needed to drink 5 pints of water), men could bathe in the sea (there were unit, brigade and divisional swimming competitions) and visit Tripoli for half or full days. In 1943 Tripoli was still a Colonial City with a European population and cafes, bars, restaurants and churches. Alternatively entertainment would be brought to the soldiers in the form of films – "Mrs Miniver" was popular while the famous British propaganda film, "Desert Victory" got poor reviews! There were also ENSA – Entertainments National Service Association, or more popularly Every Night Something Awful - "Gang Shows" with comedy and music or NAAFI's with books and non alcoholic refreshments. Being based near Tripoli the men of 1AD would have seen the massing of men, equipment and ships for the forthcoming invasion of Sicily which took place on 10 July.

On 10 July it was decided that 1AD would be stood down to reorganise for future campaign in Europe, although they remained part of X Corps and the 8th Army, and they handed over 24 of their remaining Sherman Tanks and other vehicles to 7AD. With no immediate combat role 10H was not a priority for replacements (although men would have returned from hospital etc) so was understrength (60-75% of

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authorised numbers). A few days later the GOC, Major General Briggs returned to the UK to become head of the RAC and was replaced by Major General Galloway, and Infantry Officer who had served in various roles in the Middle East. There was also a change of CO of 10H. The YD also departed and were replaced by 1st Kings Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC) as the motorised infantry battalion. 11 Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) with 24 self propelled guns (artillery mounted in a tracked vehicle) also joined 2 Arm Bde.

At the end of July, 1AD moved to Tunisia and formally left 8th Army, now fighting in Sicily, and transferred to British North African Forces (BNAF) an administrative organisation for British and Commonwealth units across North Africa, for whom there were no immediate plans to commit to combat operations or were reorganising.

10H were now based in the village, D'Jebel Hallouf, west of Tunis, taking over from a Royal Artillery unit guarding several hundred Italian and Germany POWs in a camp and on work details; this wasn't particularly strenuous as the POWs made no effort to escape (there was no where to escape to, and they were grateful to be guarded by the British rather than the French!) Each 24 hour guard duty required 60 men and was rotated through the Squadrons in the Regiment, so men could expect to do 1 or 2 such duties a week. The weather was still very hot and the men had to take anti-malaria medication daily, but by way of relief they could take a few days local leave in Tunis (George Fornby and Gracie Fields performed here during this period) or travel by train along the coast to Algiers to spend their accumulated pay. There was also the opportunity for men to be re-evaluated in their role to move up the pay scale or to undertake training and education.

3 October 1943 – Admitted to 97 General Hospital as x(ii)

Trooper Rea was admitted to the British 97 General Hospital located at Birine south of Algiers in Algeria. 10H had moved from Tunisia to Algeria with many men (including 48 Italian POWs to assist with work) travelling by train. There is no record of why Trooper was hospitalised, he might have become ill from an insect bite in Tunisia, as a result of eating something on the journey, or the change in weather – it was much colder and wetter in Algeria than it had been in Tunisia.

General Hospitals were established in suitable buildings, run by the military but often with civilian (British or local) Doctors and Nurses, capable of treating the most serious injuries or illness and allowing men to convalesce and recover. They typically housed 600 or 1200 men. As it was not in a combat role, 1AD would have had no requirement for its own Field Hospital.

15 October 1943 - Transferred to 96 General Hospital as x(ii)

96 General Hospital was located in Guelma, also in Algeria, and the nearest British Hospital as 97 General Hospital was moving to Tunisia. Algeria was predominately a US base for operations whereas the British were based in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt.

30 October 1943 – Discharged from 96 General Hospital and Returned to 1AD as x(i)

1AD was now based at Boufarik, a small French Colonial town, 25 miles south of Algiers, with 10H at the village of St Marguerite. Here they started to receive new Sherman Tanks (shipped from the UK or US) and other vehicles and replacement personnel from Britain, slowly returning to full strength during a period of reorganisation for 1AD.

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Trooper Rea was now awarded the Africa Star for having spent 12 months in Africa defined as being from the Suez Canal to the Straits of Gibraltar, on active duty.

Life in St Marguerite was relatively relaxed, with the men of 10H getting two half days and one full day off a week. There were still parades and PT, but the main effort was on unit training, especially radio drills and assisting French Colonial Cavalry (Saphis) make the conversion from horses to tanks. The local French Farmers were welcoming, exchanging chickens, fruit (especially oranges, which men would try to get boxed up and sent home) and cauliflowers for English rations, petrol, wood (from boxes and packaging) and cigarettes. Relations with the local Arabs (who did most of the menial work for the colonists) was much cooler, perhaps shaped by British experiences in Egypt and Libya, and the French colonists attitudes. There was a requirement to guard equipment and buildings to prevent petty theft, often by the local Arabs. In early December the 10H, following a spate of thefts, raided a local Arab settlement and recovered considerable amounts of British Army equipment, mostly clothing.

There was a rota system whereby men could take lunch or dinner in the local cafes, and could visit the city of Algiers for a day or the mountain resort of Chrea (where the rich of French Colonial society went to ski). There were also regular shows and performances for the men of 1AD as well as sporting events between then the units in the Brigade and Division, especially more football and boxing; in early December 10H drew 2-2 with the Bays.

Christmas Day 1943 began with a full cooked breakfast, then church services (there were a number of churches of differing denominations available) and carol singing, followed by a big lunch in a barn, with Chicken, Turkey, roast and boiled potatoes and other vegetables. In the afternoon there was a variety of entertainments, including the officers playing polo on donkeys in fancy dress, ending the day with a late tea and singing. On Boxing Day local French families hosted the soldiers for meals; this was then reciprocated for tea and in the evening watching movies in a temporary cinemas in barns.

On New Years Eve the BBC recorded a selection of interviews and messages with the Officers and Men in 1AD and its constituent units for broadcast back in Britain.

Between Christmas and New Years 1943 the 10H received the last equipment and drafts of new manpower to bring it up to full strength but the weather deteriorated, becoming colder and wetter.

2 January 1944 – Admitted 1 Light Field Ambulance (LFA) RTU

From the small print it would appear that Trooper Rea was admitted to the 1 LFA on 24 December 1943 and then returned to the 10H. 1 LFA provided close medical support to 2 Arm Bde with approximately 400 men structured in 3 Medical Squadrons (with stretcher bearers and ambulances) and 1 Dental Squadron. During battle they would collect the injured, under fire, and administer first aid before determining where men should then be sent for further treatment. When not in the front line the LFA would occupy buildings or build shelters capable of holding a small number of men being treated for common ailments and simple surgery. If the ailment or injury was minor he would have stayed with his unit and reported to the LFA at least once a day.

Later in January a number of 10H Officers and men returned to the UK to join Hussar Regiments who had seen no action but were now preparing for the Invasion of NW Europe. In return 10H received men from those Regiments as trained replacements. Trooper Rea was fortunate that he was not selected to

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return to Britain as all the Hussar units that went to Normandy suffered very heavy casualties in the summer of 1944.

22 January 1944 – Admitted 1 LFA Posted x(ii)

Trooper Rea was again admitted to the LFA for a few days, probably with a weather related ailment.

28 January 1944 – Discharged and Reported to HQ 1AD as x(i)

Trooper Rea rejoined 10H fit for duty.

In late January 10H moved the area of Bouira to the East of Algiers (home to the largest Roman Aqueduct in Africa) to undertake a lengthy period of training exercises, some with Saphis. However this lasted only 3 weeks before a sudden, heavy, snowfall curtailed all activity and they returned to St Marguerite and life returned to normal. At the end of February a detachment of 10H went to Algiers to participate in a parade for Free French and Soviet dignitaries to celebrate recent victories and the formation of the Soviet Army. When they returned to St Marguerite they were mobilised to help assist the French authorities in a search for some escaped German POWs for several days but none were found. They also assisted the Royal Military Police and French Police in raiding Arab settlements and recovering more stolen British War materials.

In March the 1AD Infantry Brigade (18th) was dispatched to Italy as an emergency reinforcement and the remainder of the Division put on notice to follow. There was now a flurry of administrative actions to help “clear the decks” for deploying. Two Soldiers, Troopers and Clegg and Dickinson were given a General Court Martial and found guilty of Assault and sentenced to 9 months and 128 days respectively of detention at the British Military Prison in near Cairo (made famous in the Sean Connery film “The Hill”), and the CO addressed the whole Regiment on the outcome. There were also Boards of Officers to account for lost and damaged equipment so that replacement equipment could be requested; B Sqn were the “worst” offenders including losing a water cart!

The CO addressed the Regiment again a week later, following an outbreak of Malaria, which the CO believed was due to men not taking the preventative medication. From then on there were formal parades to make sure the men took the medication and the threat of a court martial, for disobeying an order, if they didn't. There was a further medical scare when a number of men were bitten by a rabid dog, but no one became infected. Shortly thereafter 10H undertook a night exercise – driving to a location the late afternoon, a night firing exercise, refuelling, rearming and eating before returning to base.

For those 1AD units who remained in Africa for now, there was a knock out football tournament with local RAF and RN units, which culminated in a match between the RAF and the 8th Army in the main stadium in Algiers; the 8th Army won 5-1, aided by a young Tom Finney (who was a tank driver in 9L but given his pre war career was given leave to play football). There was also a hockey tournament (not that there was much collective experience) and donkey races.

In April the weather improved sufficiently that men could bathe in the Mediterranean sea at various locations such as Sidi Faroush, and towards the end of the month the whole regiment was stood down so men could take local leave or go to various rest camps along the coast (where there was a 1AD Football Tournament - C Sqn 10H made the semi final), or in the mountains. When everyone returned

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1AD received notification during a visit by General Sir Maitland “Jumbo” Wilson, the Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean and Middle East, that it would be moving to Italy soon. The men received new uniforms and began to paint the vehicles in preparation for their transportation.

Once completed the men and vehicles moved, on 15 May, to a staging area just outside Algiers near the city of Blida (the City of Roses) which was a centre of fruit and olive growing, as well as having been a French Garrison town. Most men stayed here for about 10 days. They were able to visit the city during the afternoon to avail themselves of the amenities such as cafes or the Roman Baths, but otherwise they were confined to their camps. Trains started to arrive to collect the men and equipment to take them to the docks in Algiers.

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Italy 1944-1945

The Allies had invaded mainland Italy in September 1943 with the US 5th Army landing on the Mediterranean coast and the 8th Army on the Adriatic coast. The Italian Government, having imprisoned Mussolini, signed an Armistice with the Allies and the forces supporting King Emmanuel joined the Allied side, while the remaining Facist forces joined the Germans. The port cities of Taranto, Bari and Naples were soon captured as the Allies advanced north, and by December 1943 they were facing a line of German Fortifications (known as the Gustav Line) approximately 90 miles south of Rome, where the Italian peninsular is at its narrowest.

The Allies remained here for over 4 months despite several attempts to break through the German defences, hindered by the terrain and winter weather. A plan was then devised by General Sir Harold Alexander (who was in overall command of the Armies in Italy), Operation DIADEM, to use overwhelming force in better weather to overcome the German defences, capture Rome and push north. In drawing up DIADEM it was agreed that additional units would be needed later in the summer of 1944 when other units were withdrawn; thus the 8th Army began to identify units throughout the mediterranean and for them to prepare to move to Italy.

Operation DIADEM was launched on 11 May 1944 and was soon pushing the Germans northwards into flatter terrain. In late May the Germans decided to abandon southern Italy and retreat to the northern Apenianne Mountains where they were preparing further defensive positions. On 4 June American soldiers entered Rome; on 6 June the Allies invaded NW Europe in Normandy.

When the men of 2 Armd Bde arrived in Algiers on 24 May, their equipment was loaded onto military transports and then men onto the South African Union Castle Line passenger ship, City of Durban. Men were accomadated 2 or 3 to a room. The ship still had stewards who served the men (no alcohol) during the day and at meal times. The voyage was uneventful with men enjoying the sun or playing games.



The journey to Italy lasted three days, sailing along the North African coast in a convoy, across to Sicily, along the northern coast of Sicily past Palermo and then to Naples, landing on 27 May. On landing the men whisked to a transit camp outside the city, which was predominately used by the US military, and

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out of bounds. The Division's equipment was landed at Taranto in the heel of Italy; the main port used by the British, and the men had to be transported across Italy, by lorry and train (in cattle trucks rather than passenger cars) to the Adriatic coast to assemble. This they did at a camp at Matera and Gravina outside the port city of Bari in a camp recently vacated by newly arrived South African units.

On 9 June 1AD formally rejoined the 8th Army (they were allowed to wear the "Charging Rhino" shoulder flashes) and was ordered to move across Italy to join the 1st Infantry Division which was then resting near Rome as part of V Corps. The move took 4 days, travelling 150 Kilometres a day in a series of convoys, passing through the battlefields of May 1944 before setting up in the countryside to the southwest of Rome.

1AD spent the next few weeks practicing close armoured support to Infantry attacks, which was not something they had done in the Desert, nor was it what the Sherman had been designed for. The hilly terrain, long valleys and the narrowness of the Italian peninsular meant that the sort of large scale Armoured battles of the Desert were rare in Italy. Rather the role of the Armour would be to support Infantry attacks either by accompanying them as they advanced or providing fire support and protection from German tanks. The Sherman, although mechanically reliable, had by now developed an unhappy reputation of catching fire ("brewing up") when hit due to its petrol engine, despite efforts to reduce the risk. In the closer terrain of Italy there was a much greater risk of being surprised by German fire at close range and as a result crews practiced bailing out. They also took to placing spare lengths of tank tracks, sand bags and wood on their vehicles to provide added protection.

C Squadron 10H (along with the C Sqns of the Bays and 9L) was allocated to 3 Infantry Brigade in this training, which was absorbing replacements after heavy fighting. The training would have been long (Italian summer days can be up to 16 hours of daylight), hard and tiring in the scorchingly hot summer weather as the men practiced new skills in Troops and Squadrons. The soft summer soil made driving a tank uphill treacherous and if not done at the right angle and speed could result in the tank becoming stuck, throwing a track, rolling backwards (leaving them vulnerable to German fire) or occasionally cause the tank to topple over. The men suffered in the hot sun as there was no sun cream available to protect them, and the tank exteriors became too hot to touch. As the training progressed there were also night exercises which were just as hot. There was the opportunity to visit the battlefields south of Rome in the Liri Valley to help inform and educate the men on the best way to use tanks in Italy. I visited some of these sites in May 2015.

There were, however, some perks being so close to Rome; day trips for groups of 10 men per Regiment per day were soon organised to see the sites as the Vatican and Colosseum. There were also numerous British Army Clubs (by Corps and generally) or Allied Servicemen's clubs where men could get a 3 course meal of 80 Lira (just under 2s). In addition the local Italian farmers were happy to trade wine and fruit (apricots and peaches) with British soldiers, and offer hospitality.

At some point over the Summer of 1944 Trooper Rea would have received his "8th Army Clasp" having been both at El Alamein and then done the specified number of days serving in the Army. The 8th Army was now a truly international force not only with men from Scotland to Cornwall, there was representation from all of Ireland (the Irish Brigade contained many volunteers from Eire), the Commonwealth including New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, Cyprus, and India, as well as the Kingdom of Nepal (Gurkhas), Jews from Palestine, a Free Polish Corps, a Greek Brigade and over 10,000 pro-Allied Italians.

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Commonwealth units also served in the US 5th Army which contained men from across the US, including units of ethnic Japanese and Black Americans (the US Army was still segregated) and a Brazilian Division.

As 1AD trained under the hot Italian sun, the Allies continued to push north with the city of Assisi, with its Basilica to St Francis undamaged was entered on 17 June by British and Indian Soldiers, with Perugia being captured by the British on 20 June. The medieval city of Siena fell to the French on 3 July, the Adriatic port of Ancona was captured by the Polish Corps with Italian support on 18 July and on 4 August New Zealand, British, Indian and South African soldiers entered the medieval city of Florence (also rescuing some of the great works of art that had been hidden in nearby castles). At the same time some US and all the French Divisions were withdrawn to prepare for the Invasion of the south of France.

On 30 July the 1AD was on a Full Parade for the visit of King George VI (Codename General Collingwood) who inspected all the units and dined with the Officers. He was visiting Italy on a morale raising visit, personally issuing awards and medals for bravery in the aftermath of the capture of Rome and the "DDay Dodgers" scandal. (See Annex A) It was also very personal visit for King George as one of his nephews, Lt Viscount Lascelles in 3 Grenadier Guards, had been captured by the Germans in Italy earlier in the summer. He visited as many British, Commonwealth, Indian and Gurkha units as he could as well as the Senior Officers (several of whom were Knighted), although he did not visit the Pope nor King Emmanuel or Crown Prince Umberto who headed the pro Allied Italian Government. Despite the Codename and the Secrecy, the publicity surrounding the visit caused some alarm to the Germans!

On 4 August, 1AD started to move to join the main body of the 8th Army as it prepared to attack the next line of German fortifications. Initially they moved east to the Adriatic coast and the city of Ortona, known as the "pearl of the Adriatic", a pre war holiday destination for the middle and lower classes, and famous for its wine and fish dishes. It had suffered heavy damage in fighting in late 1943 and was now a British Supply point and as far north as the railway system still operated on the Adriatic coast.

Towards the middle of the month they moved north to camps in the hills around the city of Ancona and received 12 of the latest Shermans with a larger gun capable of taking on heavier German tanks; in addition an extra Brigade of Infantry, 43 Gurkha Brigade, was attached to the Division. More controversially, there was a change of Divisional Commander with Major General Richard Hull taking over on 14 August. Although General Hull was a decorated RAC commander from Tunisia, no reason was given, or has been uncovered, for the change so close to a major attack. My assumption is that it was felt that for the battles to come that were envisaged a thrusting and proven tank officer would take advantage of any opportunity. But Major General Hull had no time for anything other than the briefest visits to the men and units in his new command. As the month progressed the Division and 10H were visited by Lt General Keightley the Commander V Corps and General Sir Oliver Leese the commander of the 8th Army (having succeeded General Montgomery in January 1944).

25 August – 26 September 1944 Operation OLIVE

The Germans had constructed a line of Defences, known as the Gothic Line (itself split into 3 lines, Green I, II and III), in Northern Italy from Pisa on the west coast to Rimini on the east coast. This part of the Italian peninsula is approx. 120 miles wide, with the Apennine Mountains running almost coast to coast, with only small areas on each coast where the terrain was flatter, albeit crossed by rivers. Beyond the Gothic Line in eastern Italy the Apennine mountains flatten out into the fertile Po Valley and Lombardy plains, believed to be more suitable for mobile warfare, with the major industrial cities of Italy. Further north were the Alps and then beyond to Austria and southern Germany

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General Leese's plan, Operation OLIVE, was to attack and break through the Gothic Line on the Adriatic coast using the V Corps and I Canadian Corps supported by over 1000 tanks. He believed that the terrain here favoured the tried and tested British offensive tactics rather than trying to push up and through the narrow valleys and high mountains of central Italy. To do this the British had massed two Corps with 3 Armoured Divisions, 5 Infantry Divisions, 3 Armoured Brigades, a Greek Brigade and the support of the Polish Corps on a narrow front of less than 20 miles. 1AD was part of V Corps and held back to exploit breaches in the German Defences. With the Allies having broken out in France and liberated Paris, the US-French landings in the south of France and the Russians entering Poland and Romania, many believed that the war would be over before the end of the year and that Operation OLIVE would be the decisive battle in Italy; the morale of the 8th Army was high.

The Germans had been tricked into believing that the Allies would attack in central Italy and had massed their best, remaining forces here. The replacement men and units sent to Italy were often low quality with overage men, reluctant conscripts, or men taken from non combat roles in country as they retreated north. There were very few of the most modern German tanks in Italy, instead they relied on older but tested equipment, vehicles that had been produced in small numbers (such as the enormous "Elefant" tank), equipment that had been taken off the Italians at the surrender, or was being still produced in northern Italian factories.

Operation OLIVE began on 25 August in hot dry weather, witnessed by Winston Churchill, who escaped his minders and got close enough to the front line to witness the opening artillery barrages. Also in Italy at the time was the deputy PM Clement Attlee who was visiting British units to speak to all available personnel about the plans for post war Britain; he visited 10H on 1 September. The Canadians were on the coast (behind the Poles who were withdrawn for a rest after a few days), with V Corps inland. The Germans were taken by surprise by the opening attacks and rushed out of the Green I line with hundreds of prisoners being taken. It was only on 3 September (the day on which the British Army liberated Brussels), as the Canadians approached the Green II line that Germans realised that this wasn't a diversion, and rushed reinforcements to man the defences. The Canadians now requested that 1AD be allocated to the Canadian Corps to help maintain the momentum of their attack, but Major General Hull opposed this and 1AD remained in V Corps; it highlighted tensions between British and Canadian Generals.

On 4 September it appeared as if the German line was crumbling and a decision was made to force a break through with 1AD, and they were ordered to cross the Conca River, take the village of San Savino on the Coriano Ridge and then press on to cross the River Marano some 20 miles north. As they attacked the Canadians would be on their right and British 46 Infantry Division on their left.

Problems began from the outset; 1 AD was strung out in a column, with 2 Arm Bde at the front (10H at the front, followed by the Bays and 9L, with the Infantry and Artillery interspersed), several miles long on poor roads being used by the vehicles of other units. The weather was hot and humid, which coupled with the large number of units and radios in a small area made radio communications unreliable. Tanks moving at low speed, or idling, use more fuel and are more likely to break down than if moving at high speed. Coupled with the hot weather and little sleep, many of the crews were tired when they started to advance in the early hours of 4 September. There were delays in crossing the River Conca, due to the volume of traffic and vehicles pulling off to be refueled or repaired. There were further delays caused by fighting to the north east and the crews were forced to spend much of the morning in their vehicles, unable to get out for even the briefest periods in case the advance resumed.

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As orders and instructions were passed up and down the chain of command it wasn't until 1330 that 2 Arm Bde started moving again, and almost 1600 when the start position, a road running west to east along a low ridge south of the Coriano Ridge was reached. Already late, there was no time for the few guns available to effectively support the forthcoming attack or to bring up Air Controllers to call in air support (despite the growing cloud cover).



(Looking north to Coriano Ridge from approx where the Bays and 9L attacked. 10H attacked on the right of the road in the centre, and Coriano village is off to the right of shot)

There is still confusion about the precise events that afternoon, and it is unclear how many tanks took part in the attack, as tanks had dropped out of the column with various mechanical issues. 10H, on the right of the road they had been travelling north on, sent forward A and C Sqns, with the Reconnaissance Tanks, leaving B Sqn to provide supporting fire (this would have been of limited affect given the distance and the Germans being dug in). As soon as they crossed over the ridge they came under heavy fire from German forces in front of them who had been rushed to shore up the defences along the Coriano Ridge. The 10H were fortunate as to their right Canadian Forces (who commented on their surprise and admiration on the Hussars attack, which assisted them, although they to were repulsed) were also attacking, diverting German fire; in addition and there was also cover, trees, hedges and small farms, that obscured the advance. Nevertheless many tanks were hit by German fire or became stuck on the soft farming soil and were abandoned. Crews scrambled back to the safety of British Lines where the Infantry of 1 KRRC were digging in and handed them cups of tea and water. The attack lasted less than an hour at the end of which 10H had less than half their tanks available (most in B Sqn), although those that had dropped out for mechanical reasons caught up later on, and 22 casualties. We don't know whether Trooper Rea was in a vehicle that dropped out or pressed on to attack Coriano Ridge; but comments he made to me makes me believe it was the later.

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On the left of the road the Bays had come under fire as soon as they began to to form up on the start line, and that increased as they advanced, bearing the brunt of German fire. The arrival of 9L to reinforce them, added to the confusion when they advanced through the remains of the Bays attack and the two regiments became mixed up. The Bays took the heaviest casualties of the attack, losing 98 men or approx 40% of tank crews, and in less than an hour had been reduced to less than 40% tank strength; by the time straggling vehicles had rejoined them they were able to form a single composite Sqn. The Brigade as a whole had lost 77 tanks.

There was much bitterness in the Bays at an attack that was likened to the Charge of the Light Brigade; survivors felt the Regiment was never the same again and it was months before they were back at full strength. The Bays have a Regimental Memorial at the site of the attack and there is a Commonwealth War Graves Commision (CWGC) cemetary with some 1800 graves of all nationalities further east near the village of Riccone. Veterans within 10H felt it was a worse battle than then had experienced in any of the Regiments time in France 1940 or the Desert. There was irritation with the neighbouring Canadian's who felt that had there been better communciations (they described Major Genral Hull's progress reports as "conflicting and confusing") and liasion the attacks could have been better co-ordinated with a more chance of breaking through

It rained on the night of 4/5 September turning the dry ground to mud, and the main fighting moved further west, around the Principality of San Marino. 2 Arm Bde pulled back slightly to await events and recover and repair damaged vehicles, but all the Regiments now had more crews than tanks. They also had to deal with large numbers of Italian refugees who had been hiding from the fighting and now emerged once they realisied they were safely behind Allied lines. Many of these rural families offered what support they could to the Allies, and many British tank crews were touched by they way they sheltered injured soldiers or assisted in burying the dead with as much dignity as circumstances permitted. There was now a pause whilst a new plan was cast, and on the night of 12/13 September both the Canadians and V Corps made Infantry attacks, supported by Armour, along a broad front. In these attacks 10H provided fire support with all available vehicles to the attacks by both 1AD Infantry Brigades against the villages of Passano and San Savino. The German line couldn't withstand this scale of attack and the defenders fell back, to Green III, and 1AD alone took a thousand prisoners as the advance north resumed. The Germans were forced to dispatch the last 3 reserve Divisons they had in Italy to the Adriatic.

On 20 September the Greek Brigade, attached to the Candians took the coastal town of Rimini and the Germans fell back to their last line of defence on the River Marecchia. By now the weather had turned very autumnal with heavy rain, swelling the rivers and turning many of the roads to mud. This change in the weather coupled with an outbreak of malaria, the hard fighting and the casualties started to take their toll on 8th Army morale.

On the night of 22/23 September the British and Canadians launched a new round of attacks. 10H was now attached to 43 Gurkha Brigade for an attack on the village of Santarcangelo by 2/8 Gurkha Rifles, on a spur of high ground. While the Gurkhas were able to advance on foot and capture the village, the move of the tanks was a nightmare, made worse by the fatigue of the crews and the deteriorating weather. Torrential rain made the roads difficult, and while they were passable for men on foot, they were a struggle for heavy armoured vehicles that couldn't move off the road for fear of bogging down in the darkness.

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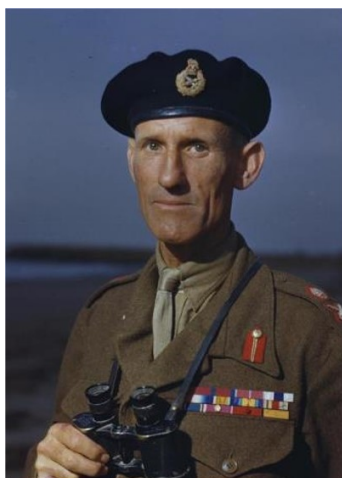


By Simon Harrison.

The chosen river crossings were deemed unsafe, due to the state of the banks and the depth of the water. An alternate route was then found but a deep irrigation ditch encountered along with random, indirect, German shelling caused more delays. Despite this the first tanks made it into Santarcangelo just after dawn to help repel German counter attacks and secure the village. The Germans now pulled back blowing the banks of rivers, which coupled with the heavy rain turned the flat open land of the Lombardy Plains into a sea of mud. On 25 September Operation OLIVE was called off amidst further heavy rain and high winds.

At the end of Operation OLIVE the 8th Army had won a tactical victory in that it had broken through the Gothic Line, and rendered more of it untenable by now being behind it, and in the process defeated a larger German force. But the cost, in terms of casualties was unsustainable when replacement manpower was scarce and damaged morale. Italy was by now a secondary theatre of operations and not a priority for replacement manpower from the UK and the majority of replacements were found from manpower in the Mediterranean and Middle East deemed surplus, such as anti aircraft gunners, being retrained.

On 1 October General Leese was transferred to the Far East become one of the Admiral Mountbatten's subordinates and command of the 8th Army passed to Lt General Sir Richard McCreery, an experienced cavalry and tank officer, who had commanded 2 Arm Bde in 1940 and more recently X Corps in Italy since 1943. He had been knighted by King George VI, with whom he corresponded on matters of the RAC and equestrianism, during the Kings visit to Italy in July. Lt General McCreery cancelled all further operations until the weather improved and set about reorganising the 8th Army and restoring morale after the disappointment of Operation OLIVE. One of his first decisions was to disband 1AD as he already had other Armoured Divisions and he needed manpower to make good the recent heavy losses. The Gurkhas were sent to reinforce the Indian Divisions in Italy, and 18 Infantry Brigade along with many of the support elements disbanded and the men sent to 46 Infantry Division as replacements. 2 Arm Bde (with a new commander) was retained as an Independent Armoured Brigade with 1 KRRC in the short term and an Artillery Regiment, attached to 46 Infantry Division. What saved the Brigade and its units from being broken up was that they were Regular Army units.



General Sir Richard McCreery on 1 Oct 1944.

2 Arm Bde was pulled out of the line to rest and receive replacement tanks and manpower, many of whom came from the Wiltshire Yeomanry who were now being disbanded.

The Journey of Trooper Francis Leonard Rea



By Simon Harrison.

(There seems to have been quite a number of men from the West Country in the 10H as the books refer to them being sent copies of the Western Daily Press and the Bristol Evening Post to keep themselves up to date with news from home; in return they sent home copies of the 8th Army newspaper and any produced by units).

The 10H now received some of the first Sherman Firefly tanks delivered to Italy. These had a powerful 17Pdr gun (the weight of the round fired), with a distinctive long barrel, that could tackle any German Tank as well as be used in a general support role. Whilst the improved firepower was welcomed, the rounds fired were bigger and heavier, so familiarisation (the bang and flash was considerably louder and brighter than with the 75mm) and practice was needed. In many cases the spare driver was removed from the crew to allow more ammunition to be carried. Initially the 10H received two Fireflies (one sent each to A and C Sqn) with more arriving in the coming weeks; some of the crews of the older Shermans with the 75mm gun now added piping to their tank barrels to try and fool the Germans into thinking they had been upgunned.

10 October 1944 – Admitted to 31 General Hospital as x(ii)

31 General Hospital was located in the small city of Arezzo situated SE of Florence, some 60 miles from where the fighting in September had occurred. At this time 10H were still in reserve so the cause for the admittance was not due to any fighting. It could have been as a result of an accident, illness due to the poor weather, or a reaction to the heavy fighting the previous month. However I believe that it was most likely a gastro-intestinal infection that caused Diarrhea and Jaundice. A (The) major sustainer of British (Indian and Commonwealth) morale in the war was being able to stop and brew up tea or coffee during lulls in fighting. Although there were plenty of water sources in northern Italy, the combination of the heavy rain (which caused many waterways to burst their banks and overwhelm irrigation systems), the fighting and vehicles passing through water meant that it became muddy and polluted. This was compounded by the difficulties in properly boiling the water (lack of material to burn) to kill any bacteria. This remained a constant drain on British manpower for the remainder of 1944, with in some units more men being incapacitated due to illness than fighting. It was so serious an issue that Lt Gen McCreery authorised bottled water from southern Italy to be shipped north to help alleviate the problem as a priority despite the logistical issues it created.

13 October 1944 – Admitted to 58 General Hospital as x(ii)

Trooper Rea was transferred to 58 General Hospital located in Ferranto also near Florence. In 1944 the treatments for gastro-intestinal ailments were not as simple or as quick as we take for granted today. Thus, these sort of illnesses were far more debilitating and men often took some time to recover their strength sufficiently to be able to return to duty. In the most severe cases, 2 months of hospitalisation were required.

19 October 1944 – Transferred to 9 CO (Corps Ordnance?) Depot as x(ii)

Trooper Rea was discharged from hospital but not fit for active duty so was attached to one of the many supply and ordnance depots supporting the 8th Army in Italy; most likely on light duties.

25 October 1944 – Discharged from 39 Depot to 1 ARR as x(iv)

Trooper Rea was discharged from hospital but was considered unfit for front line duty so was attached to 1 Armoured Reinforcement Regiment (ARR) which was part of 1 Armoured Delivery Group (ADG).

The Journey of Trooper Francis Leonard Rea



By Simon Harrison.

The ARR had a similar role to the RAC Base Depot in Egypt, albeit not fixed to a specific location, holding reinforcements RAC personnel until they were called forward. While with 1ARR men would have received briefings and training on driving Armoured vehicles in the Italian mountains and weather, from experienced soldiers. Many of the reinforcements would have been men retrained to join the RAC, probably in Egypt!

7 November 1944 – Posted to HQ 1(Br)ADG as x(i)

Trooper Rea was now deemed fit to return to duty and was attached to the ADG in Northern Italy. The ADG, consisted of 1 ARR and two Armoured Delivery Regiments (ADR) responsible for delivering new, repaired and reconditioned armoured vehicles to front line formations, rather than units having to dispatch men to collect vehicles. As part of this role the ADR would check that new or repaired vehicles were ready for front line service with test driving and firing, as well as collecting vehicles that had been damaged and couldn't be repaired by units – the 8th Army had extensive workshops supporting the Army and Corps that could repair, upgrade or modify vehicles. For example many of the older Sherman Tanks could be upgunned or have more powerful engines installed, be converted to Bulldozer tanks, have telephones fitted to the rear so that infantry could talk to the crew without having to get on the vehicle and bang on the turret, or have the turret removed to convert them to an Armoured Personnel Carrier known as a Kangaroo. The work they did was unglamorous but essential in keeping the armoured units up to strength with working vehicles.

The 8th Army has resumed its offensive in mid October now pushing North West towards along Highway 9 towards the city of Bologna with the aim of linking up with the 5th US Army who were pushing north through the mountains. The fighting took place in the foothills of the Apennine Mountains which wasn't ideal for tanks, but it was better than the flooded lowlands. The pace of the battle was very much driven by the weather (the autumn of 1944 was one of the wettest of the 20th Century, with only the terrible November 1966 rain and flooding being worse) and the ability to get supplies up to the front lines. But the attacks were stretching German resources and the city of Cesena fell to the British (10H in the lead) on 19 October. There were no major Armoured battles but there was a steady drain of vehicles damaged, stuck in mud or broken down.



A Sherman of 3 Trp, B Sqn, but unknown Regt of 2 Arm Bde crossing a river in Northern Italy late 1944

The Journey of Trooper Francis Leonard Rea



By Simon Harrison.

In early November 1944 the city of Forli (approx 20 miles NW along Highway 9 from Cesena) fell to the British, however there were now several swollen waterways coming off of the mountains in the path of the next objective, the town of Faenza, and the British chose to pause to rest and bring up supplies.

Trooper Rea would have been working in the ADG pending space on transport to return him to his unit. It was the Army Policy of the time that that men would return to their original unit following injury or sickness unless there were extenuating circumstances or they had been absent for a very long time.

28 November 1944 – SOS (Stuck off Strength 1 ADG) and posted to 10H x(i)

Trooper Rea returned to 10H along with ten other Officers and men who had been away from the Regiment for various reasons. He rejoined in time to participate in 2 Arm Bde supporting 46 Infantry Division crossing the River Lamone south west of the city of Faenza (noted for its Cathedral and Clock Tower architecturally, and its production of Ceramics). The attack would be supported by Polish Forces from the south to create a bridgehead through which other forces (New Zealand and Indian) would pass to advance north wets towards Imola and link up with other British Forces (XIII Corps, part of the 5th Army pushing north through the mountains). For the crossing 10H were supporting 128 Brigade made up of battalions of the Hampshire Regiment, all of whom were understrength, at the village of Quartolo.

The crossing, on the night of 3 December met no opposition, in part because of other crossings and 10H were soon on the high ground. However growing German resistance and heavy rain meant they could not press forward and on the night of 7 December the River Lamone burst its banks. The following morning the Germans launched a major attack with artillery, aircraft, tanks and infantry aimed at wiping out the bridgehead and recapturing Faenza. In a day of intense fighting the Germans were beaten off by artillery fire and the tanks of 2 Arm Bde, in the main the 9L and Bays, who were on the lower ground supporting Infantry Battalions. It was now recognised that 46 Infantry Division could take no more and it was withdrawn for a rest (they were actually diverted to Greece). The saturated ground and the state of the River Lamone brought all attacks to a close.

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By Simon Harrison.

Mud near Faenza, December 1944



11 December 1944 – Reclassified for Pay Scale Driver Class 1A

Trooper Rea, having been in the Army for 3 years, was now reclassified as 1A at the top of the drivers scale for pay purposes, earning 5s a day, as a Trooper. The next step would have been to be promoted to Lance Corporal (getting a stripe and an extra 6d a day) on the recommendation of his Sqn OC, and that would have certainly been discussed with him and what it would have entailed. Given the availability of manpower in Italy he would have almost certainly remained in 10H, but possibly moved to another Sqn, to a tank where the commander also had another role, such a Troop or Squadron OC. There may also have been a discussion about a post war career in the Army.

In early December the men of 10H were issued with new clothing to help them cope with the Italian Winter, based on the experiences of the previous winter. Each man was issued a minimum of 4 pairs of woollen socks, thick sweaters, string vests (supposedly based on what was worn by Arctic Explorers!), waterproof trousers, blouses and smocks (to go over their tank overalls), woollen gloves or mittens, scarves and new sleeping bags. This was coupled with efforts to ensure that every man had at least one hot cooked meal a day, and that rations were supplemented with luxury, but nutritious food such as cheese from Canada and marmalade from South Africa. The British also made sure that every man washed and shaved everyday, changing clothing where possible, not only for morale purposes but also for health and well being.

2 Arm Bde was now attached to 56 (London) Infantry Division, a pre war Territorial Division that was to have been broken up at the same time as 1AD, but Winston Churchill had vetoed this. After some reorganisation and replacements dispatched from the UK it was built back up to strength, but in December 1944 it was still weak and was allocated a defensive role around Faenza.

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By Simon Harrison.

As Christmas approached the British (with a New Zealand Battalion) held most of the Faenza except for the northern outskirts and approaches.

10H was assigned to 167 Infantry Brigade with a Squadron allocated to each Infantry battalion as they were rotated through the front line positions. C Sqn was supporting 9 Royal Fusiliers (9RF) and Christmas Day was spent just behind the front line, spending the day in or close to the Infantry ready to repel any attacks or support patrols. At night they would have slept in abandoned buildings close to their tanks. At any time the Squadron would have had 2 Troops in reserve and 2 Troops close to the front line. Food would have to be brought up to them with the daily supply run and cooked over small stoves by the crews or by Squadron Cooks if they had come forward (which was a morale boost). Breakfast, eaten just after sun rise, would have been porridge or sausage and bacon with tea; lunch soup; and dinner some form of stew while they refueled and rearmed. During the day they would have drunk tea with biscuits, sucked on sweets and smoked staying in or close to their tanks seeking to stay warm and dry.

The British and New Zealand Infantry were not passive, patrolling to locate Germans positions, extending British control around Faenza, and preventing the Germans from observing British positions and supply routes. On Christmas Eve C Sqn, captured 3 prisoners from 114 Jaeger Division (a German unit created from the remnants of others in Italy and with low morale), and a further 9 prisoners on Christmas Day, albeit with a tank damaged by a mine. On Boxing Day, a patrol from 9RF was ambushed, but saved by a Sgt Ross from C Sqn who placed his tank between the Germans and the pinned down British Soldiers, then charging the German positions so that the infantry could retire; these actions won him a Military Medal. The following day C Sqn (and 9 RF) were pulled out back to Forli (replaced by A Sqn) and got to enjoy a belated Christmas Dinner in a large barn. Here they were treated with Turkey, Pork, potatoes (roast and boiled) and cauliflower, followed by pudding and wine (there was a shortage of beer in Italy). In Forli there were British Army clubs showing films or variety shows, as well as restaurants and baths that could be visited. C Sqn returned to Faenza for New Years but it was quiet as the weather had turned colder.

In the last days of December and the start of January 1945 there was light snowfall and severe frosts but clear skies. The frost hardened the ground enough for a short sharp offensive operation to be planned to the north of Faenza. Operation CYGNET (because it would be an armoured swan – Army humour!) took place on 4 January with a targetted artillery barrage on known German positions at first light prior to the tanks of 10H emerging from Faenza with C Sqn in the lead and the Infantry of 2/6 Queens (a south London based Regiment) in Kangaroo Armoured Personnel Carriers or riding on the tanks. For the first time in Italy the British were using radios in the tanks that enabled the commander to talk direct to aircraft over head and by use of coloured smoke direct the support. There was a brief hold up at an unmarked ditch that had filled with snow, but this was bridged and 10H and the infantry were on the German positions before they could react.

In conjunction with attacks by the New Zealand Division to the south and west, and the Canadians further north, the Germans were pushed back some 10 miles to positions behind the River Senio in confusion. Over a thousand German prisoners (140 by C Sqn) were taken in the process, some of whom were veterans of the war in the desert. C Sqn had taken the only casualties of 10H, 4 men lightly injured when three tanks encountered mines or fell into the snow filled ditch and had to be abandoned. That night there was several inches of snow that prevented any further attacks. The tanks of 2 Arm Bde remained supporting the Infantry in the newly won positions for a further week (10H were relieved by the Bays), but there was no fighting and the weather made it difficult to bring up supplies (work parties from squadrons were issued shovels to help keep the roads clear of snow and passable – they would have been grateful for their winter clothing!) so the Brigade was withdrawn to Pesaro on the Adriatic.

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By Simon Harrison.

The town of Pesaro is noted for its architectural sights (another Pearl of the Adriatic!), with many large buildings, squares and open spaces where vehicles were parked for inspection. The town had been abandoned by the Germans (and the inhabitants) at the start of Operation OLIVE and was now a ghost town except for 8th Army personnel. The men stayed in the local hotels 2 or 3 to a room; a party of men was dispatched for some leave to Florence. This was short lived as on 23 January it was decided that the three armoured regiments would be “dismounted” to serve as infantry for a short period. Many of the infantry formations in the 8th Army had been in action for four or five months, were understrength and nearing exhaustion, requiring several weeks rest out of the line to absorb replacements and prepare for future operations. Strategically it had been decided that all Canadian units in Italy would be withdrawn and moved to Holland to join the 1st Canadian Army. The men of 10H only had personal weapons (pistols or sub machine guns) so there was the hasty issuing of rifles and some firing practice (which many wouldn’t have done since training back at Bovington, before moving north along with a small number of tanks they took for fire support. The majority of the support personnel were left at Pesaro to overhaul the vehicles left behind.

10H moved into the line on 1 February along the Naviglio Canal (dating from the middle ages but had fallen into some disrepair so it was not a major obstacle), north west of the city of Ravenna. They took over from another dismounted armoured regiment, 7 Hussars, who left them much of their equipment; the 9L were located on their left. This was a flat farming area, covered in several inches of snow, which meant any outside positions soon filled with water and had to be vacated. Instead the 10H based themselves around the farm buildings (which often still had their owners/inhabitants or refugees who would not leave) that dotted the landscape south of the canal, and sent out patrols to make sure the Germans didn’t cross the canal.

The main German line was some 2 to 3 miles north of the canal along the River Senio, which had raised banks. South of the river the Germans had constructed outposts similar to the British to delay and warn them of a repeat of Operation CYGNET. It was fortunate for the 10H that the German forces in the area were from two weak Divisions (one of which was made of Turkomen from the Balkans who had been pressed into the German Army and had little fighting spirit) who were content not to test the 10H positions, especially once they realised the British had tanks. The 10H were very conscious that they weren’t really infantrymen, but sought to do the best job they could, without pushing their luck; patrols didn’t stray too far from their own positions. They did on one occasion capture three German prisoners, but C Sqn also has the misfortune of a Corporal Pym being injured by a mine.

13 February 1945 – Admitted 1LFA and SOS as x(ii)

Trooper Rea was admitted to the Field Ambulance (probably based in the village Villanova – where there is now a CWGC cemetery with 200 graves, mostly of Canadian soldiers) as unfit for duty. This was almost certainly illness related to the bitterly cold weather and the wet conditions at that time.

18 February 1945 – Discharged 1LFA and TOS by 10H as x(i)

Trooper Rea returned to duty.

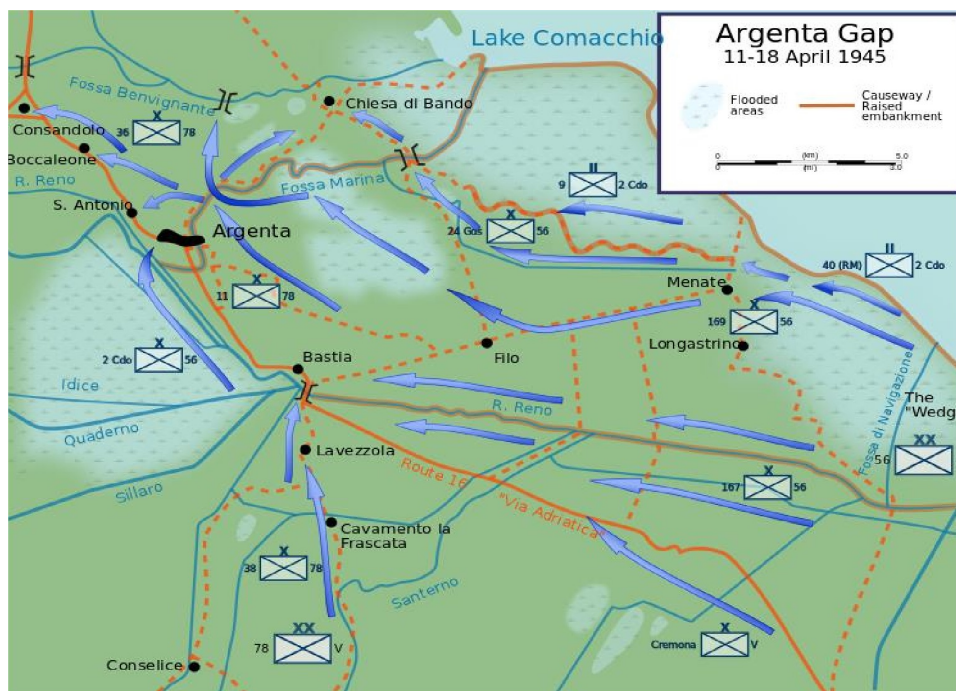
The Journey of Trooper Francis Leonard Rea



By Simon Harrison.

On 2 March, 10H were relieved by 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (who were part of 19 Indian Brigade) and they moved back to Forlì, before returning to Pesaro to be reunited with their armoured vehicles. At about this time the C Sqn OC, Major Ford-North, who had been in charge since just after El Alamein moved onto a staff post and was replaced by another Major in the Regiment. All the personnel of 2 Arm Bde reassembled at Pesaro on 6 March and officially “remounted” as armoured units again. After a few days rest, 2 Arm Bde moved north, and began a series of training exercises with their old friends from the 56 (London) Infantry Division, and the 78 (Battleaxe) Infantry Division (both part of V Corps), demonstrating and honing the sort of armoured advances that had occurred with Operation CYGNET. There was also opportunity for gunnery practice on a coastal range and driving practice in rough terrain (although this was not appreciated by the Italian Farmers whose fields were used!)

The 8th Army was now preparing to launch the final offensive in Italy, Operation BUCKSHOT, in April 1945. The Germans had flooded much of the low lying land and used Italian labourers to create obstacles and fortifications, which they hoped would compensate for the declining quality and numbers of their soldiers who were short of food and fuel. The role of V Corps was to breach the Argenta Gap, a narrow causeway high ground around Highway 16 to the west of Lake Comacchio. The British plan was detailed, complex and flexible, with initially 10H supporting 56 Infantry Division, and C Sqn 169 Infantry Brigade with the battalions of the Queens Regiment.



10H moved up to just behind the front line at the start of April and were dispersed under camouflage, moving forward to support a number of diversionary attacks up the west coast of Lake Comacchio to test the German defences that resulted in over a thousand prisoners being taken: there was no fanatical resistance by Germans in Italy and many would surrender once their position was compromised or in the face of British firepower. In these attacks 10H provided direct fire support, often at close range, to the Infantry as they attacked. One occasion tanks were put on barges crewed by Royal Engineers and sailed out into the lake to provide support.

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By Simon Harrison.

The main offensive began further west on 10 April late in the afternoon against the main German Defences, which were quickly breached and the Germans started to retreat. On 11 April, 169 Infantry Brigade and C Sqn advanced westward on the town of Bastia, while other British and Italian forces approached from the south. By 13 April they had reached the town of Filo where German armoured and infantry forces put up heavy resistance until the town was captured, and then the following day at Bivo Palazzuola where the fighting lasted until midnight until the Germans finally withdrew.

On 14 April 10H and their old friends of 9RF advanced on Bastia, the Infantry riding on the tanks. The southern end of the town was marked by a railway embankment that the Shermans of 10H could only cross by exposing themselves to anti-tank fire. The Infantry dismounted and advanced into the town while the 10H looked for a way over the embankment, eventually rejoining the infantry at an abandoned treacle factory. German opposition was intermittent and Bastia fell on 15 April with hundreds of prisoners (many being Croats who had changed nationality to join the German Army) being taken and the offensive turned north towards the town of Argenta, despite the Germans trying to block the roads with treacle (a local speciality) from factories in the town and tanks; they could only delay the British, not stop them. Argenta was abandoned the following day and 10H was withdrawn for a short rest; C Sqn had lost several tanks and men in the first two weeks of April and needed replacements.

The 78 Infantry Division now took the lead in the offensive, supported by 2 Arm Bde pushing north towards the city of Ferrara. 10H were now attached to 38 (Irish) Brigade and C Sqn to 1 Royal Irish Fusiliers (RIF). Again the Infantry rode on the tanks, dismounting when they came under fire, or in Kangaroos through the increasingly flat and open terrain under clear sunny skies. All the while other British units continued to push northwards capturing towns full of hundreds of Germans or battling disorganised rear guards, depending on the unit; the German 362 Infantry Division, which had a poor reputation, fell apart, whereas the 42 Jaeger Division which included men of Croatian origin who must have feared being captured fought hard until the end. In these last days of the war, C Sqn seems to have been fortunate to have entered towns the Germans had already abandoned; A Sqn, attached to the Inniskilling Fusiliers stumbled into retreating German armour and infantry at the village of Saletta and endured a hard, day long fight with casualties. C Sqn also narrowly missed being attacked by the RAF who mistook them for retreating Germans!

On 25 April, 2 Arm Bde was concentrated around Ferrara to recover and repair vehicles, and administer Germans who arrived to surrender. They were also able to supplement their rations with strawberries and asparagus which were commonly grown in the area. Being a cavalry regiment, the officers began to collect up German horses that were roaming around (many from a veterinary hospital that had been abandoned) and not yet been claimed by Italian farmers.

On 2 May, following lengthy and secret negotiations in Switzerland, the German forces that remained in Italy formally surrendered to the Allies and laid down their weapons. This allowed the Allies to push north to liberate the large towns and cities of northern Italy and thence to the Alps and into Austria to meet with US forces pushing through southern Germany. The war in Europe officially ended on 8 May 1945, VE Day, and 10H like all units held services of remembrance and thanks giving; but for the forces in Italy there was one final crisis.

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By Simon Harrison.

When the Germans in Italy surrendered, they were clear that it was to the Allied Armies in Italy only. At the time of the surrender there were large numbers of Germans, and their Balkan and anti-communist allies retreating from Yugoslavia and Austria in to Italy where they planned to surrender to British or US Forces in the belief they would get better treatment and (like Free Polish Soldiers) the option to emigrate. In order to make that retreat they continued to resist and hold back Tito's Partisan Army pushing to clear northern Yugoslavia, as well as capture those who had opposed them. This fighting continued into the middle of May, when the Germans ran out of supplies. As the British had pushed north into Austria and into north eastern Italy (Venice was entered on 28 April) they were swamped by tens of thousands of surrendering Germans, their allies and refugees all trying to escape Tito or the Soviets

To the Western Allies surprise, Tito's partisans didn't stop at the Yugoslavian border and pushed into Italy (seizing the city of Trieste) and Austria. The Partisans began to loot, destroy property, set up councils of occupation (some in conjunction with Communist Italian Partisans) and demand that prisoners and refugees held by the British be handed over. When the British refused there were tense, armed, confrontations and stand offs. Tito refused to reply to any correspondence from Churchill or President Truman on these events as the relationship had broken down some months before. The Italian Government, struggling with the newly liberated territory and its own problems, was alarmed as Britain and the US had promised them, when they had joined the Allies, that they would not lose any territory as a punishment.

The Armoured units of 8th Army were now dispersed to reinforce key locations and act as mobile reinforcements, in Troops and Squadrons. The Partisans were lightly armed and were often intimidated by the presence of tanks bolstering the British Positions. A British and New Zealand Armoured column entered Trieste supported off shore by the Royal Navy resulting in a tense stand off; Partisans were prevented from entering Venice. Towards the end of May, when some units were already starting to return home or be shipped to the Far East, the situation was seen as so grave that a defensive position was prepared beyond which the Yugoslavian units would not be allowed to pass – known as the Morgan Line after the General who drew up the plans.

10H were now attached to 56 Infantry Division and moved to the North Eastern corner of Italy, Venezia Giulia, to assist in the administering of people handing themselves over to the British and patrolling the Morgan Line. They were based in the town of Villa Opicina, looking down on the coastal city of Trieste on the border with Yugoslavia. Here they sought to maintain amicable but firm relations with the Yugoslav Partisans (and their Italian Communist allies of various persuasions) – a number of sporting events were held – but at the same time arresting and returning those Yugoslavians who sought to move deeper into Italy. These were tense and busy times with the soldiers on the ground caught up in difficult political and moral issues, especially the return of unwilling refugees to the Yugoslavs or Soviets, that could have very easily escalated in to an extension of the war that had just ended.

On 16 May, C Sqn provided support to US soldiers who had moved to support the 8th Army and were guarding bridges at Gorizia and Sagrado where there were tense standoffs. There was a further stand off at Sagrado on 12 June when armed Yugoslavian Partisans harassed and threatened 10H soldiers.

By mid June tensions began to lessen as many Yugoslav partisans began to drift home – they had fought to liberate their homeland, and were not paid soldiers. Tito began to communicate with Britain and the US on his demands, and controversially, some of those who had surrendered to the British were sent

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By Simon Harrison.

back to Yugoslavia to an uncertain fate (albeit many in British run camps did escape to start new lives in western Europe and beyond). In the late 1980's there was a high profile libel trial when the surviving senior British Officers successfully defended themselves against allegations of having knowingly committed war crimes by allowing the refugees to be returned.

As the summer moved on and the crisis passed, the British Army in Italy began to shrink and revert to a peace time posture. As men departed to be demobilised so units shrank in size, with Armoured units losing 1 or 2 Troops per Sqn. There was still plenty to keep men occupied as equipment was maintained, guarding their own camps, surplus equipment being moved to ports for shipping elsewhere (tanks were mostly prepared to be sent to the Far East) and camps of German POWs (who were used on work details) and refugees to be guarded. In addition the British provided assistance to the Italian Government in maintaining order by supporting the police in mounting armed guards patrolling the streets or manning checkpoints, collecting surplus weapons and helping distribute food aid.

4 July 1945 – Passed TTT as Driver Operator and classified as such

Trooper Rea undertook and completed some form of training as part of a further round of reorganisations and restructuring of the Royal Armoured Corps.

The summer of 1945 in Italy was a warm and pleasant one, and when the men of 10H weren't performing duties there were opportunities for Cricket (The Bays won the Brigade tournament) and Football, whether at the unit level or as part of 56 Infantry Division. In early July a 56 Infantry Division team – called the Black Cats after their Divisional badge, Dick Whittingtons Black Cat - played an Italian XI in the main stadium in Trieste, winning 4-3; later in the month they also beat a Trieste XI. On 9 July there was a Divisional sports day with a wide range of sports, games and challenges.

By mid July all of the Yugoslav Partisans had returned over the border, and the cafes, restaurants, shops, barbers and dance halls of Trieste were opened to groups of British Soldiers. Trieste had not been bombed heavily during the war and the prevailing atmosphere was calm and welcoming to British soldiers; probably with the behaviour of the Yugoslav Partisans fresh in the mind! There was considerable unrest and turmoil elsewhere in northern Italy that did boil over into violence (some political, some revenge and some just criminal) and banditry with weapons that had been used against the Germans or acquired at the end of hostilities. Several cities were off limits to British personnel and attacks against individuals or small groups, or individual vehicles being held up was not unheard of. In September 1945, when Trooper Rea was back in the UK, the communists in Trieste called a General Strike to protest, amongst other things, the continued presence of British soldiers. This so alarmed the Italian Government that they appealed to the 8th Army for assistance; somewhat reluctantly armed British soldiers guarded key buildings and others were held at readiness lest things got out of hand. Fortunately there was no trouble and the strike dissolved after three days.

A source of tension with Italians was the exchange rate set between the Lira and the British Military Pound (the currency that soldiers overseas were paid in, that could only be swapped in Regimental Pay Offices) of £1 to 1000 Lira, and that locals could only be paid in Lira; Soldiers complained that they were overcharged by Italians. There was also tension over the responsibilities of the Allied Military Civil Administration and the Italian Provisional Government of Crown Prince Umberto, and the presence of armed British patrols on the streets. But by and large Italians, especially in the rural areas, were welcoming and friendly with British soldiers as they helped maintain fair law and order.

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By Simon Harrison.

On 6 August there was a parade for the visit of Field Marshal Alexander the Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean who brought the news that men who had fought in the Desert and Italy would not be sent to the Far East unless they volunteered, and that demobilisation would be speeded up. This was followed by speeches and visits from representatives of the Ministry of Labour on post war employment and education schemes for demobilising soldiers. The Army now decided to detach 10H from 2 Arm Bde and re-role them as a "Divisional Cavalry" (the Light Cavalry role in modern parlance) to be attached to an Infantry Division; they now handed over the remaining tanks and began to receive armoured cars.

In addition to sports, men could also attend an open air cinema near by which also put on performances of Opera by Italian Companies (who also performed at the famous Trieste Opera House). A performance of "La Boheme" was disturbed by the arrival of drunken Yugoslav Partisans who had slipped over the border and began firing their weapons until they were rounded up and sent back; no one was hurt fortunately. On 15th August the 10H received the news that Japan had surrendered and VJ Day declared, and were stood down for 5 days. Part of the Allied Garrison of Trieste included US Soldiers and British Soldiers were invited to attend a concert by the Andrews Sister.

The Potsdam Conference in August 1945 rejected the transfer of Trieste from Italy to Yugoslavia (although it did authorise some changes to the border) but it remained a flashpoint into the mid 1950s; part of the British Garrison of Austrian Occupation would be based in Trieste as a deterrent and to ensure the lines of communication, until it departed in 1956. The ownership of Trieste remained a source of tension into the early 21st Century when Italy insisted that Slovenia formally acknowledge Trieste as an Italian City before agreeing to their joining the EU.

26 August 1945 – Granted 28 Days "Leave In Addition to Python" (LIAP).

The Army had long recognised that men could not be expected to serve overseas indefinitely, and pre war the maximum length of continuous overseas service was 6 years; this was known as Python. In early 1943 the period of overseas service began to be reduced, and by late 1944 it was set at 3 years 6 months. To offset the potential surge of men who could now return to Britain (but not be demobilised) the Army began to put in place schemes and incentives to recognise and reward long service and dissuade desertion. One such scheme was LIAP (sometimes known as Churchill Leave) where by men would be given 1 weeks leave in the UK for every years service overseas, plus an extra week and travel time. When LIAP started in late 1944 there were strict criteria for who was eligible (such as priority to men in combat units and having a clean service record), as well as limits on how men could return to the UK; many units formed committees of all ranks units to advise CO's on who should receive LIAP, as it was the CO who granted or vetoed LIAP (which they could do for several reasons). (There was a near riot in the Bays in November 1944 when the CO resorted to drawing names of eligible men from a hat and the first name drawn was from the HQ Squadron!) With the war now over and travel back to the UK much easier there were few practical limits on men taking LIAP.

There were three caveats with LIAP. The first was that men who were granted LIAP knew that when they returned to their unit they could expect to continue to serve overseas for some years; notionally it was capped to a further period of Python which went over and above the terms that some men had sign up for. Secondly, men who didn't return from LIAP they were deemed to have deserted and as a consequence the soldiers unit received fewer places for other entitled men to take LIAP; thus there was considerable peer pressure on those receiving LIAP to return so others could return home.

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Finally by accepting LIAP men gave up any untaken leave they had accrued in the years prior to the year in which they took LIAP.

From all of this we can deduce that Trooper Rea had a clean and unblemished service record to have been awarded LIAP. As a result he would be granted 3 weeks leave (having been overseas since 1942), plus 1 week, plus 3 days travelling time. The Army would have transported him, and 180+ other men of 10H eligible of LIAP as well, as far as Calais (by a mixture of train and lorry which he reached on 28 August), where they would have caught a ferry and arriving at Dover he would have been expected to pay his own way to wherever he wanted to go; presumably back to Somerset. He would have travelled in uniform, and I am sure looked very tanned from the Italian summer, and had a fair bit of back pay in his wallet! At the same time many of the men who had been called up before the war or in 1939 returned home to be demobilised, some of whom were flown back to the UK in aircraft being relocated.

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Austria, Germany and Demobilisation – 1945-1946

5 October 1945 – Detained Milan

Trooper Rea returned to Italy from his LIAP arriving at Milan Train station, either having travelled via train through France and Switzerland or a mixed train and lorry journey through Germany. At this time there was an allowance of an extra 4d per day for Soldiers (rising to 4s 6d for Officers) to cover the extra expense of being in the Mediterranean.

25 October 1945 – Ceased Entitlement to Mediterranean Allowance moved to CMF

Shortly after Trooper Rea's return to 10H, they bade farewell to Italy and moved to the small town of Stainz, in the province of Styria in Austria, in the British Zone of Occupation where they joined their old friends of 46 Infantry Division. The Mediterranean Allowance was now removed as Austria wasn't deemed to be in the Mediterranean and in the country they could only use Army or NAAFI facilities.

There were over 50,000 British Soldiers (the Regular British Army in 2017 is 82,000 strong!) then in Austria, with Lt General McCreery as the Military Governor of the British Zone (there were also US, French and Soviet Zones). At this time there was considerable turmoil and tension in Austria, which had been re-established as an independent country at the end of the war, over forthcoming elections to form a government between the Communists and the Soviet sponsored communist Government in exile and the British, US and non communist Austrians.

A further source of tension was the British proposal (subsequently approved at the Potsdam Conference) to transfer the region of the South Tyrol (with 150,000 inhabitants) to Italy (where it was called the Alto Adige), despite the local people having German as their main language. This was seen by many as a reward to Italy for having changed sides, but had also been the source of a long running dispute between Austria and Italy. The British feared a uprising against the decision but the protests remained peaceful at this time. In the 1960s and 70's there would be terrorist attacks in support of an independent South Tyrol or reunification with Austria; in response the region was granted significant powers and today has a status similar to that of the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man in GB.

10H duties included guarding key buildings and facilities, supervising POWs at work, attending to displaced people and patrolling the rural areas.

6 November 1945 – Admitted 183 Field Ambulance and SOS to x(ii)

Field Ambulances were the equivalent of the Light Field Ambulance in to support Infantry Brigades. No reason is given as to why he was admitted (illness or injury) or where they were located.

23 November 1945 – Discharged and RTU

However the 10H remained in Austria for a few weeks before being dispatched to Germany, leaving the 8th Army and joining what was now known as the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR).

16 December 1945 – Transferred to BAOR from CMF

I can find little about the move from Austria to Germany, other than they moved by train from Graz in Austria to the Rhineland (which took several days given the state of the German Railways). Here they were attached to 49 Infantry Division in North West Germany and based in the town of Werl just east of Dortmund. The town is most famous for the Wallfahrtsbasilika with its 15th Century statue of the Virgin Mary taken

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care of by Franciscan monks. The town had also house a prison for political prisoners that was now being used by the British.

At this time Germany had been divided, like Austria, into four zones of occupation, Britain, US, France and Soviet Union who each ran the part of the country they occupied. The British Sector was in Northern Germany and was run by Field Marshal Montgomery who appointed British Generals as military governors of the large cities, such as Bremen and Hamburg, and the major German states, such as Schleswig-Holstein. They administered their respective areas with the soldiers available and German police and other officials who were untainted by any association with the Nazi era. They were responsible for distributing food, maintaining law and order (including running courts, prisons and arresting wanted individuals), managing the thousands of disarmed ex combatants, overseeing reconstruction and administering the thousands of refugees and other displaced personnel. In doing this the British also maintained a strict policy of non-fraternization with Germans who were expected to speak English when making requests of the occupying forces. German could be spoken in some circumstances, such as when speaking to children, but there was no social interaction with locals as there had been in Italy. British soldiers lived in the accommodation where they slept, were fed and made use of whatever available facilities were there, such as Naafi's, Libraries etc. Also in the British area were contingents from Belgium, Holland, Norway and most controversially the Jewish Brigade who had been in Italy.

Aside from routine peacetime military activities, armed British Soldiers patrolled the streets and countryside, and guarded key buildings and infrastructure. In some areas the British made a point of mounting guards and changing them with some ceremony, music and formality, despite still being in wartime attire, which both bemused and irritated the Germans who felt they were being slighted.

The main British Concern was the potential impact of the lack of food available for the German people, despite rationing. The dislocation of the last months of the war meant there were only limited harvests in 1945 and the German people had not been mobilised to grow their own food as Britain had. This was coupled with continued rationing elsewhere in Europe and the need to feed the occupying forces, refugees and survivors of camps as priorities. Thus Montgomery sought to ensure that food distribution was consistent and fair, while at the same time cracking down on black marketing and food hoarding. Unlike in some Soviet and French administered areas there were no food related disturbances in the British area of occupation.

Werl prison was used by the British to hold low ranking officials and military personnel who were under investigation. Some of these would be being questioned on site or transported under guard to other locations for questioning. The British were concerned both about prisoners trying to escape and "Nazi Resistance" fighters trying to free prisoners, but there were no such occurrences. Werl Prison would remain British administered until 1954 when there was an organised mass breakout that resulted in British Soldiers opening fire, but a number of convicted war criminals escaping. Shortly thereafter responsibility was passed to the West German authorities; it has been redeveloped several times since and remains one of the largest prisons in Germany.

15 January 1946 – Admitted 146 Fd Ambulance and SOS to X(ii)

146 Field Ambulance was part of 49 Infantry Division, no reason is given for his admittance.

27 January 1946 Discharged 146 Fd Ambulance and RTU

Trooper Rea returned to duty.

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1 March 1946 – SOS as x(8) and Sent RAC Depot Catterick for Release.

Trooper Rea was struck off the strength of 10H and sent to the RAC Depot at Catterick in North Yorkshire to be discharged from the Army. He would have most likely travelled back with other RAC soldiers all eligible to be demobilised at the same time.

The time spent at Catterick would have been relaxed but quite dull while the men awaited demobilisation. There were daily parades, kit inspections and light duties, sometimes helping local farmers or guarding the remaining German POWs held around Catterick. Within the Garrison there were the usual Naafi facilities and a large cinema. Alternatively men were able to walk into Richmond to avail themselves of the pubs and dance halls or take the train to Darlington or Northallerton, and weekend passes were common. All soldiers would have been conscious of being well behaved and not breaking military regulations as that could result in you being sent to a unit and demobilisation delayed.

25 March 1946 – Medically Examined and Found to be Fit

Trooper Rea received his pre demobilisation medical, passing it and was deemed fit to be discharged

28 March 1946 – Demobilised and SOS of the Army.

On his day of demobilisation Trooper Rea would have visit the Pay Office to collect any money outstanding to him, then been bussed to Strensall Barracks near York to exchange his military clothing for a suit. He would then have been bused to York Station to make his way home.

Beyond the war

Although demobilised on 28 March, Trooper Rea did not actually leave the Army for a further 3 months to allow for the paperwork to be processed. In this time he remained subject to military law and had he been arrested he could have served time in a military prison or been returned to a unit. He remained liable for General Reserve Duty until 1959, had there been a need for large scale mobilisation of the ex RAC personnel. None of the military crises that arose in this era, Berlin Airlift, Malaya, Korean War, Kenya and Suez required such a mobilisation. Instead he returned to civilian life in Wellington and working for Foxes.

The 10H remained in Germany, having moved to Lubeck to patrol the border between the British and Soviet Zones until 1950 when they returned to the UK based at Perham Down between Ludgershall and Tidworth. Here they were re-equipped with Centurion Tanks seeing service in Libya, Jordan and Aden in the period. They returned to Germany in 1960 in a special light armour role; in 1969 they were merged with the 11H to form the Royal Hussars. After further amalgamations they became part of the Kings Royal Hussars (KRH) based in Tidworth (since 1998) equipped with Challenger 2 Tanks as part of 12 Armoured Infantry Brigade. The Regiment celebrated its Tercentenary in 2015, and it has recently been announced that it will be re-rolled to Light Cavalry equipped with the new Ajax vehicle by 2025 and move to Aldershot.

The Bays disappeared from the Army in the late 1950s and are now part of the Queens Dragoon Guards, the Welsh Cavalry, based in Norfolk. The 9L merged with another regiment in the late 1950s and are now part of the Royal Lancers based in Catterick. Both are currently equipped in the light cavalry role

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The 1st Armoured Division was reformed in Germany in 1960 as part of the BAOR to defend West Germany. In 1990/91 they deployed to the Gulf to take part in the Liberation of Kuwait, followed by deployments in the Balkans, Iraq again in 2003 and then Afghanistan, all while still based in Germany. In the summer of 2015 the Division was officially renamed 1 UK Division, retaining the badge of the charging (or rampant) rhino and moved to its new home in York, where it took on responsibility for the British Armys Adaptable Forces.

Lt General Richard McCreery remained in Austria as the British Military Governor until 1946 when he moved to Germany to command the BAOR. His time marked the thawing of relations with the German people and greater social interaction. As a horseman he also championed the reintroduction of point to point horse meetings by British units. In 1948 he moved to New York to help advise the new United Nations on the formation and use of military units for peace keeping purposes. He retired as a General in December 1949 and lived at Stowell Hill in Somerset where he divided his time between horse riding, countryside issues (he was a Steward at Wincanton Racecourse) and the gardens. He wrote no memoirs and shunned post war publicity, although he did attend the Coronation in 1953, where one of the six grey horses that pulled the State Coach was called McCreery and contributed to the 1957 Defence Review. He passed away in 1967 and was given a memorial service in Westminster Abbey.

Field Marshal Montgomery returned from Germany to take up the post of Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Head of the Armed Forces) in summer 1946. It was an unhappy time as he was locked in disputes with the RAF and Royal Navy, as well as the Labour Government. He is reported to have said, "I have spent my professional career fighting the Germans and the Politicians – I prefer fighting Germans as I beat them", which didn't endear him to Labour MPs. In 1948 he became the Deputy Commander of the newly formed North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) working to a succession of US Supreme Commanders, establishing the leading role Britain maintains today in the organisation. He retired from the Army in 1956 returning to the UK to take up his seat in the House of Lords, taking an active interest in military and veterans affairs, as well as courting controversy on numerous occasions in the 1960s. He was consulted by several Governments on military matters but never took up an official appointment nor joined a political party. He wrote his (controversial) memoirs as well as providing commentary pieces for the Sunday Times, becoming one of the first ex General to become a media pundit. He remains an influential, if controversial figure, in the British Army in the 21st Century, although some of his writings on Leadership are considered essential reading. There have been several barracks named after him, the current one being Montgomery House in Aldershot the home of Regional Command organisation.

Italy remembers the sacrifices of the Allies on Liberation Day, 25 April, a public holiday that commemorates the date on which Italian Partisan forces liberated the cities of Milan and Turin, with ceremonies at battlefields, memorials and barracks. Just as in Britain you will find war memorials in Italian towns and villages as the centrepiece for Remembrance Ceremonies in November.

The Italian Royal Family left the country in July 1946 after a referendum on post war Italy remaining a Constitutional Monarchy or becoming a Republic. Until early 21st Century the Italian Constitution forbade them from returning to Italy (they lost their citizenship) and they moved to Switzerland or Monaco (they are related to the Monaco Royal Family). Although this was repealed in recent years, Royalist support is very much a (consistent) minority in Italy today

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Annex A

The D-Day Dodgers

The D-Day Dodgers is a term for the Allied, and usually Commonwealth, servicemen who fought in Italy during the Second World War, which also inspired a popular wartime soldier's song (to the tune of Lili Marlene).

We're the D-Day Dodgers out in Italy - Always on the vino, always on the spree. 8th Army scroungers and their tanks We live in Rome - among the Yanks. We are the D-Day Dodgers, way out in Italy.

We landed at Salerno, a holiday with pay, Jerry brought the band down to cheer us on our way We all sung the songs and the beer was free. We kissed all the girls in Napoli. To welcome the D-Day Dodgers to sunny Italy.

Naples and Cassino were taken in our stride We didn't have to fight there, we just went for the ride. Anzio and Sangro are just names, We only went to look for dames, The artful D-Day Dodgers, way out in Italy.

On our way to Florence we had a lovely time. We ran a bus to Rimini through the Gothic line, All the winter sports amid the snow, Then we went bathing in the Po. For we are the D-Day Dodgers, way out in Italy.

Dear Lady Astor, you think you know a lot. Standing on your platform talking tommy rot, You're the nation's sweetheart, the nation's pride, We think your mouth is far too wide. That's from the D-Day Dodgers in sunny Italy.

If you look around the mountains, through the mud and rain You'll find battered crosses, some which bear no name. Heartbreak, toil and suffering gone The boys beneath them linger on. For they are the D-Day Dodgers who will stay out in Italy.

The term emerged in June/July 1944 when the newspapers and news reels were full of stories of the heavy fighting (and casualty lists) from Normandy. There was very little coverage of Italy, and what there was showed British Soldiers in shorts and sunny weather, marching or being greeted by cheering Italians. A rumour spread that the term was publicized by Lady Astor, a controversial back bench

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Conservative MP in the House of Commons (and noted opponent of Winston Churchill) who supposedly used the expression in public after a disillusioned serviceman in Italy signed a letter to her as being from a "D-Day Dodger." However, there is no record that she actually said this, in or out of Parliament, and she herself denied ever saying it. But it caused much bitterness to the soldiers in Italy, and especially those from Canada, South Africa and New Zealand. To address this, Winston Churchill denounced the expression in the House of Commons and both he and King George VI visited Italy in the summer to bolster the morale of the 8th Army. It may also have been one of the reasons the Conservative Party deselected her as an MP for the 1945 General Election.

The subsequent poem and ballad (sung to the tune of Lili Marlene) of the D-Day Dodgers is widely attributed to a Lance Sergeant Harry Pym in 78 Infantry Division. However, there are many versions and variations, most of which are uncomplimentary towards Lady Astor, some of which were recorded after the war and sung by veterans. Irrespective of whether she did say it or not, the expression stuck to Lady Astor for the remainder of her public career, and a number of her later public events were marked by members of the public singing the song loudly.

There are 54 Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) sites in Italy with men from the Commonwealth and Nepal who died in the Second World War, with approximately 48,000 names. Some are large such as near Monte Cassino with over 6000 names, others are as small as a single grave inside an Italian Community Cemetery. In all cases men are buried as close to where they died as possible, alongside their comrades without preference to rank, colour, creed or religion.



Coriano Ridge CWGC Site