

# **The Journey Of A Desert Rat**



**Gordon Thomas Blyth**  
**30<sup>th</sup> March 1920 – 17<sup>th</sup> January 1945**

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Imperial War Museum

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Royal British Legion

The Royal Engineers Museum

The History of the Corps of Royal Engineers

The History of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division

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## **Foreword**

This document attempts to record some of the life and experiences of Gordon Thomas Blyth. Most of Gordon's adult life was spent fighting overseas with the famed Desert Rats of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division.

Personal details are few. Most of this information is a collection of personal experiences and memoirs of former comrades set against a backcloth of unit histories. Gordon would have had his own share in these experiences.

My sincere hope is that this story will remind readers to think of the great cost of the freedom which we enjoy today; to honour the courage and sacrifice of the fallen; and to comfort all those that still grieve and are scarred by war.

May we be worthy of our inheritance.

Tony Blyth

January 2005

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## Beginnings

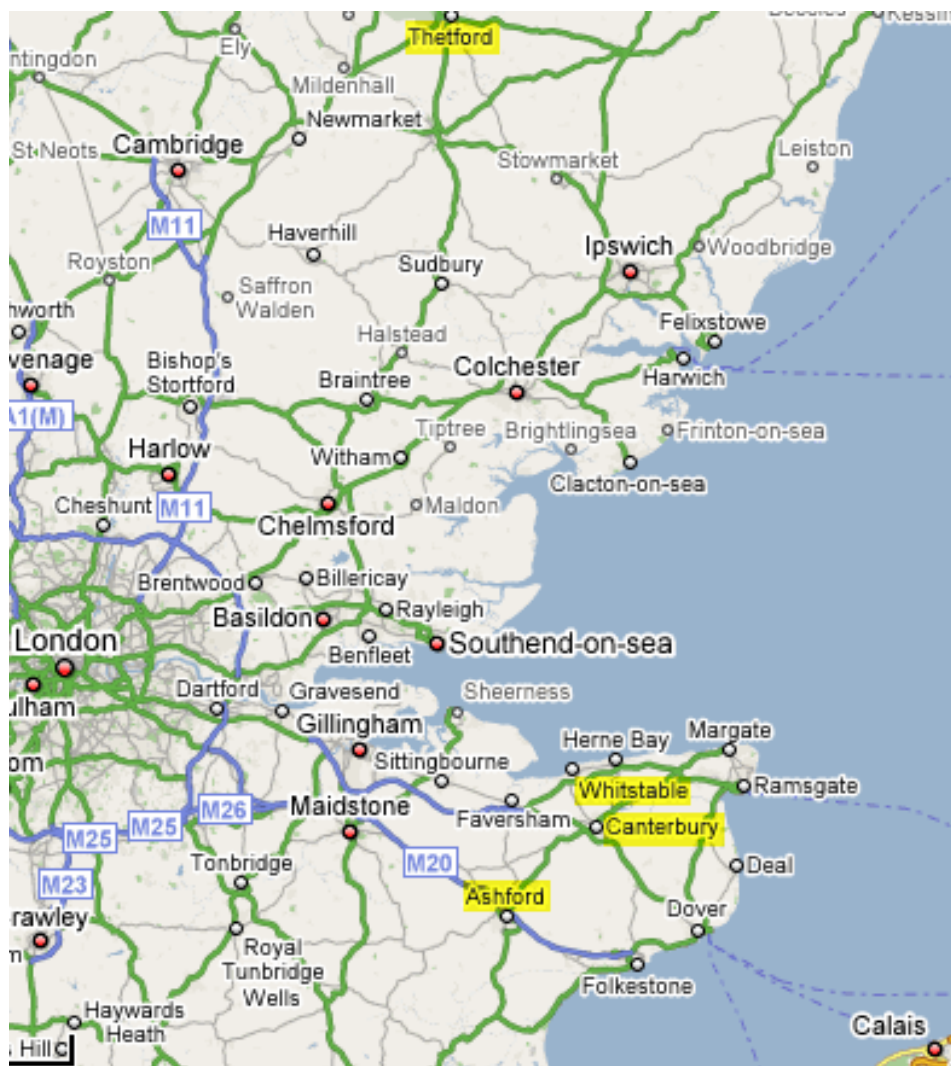
Whitstable lies on the Kent coast some seven miles to the north of the cathedral city of Canterbury.

The town itself has a proud maritime heritage; oysters, known as Whitstable Natives, have been dredged here since earliest recorded times, possibly even when it was a Roman outpost and until recently, oysters were an important part of the local industry. A century ago more than a hundred oyster boats were to be seen offshore. Vessels required sails, rigging and repairs. In order to support this, the shoreline was home to many boat yards and ship builders.

Trade continued to flourish in many ways including the use of the Thames Barges that sailed the estuary up to London.

The advent of steam brought the first railway and today Whitstable still has the oldest railway bridge in the country.

Turner came to sketch the incomparable sunsets across the sea with the Isle of Sheppy in the distance and the town boasts the actor Peter Cushing as one of its own. People born here are themselves known as Whitstable Natives in recognition of the connection with the renowned oyster heritage.



Places Of Interest

On Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> March 1920 Gordon Thomas Blyth was born, the eldest son to Alfred Thomas and Dorothy Blyth, in this seaside town of Whitstable.

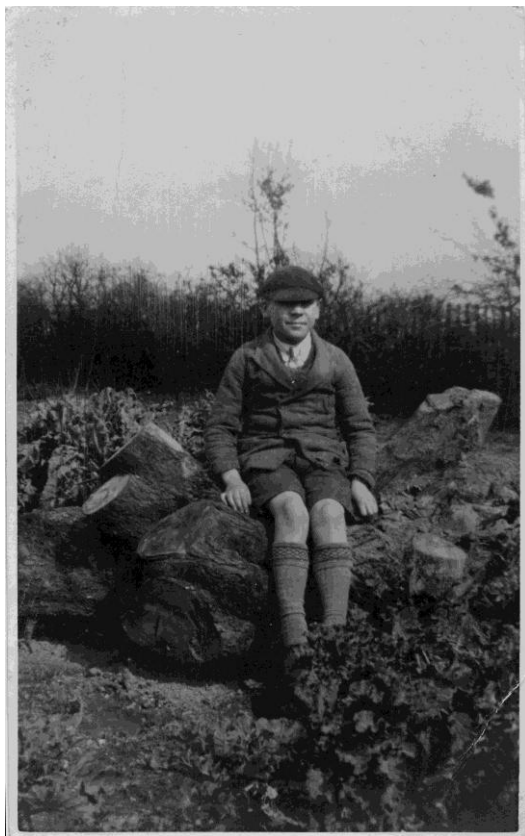
At the age of five, Gordon attended Whitstable Boys School and was soon joined by his two younger brothers, Donald and Bernard. Reading, writing and arithmetic was the order of the day but there were also many practical aspects such as woodworking, art and sport.

Away from school the boys would often go to the boating lake, which was near the beach, to spend a few hours on the rowing boats or paddle boats. The harbour was also a busy place to watch the old Thames Barges unloading grain, also larger boats used to bring in coal for the town, and delivered by the “Crab & Winkle” train to Canterbury. In those days the area was a mass of railway lines, and there were two heavy horses that manoeuvred all the coal trucks around the harbour.

During daylight hours the boys would play outside in the road with whipping tops or iron hoops with sticks. The boys had also made a truck out of an old orange box, a piece of wood, four old pram wheels and a length of rope. Then they would go charging around the nearby streets. Fortunately, there were no cars around but plenty of bicycles. After dark the family would listen to the crystal set that they had constructed.

Holidays were spent at the grandparent’s house at Kingsnorth, just south of Ashford. Gordon’s father had a “Matchless” motorbike with a sidecar. Bernard recalls that it was khaki in colour and a real big thing. Gordon would ride pillion, behind his father. The sidecar had three seats. Donald sat in the front, Bernard, the youngest, in the middle and their mother at the back. The distance to Kingsnorth was about 40km.

The family at Kingsnorth were great cricket followers so the boys would spend many hours playing the game in the surrounding fields with their uncles’ and other family members.



Gordon c.1928 in Grandparents garden at Kingsnorth, near Ashford



Gordon, 1929.  
School photograph from Whitstable Boys School

Gordon's parents were also members of the local Salvation Army church, Gordon's grandfather having been converted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century during one of the organizations evangelistic open-air meetings whilst on his way to work. Gordon's father Thomas had much musical ability and was the Bandmaster of the Salvation Army brass band in Whitstable.

And so, as youngsters, the three brothers were taught to play brass instruments by their father and his colleagues. Gordon played the Euphonium, as shown below (left) and they regularly played in the Salvation Army band together, which included civic events, marches and parades throughout the town.



The Three Brothers c. 1931 (l-r; Gordon, Bernard, Donald)

On leaving school in 1934, Gordon trained as an apprentice brick layer working for local builder B R Rigden throughout the town.

Unfortunately, the storm clouds of war once again appeared over Europe. With his trade experience behind him Gordon enlisted in The Royal Corps of Engineers on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1940 and moved a few miles up the coast to the Engineers Depot at Brompton Barracks, near the dockyard at Chatham.

After some weeks initial training Gordon found himself guarding Margate pier during the period of the Dunkirk evacuation. Military supplies were so short at this time that the men had to make do with broom handles. It is said, true or not, that from a distance this would fool any enemy spies into thinking that the troops were better equipped.

At the end of June 1940 Gordon travelled to the Orkney Isles, off the Scottish coast, where he spent fifteen months undergoing engineer training.



The Blyth Family c. May 1940 (l-r; Bernard, Gordon, Mrs Blyth, Mr Blyth, Donald)

During this time many skills would have been developed such as construction, including water and electrical supply, maintenance of roadways, removal and overcoming of obstacles, digging trenches, putting up defences, mine laying and lifting, booby traps and of course the handling of explosives for demolition activities.

On completion of his training, Gordon was posted to Northumberland on general construction duties. It was here, at Berwick bus station in October 1941, that he was to meet his future wife, a redhead, named Ruth Dockerty, who was serving in Auxiliary Territorial Service.

The ATS was the womens' branch of the army manned entirely by volunteers. At the end of four weeks basic training there were written and practical tests to find out which line of work they were best suited to. The women wore khaki uniforms with black shoes. Even their underwear was uniform issue and khaki in colour. Women were not allowed to go into action with the men or to use firearms, but apart from that they did the same work as the men and were paid the same wages. Jobs varied from cooks, clerks, telephonists and translators to lorry drivers, motorbike messengers and engineers. Very many were army drivers. They drove everything from staff cars to trucks and had to be able to maintain and repair the vehicles. The ATS anti-aircraft crews watched out for enemy aircraft. They could track them with radar, pick them out with searchlights and aim the large anti-aircraft guns onto them, but only the men were allowed to fire the guns! At this time, Ruth was stationed at Whitby Firing Camp where she was undergoing ack ack training. After this she was posted to anti aircraft sites on the Thames estuary which were defending the capital London against the Luftwaffe onslaught.





Ruth Dockerty c.1942

In May 1942, Gordon received his draft for overseas service. He returned to his family in Whitstable for embarkation leave during which time he announced his engagement to Ruth.

## The North African Campaign

On 17<sup>th</sup> July 1942 the troopship Oronsay weighed anchor from the Scottish port of Greenock and Gordon was sailing into new territory and uncertainty. Of course, the troops would have no idea of their destination at this time and rumours would have been rife. Having spent some leave en route at Cape Town, Gordon ended his journey in early September at Port Tewfik, Egypt. Port Tewfik was, of course, diabolically hot, even then. An ancient train with slatted wooden seats took Gordon up to Ismailia and then by truck to the Royal Engineers Training Base at Moascar, arriving on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1942.

*Moascar would have come as a shock to Gordon who expected to go into the line to repel the next thrust by the Germans and Italians. Chaos was the order of the day in Cairo, but at Moascar all was infinitely well ordered. More "bull" than anything Gordon had encountered to date.*

Norman  
Steed

*We were in tents on sand which was sifted by hand at least twice daily and were carried "pick-a-back" about 500 yards so that our mirror finish boots would collect no dust when going on guard at the gate. The P.T. and the Assault Course there must have inspired the Commandos and later the SAS. In those days we did encounter some SAS and Long Range Desert Group coming in or going out on their missions. The book "Popski's Private Army" tells of the work of these patrols in great detail.*

*In the few respites between a welter of guards and chores, Gordon would have gone into the cool of Ismailia for occasional evenings - exploring the native areas which were not out of bounds, tea, cakes or all day breakfast at the Allenby Club (named after the WW1 General). I recall a cafe there - The Copper Kettle. The Sweet Water Canal flowed nearby and it was said that 14 injections were necessary if one fell in. I remember the blare of loud speakers pouring out the Arab music which grated on our ears. People of numerous Middle Eastern nations enjoying the cool of the evening, the strange spicy fragrances; some very strange. The frogs and crickets, chirruping and stopping as one.*

Norman  
Steed

*This picture shows rolled-up shirt sleeves and the baggy turn-ups of the despised Bermuda shorts; both to be rolled down by order at dusk to protect against mosquitoes.*



Gordon, possibly Port Said or Ismailia c. September 1942

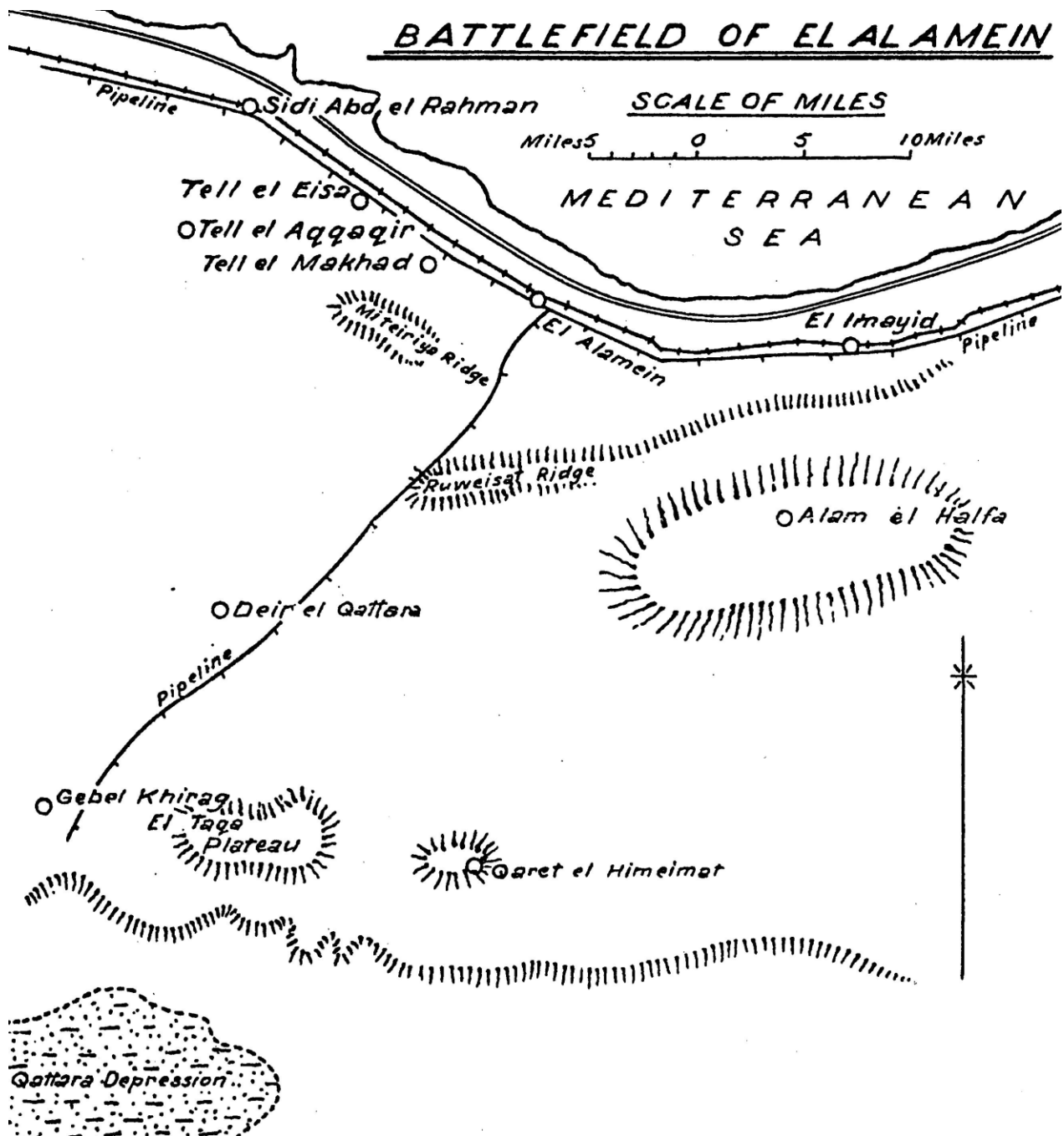
From Moascar Gordon was posted to 21<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron at Gebel Maryam in preparation to join the line. At this time Rommel's advance had been halted along a line running South from El Alamein Station.

At the beginning of October, as part of the advance party, Gordon moved forward towards the front line, passing both Cairo and Alexandria before arriving at the rear of front line southern sector, to join 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division who were guarding the flank against Rommel's expected attack.

*General Bernard Montgomery had taken command of what would be known in future as The British Eighth Army but was a great assortment of British, Empire and Allied Troops. On arrival he had declared "Here we are and here we shall stay. If we cannot stay here alive, then we shall stay here dead." The degree of inspiration in this clarion call to Gordon and his mates may not have been felt immediately. However, the General let it be known that he would not move from the El Alamein Line until he had all the material and all the men to ensure victory.*

Norman  
Steed

The El Alamein battle plan was to fool the enemy into expecting an attack from the south when in fact, the real thrust would come in the north. To endeavour to deceive the enemy, extensive deceptive measures were taken and in the preparation of these tasks, the engineer units took a large share. Three weeks before the battle of El Alamein, dummy lorries were erected in the spots where guns would be brought into action and the latter were brought up later and concealed under the dummies. In the event, so carefully was the whole scheme planned and carried out that the deception was completely successful; the main direction of our thrust and the location of our armour were unknown to the enemy at the time the attack began. Indeed the Germans were convinced that the main attack would be a "left hook" from the southern flank, and accordingly placed most of their armour to meet it there.



Battlefield of El Alamein, October 1942

With the deception activities complete, nearly all available engineers were rushed north. The battle of El Alamein started at 21:30 hours on the evening of 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1942, heralded by the biggest artillery barrage since World War One.

In these first hours, Gordon's job would be the clearance and marking of gaps through our own minefields and through many of those lying in no-man's-land, in front of the leading divisions. The mine lifting drill should be simple, automatic and foolproof. It was found, if it did not conform to these conditions, that men, from familiarity with the dangers, and from weariness or nerve strain from continuous employment on the work, became careless and the casualty rate rose. The deliberate and continuous sweeping with detectors, each man going forward slowly and intently, eyes on the ground, earphones on the head, while the noise of battle crashed round him, and then the cold-blooded investigation and lifting of the mines, no man knowing when some new heathenish invention of the enemy would not blow him to eternity, proved a terrific strain on the men employed. These clearance tasks were done under the constant attention of enemy mortar bombs, small arms and machine-gun fire.

Norman  
Steed

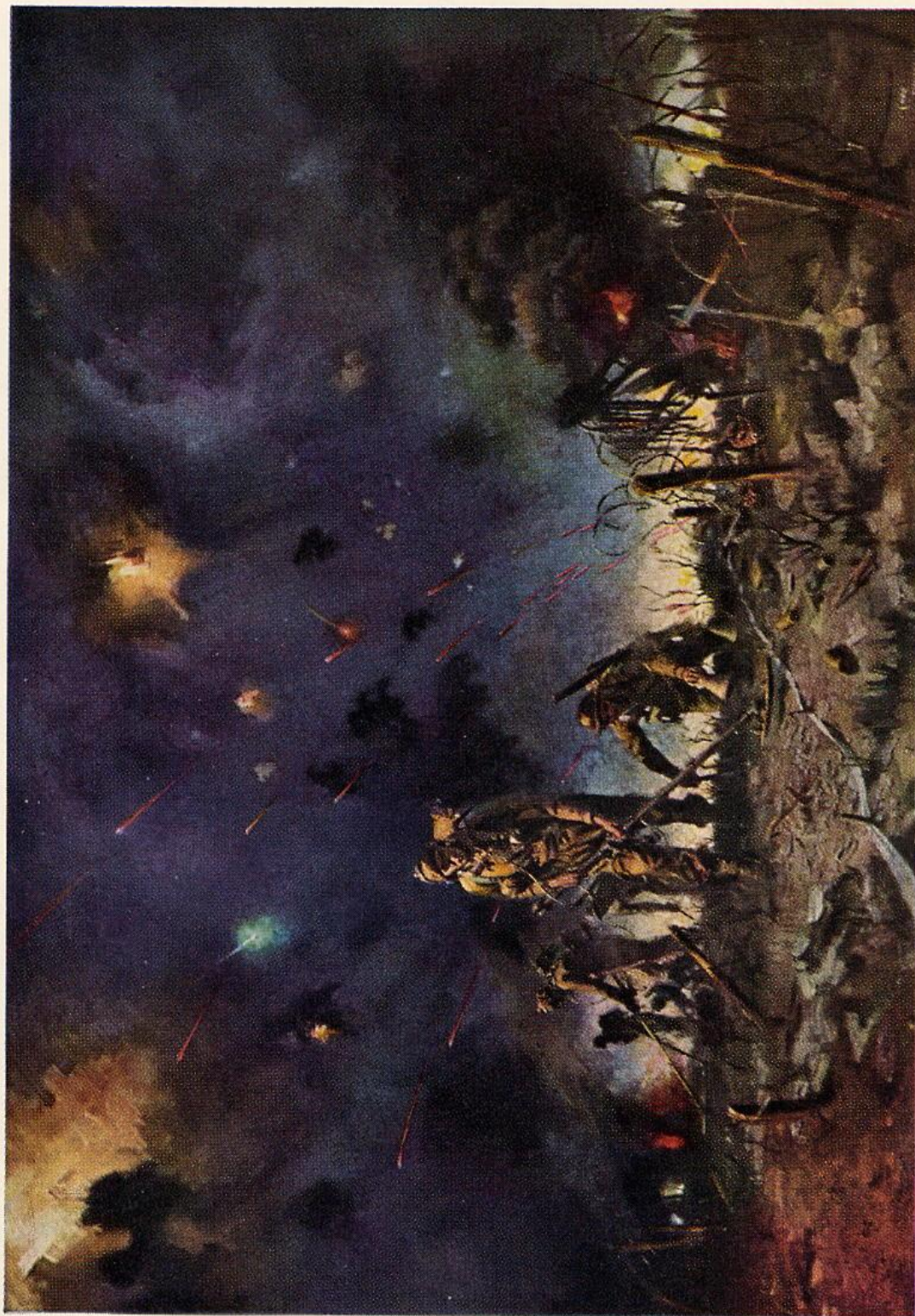
*The planning and progress of this battle is very much documented. I say without fear of contradiction that it was the most awesome experience of Gordon's life up to that date. Briefly, the minefields laid by sappers and infantry had stopped the German/Italians at El Alamein. For us, to go forward again gaps had to be made through our minefields and enemy minefields, some five miles in all. The gaps were at the northern end of the line but I am sure that the Sappers of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division were brought North to work on this. The 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured gave the impression that it was staying at the South end of the line to guard against outflanking, but quickly moved North to pass through the gaps. Passage through the gaps was slower than anticipated. When the mine detectors became unusable, the Sappers resorted to lining up, shoulder to shoulder and advancing slowly whilst prodding the sand with their bayonets. Some mines were missed.*

At the end of the night "January" minefield had been breached and infantry had moved up to consolidate new positions. "February" still remained to be tackled during the next night, 24<sup>th</sup>/25<sup>th</sup> October.

Norman  
Steed

*In the days and nights of this activity the desert was churned to a fine powder, much like custard powder. When not working, Gordon would have spent scorching days under his truck or in his slit trench. I was lucky enough to have a sheet of corrugated iron over half my trench - something like a microwave, surrounded by hosts of tireless files. He probably had one of those little circles of net with a border of glass beads to make a cover for his mug. If he managed a wash, his complexion changed from custard to chestnut brown. His task would have been the finding and lifting of mines (various) under the initial barrage from about 800 guns. The shells making a continuous organ-like howling high above. The traffic, like Hyde-Park Corner in a sandstorm, in the eerie light of searchlights deflected from clouds and the disco flashes of the guns. This went on for a few nights but gradually died out as the breakout from the minefields was achieved.*





THE ROYAL ENGINEERS OPENING THE WAY THROUGH THE MINEFIELDS AT THE BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN ON THE NIGHT OF 23RD OCTOBER, 1942, FROM THE ORIGINAL BY T. CUNEO

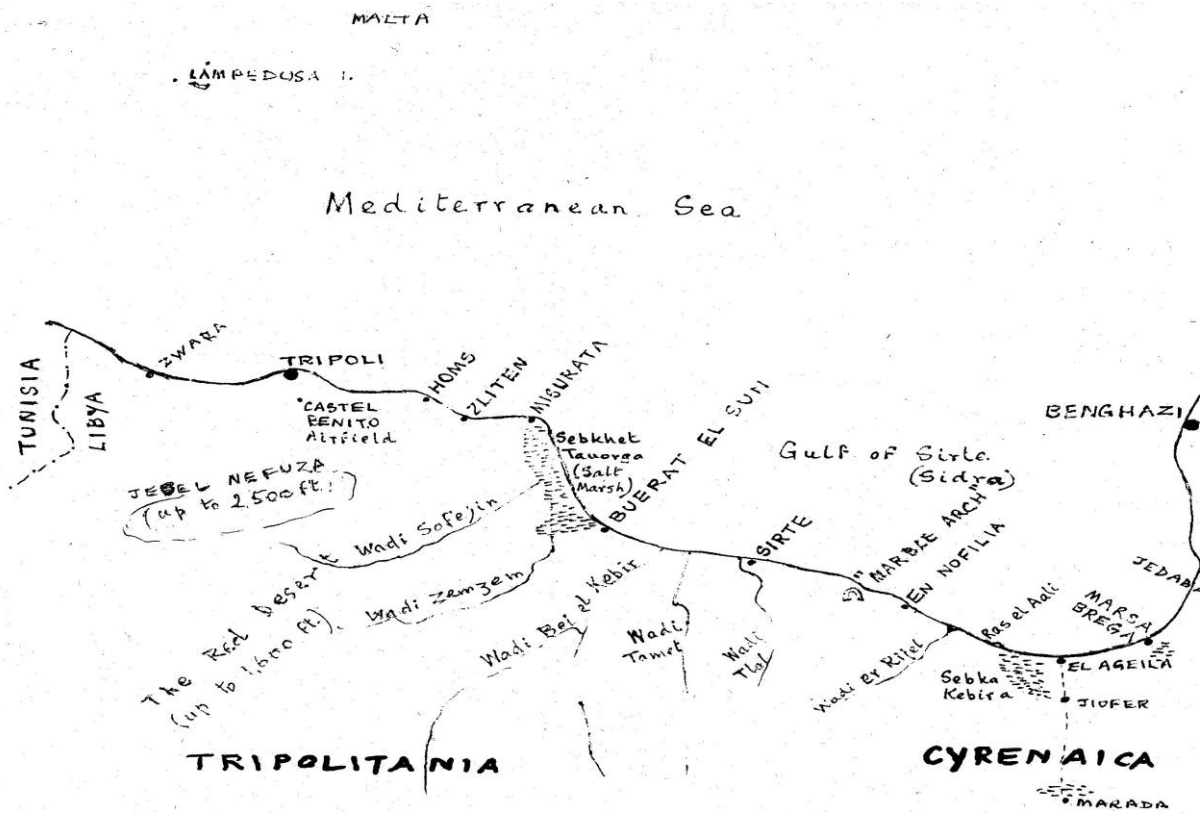
John  
Laing

*After a tremendous battle in the Northern Sector, the enemy had been finally defeated and began to withdraw. On 4<sup>th</sup> November we began the pursuit. Our first move was through the cleared parts of the minefields near Tel el Eisa. The engagements here had been much fiercer than in our sector and there were still ample signs of destruction – many tanks and other vehicles knocked out and disabled in our lines, and as we went westwards the same sight met our eyes, although this time it was enemy armour. One task that we sappers carried out on the battlefield was the further disabling of enemy tanks. If a tank looked as though it could possibly be repaired and brought into use again, in the event of the enemy regaining control of the battlefield, we delivered the "coup de grace" to forestall such action. A sandbag was half filled with ammonal, a powdery explosive. It was then placed on top of the hull of the tank and pushed tight against the turret, just where the gun barrel came through. A good detonation in that position usually meant the turret being blown off and the gun irreparably damaged.*

*Movement in the desert was fairly easy, but along the main road, we were again occupied in checking for mined verges and making diversions around deliberate craters in the road. Follow-up sappers and pioneers would have to repair the craters properly; we did not have time and were only able to mark out and improve diversions which had to be mine-free. Halfaya Pass did present a problem, as there were quite a few mines scattered about. It was decided that we should tackle the sweeping operation by night which added to our difficulties, but we managed it all right and on 11<sup>th</sup> November we were once again in Libya, moving fast across the desert following the route of the Trigh Capuzzo.*

*We were using hundreds of gallons of petrol, the water tankers had to be sent back constantly for refilling and the rations had to keep coming up. Sadly by now the rations were not very exciting - once again not much other than bully beef, biscuits, margarine and ascorbic acid tablets.*

On 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1942, 21<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron had the distinction of being the first engineers to enter Benghazi. Here, Gordon spent two days billeted at the railway station after which they returned to the command of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division. After a brief respite, the engineers were soon again found in pursuit of Rommel's retreating forces.



Scale 1:4m

The Breakout - Benghazi to Tripoli



John  
Laing

*On Christmas Eve we were ordered to catch up. I see from my notes that we made very good speed that day, covering 110 miles in 5 ½ hours which was better than most cross-country journeys. It was an exhilarating day, advancing in convoy across open terrain, free from signs of battle and the worry of setting off mines. We were not the only ones moving. We had supply columns keeping pace with us, some of the lorries undoubtedly bringing up our Christmas dinners.*

*Christmas Day was another period of rest. The padre visited and arranged a short service for us. The rumours about turkeys was true and they had come with other trimmings. Corporal Wilkinson, the squadron cook, did wonders with his helpers and we all enjoyed our meal. As well as being chief cook, Corporal Wilkinson was also a bit of an entertainer and played a great part in the singsong we had that evening.*

Gordon spent a "quiet" Christmas Day 1942 in the desert, thirty miles south of Sirte.

John  
Laing

*On Boxing Day, we came down to earth with a bump. We had imagined that we were to have another day's rest and then return to the coast road, West of Sirte, to carry on with our usual task of mine clearing. However progress had been slightly slower than expected to the East of the town and the sappers there were still a few miles short of their target. Accordingly, we were sent off 45 miles towards the coast in that direction to help out.*

*The remaining few days of 1942 and just up into the New Year were spent clearing the next 30 miles of coast road and the airfield at Wadi Tamet which was required soon, as a forward landing ground for the Desert Air Force. We camped for a while near the airfield and it was nearly a repeat of our work at Marble Arch, although not quite so extensive. Even so, we lifted over 400 mines and removed many booby-trapped obstacles.*

*During this period, I noticed a certain amount of anxiety neurosis creeping into the unit. The squadron had been on the go for so long continuously since the Battle of El Alamein, that events were getting on top of some people. These were the thoughts: "Will this ever end?", "What's round the next corner?" and "How much will we have to do tomorrow?"*

*Some men were listening out for explosions and there was really nothing else to talk about except what had been done recently and what was going to be done next.*

Norman  
Steed

*The capture of Tripoli was a prize indeed, falling on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1943. A very pleasant green and white oasis after the dusty desert. Pavements, palm trees, poncy haircuts, photos, girls, perfume and even ice-cream.*

John  
Laing

*We stayed in the Tripoli area for just over a fortnight. Although capture of the city had been one of our goals, much still remained to be done to finish off the campaign by linking up with the First Army in Tunisia.*

During this time Gordon was engaged in clearing the docks at Tripoli. At the end of the month, some members of the squadron received various medals for gallantry, indicating that they had been engaged in some work under hazardous conditions during the preceding weeks.

On 15<sup>th</sup> February 1943, 21<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron was on the move again, crossing the frontier into Tunisia, fifty miles South of the coast.

Norman  
Steed

On his travel into Tunisia, Gordon would have been engaged in making or improving diversions over difficult bits of rocky country and sweeping for mines along the verges of the road or tracks. The anti-tank mines were fairly easily dealt with unless they had been booby-trapped by the addition of an anti-personnel device. The drifting sand revealed many of them, but covered others more deeply.

The German "S" mine was a steel canister like a large tin of peaches, in which was a smaller loose canister filled with small steel balls. It had two methods of detonation; one by trip wire and one by pressure on three metal rods which protruded above ground for about two inches - not easily seen. Treading on these fired a charge which propelled the inner canister into the air and a delayed explosion scattered the steel balls.

Gordon would have learned what to do to render these harmless, but they had to be seen or detected in the first instance. Quite frequently it was the treading on one which resulted in others being found fairly easily.

The Italians had a small red painted tinny mine, or blast grenade which was very sensitive. These could be converted into a pillar box moneybox for a child and accidents occurred.

Gordon would have had a period of mine-laying in front of the Alamein line. The method there was to lay out a length of signal wire with knots in it at irregular intervals. A mine was placed at each knot. The wire was turned end to end for the next row and a wire with a different sequence of knots used for the next two rows. The Officer or Sgt I/C drew a sketch plan with rough paced measurements from a datum point and, in theory, the mines could be easily found again after the war had passed on. At that time Egyptian pattern mines were used, like a round tin tureen and lid. A glass ampoule containing nitro glycererine was poked into a side aperture and a central plunger detonated this when a vehicle passed over. The plunger was held up by a pin which sheered under the weight. The action was greased and collected sand, sometimes a pin would be missing and this would be replaced with a matchstick or odd piece of wire, creating a much more sensitive device. The inner boundary of the minefield was marked with angle iron stakes and a strand of wire. A sapper on the ground held the stake, a sapper on the back of a 15cwt truck banged it in. Sometimes the head of the hammer would miss and the handle hit the stake. After a few misses the handle would break and the head would go into orbit. I always felt that we were as much in danger from our own good intentions as from the Germans. This could not be a quiet job and occasionally attracted some fire or aircraft. A few of our own anti-personnel mines were added. Fairly frequently the fence would be erected and a few AP mines but very little else. All quite strenuous work.

Then it was back to our side of the minefield and safety beyond the infantry or tanks. A wash of sorts might be managed which, oddly, resulted in everyone going a darker shade as the flour like desert dust was shifted around, rather than washed away. Then three or four at a time would nip over to the Cook's point to be regaled with liquid corned beef or a shared tin of Irish stew to play "find the meat", one or two tinned potatoes, tinned carrot - enhanced by dried beans, lentils, onion, cabbage captured from the Italians. Biscuits, of course, fig jam or marmalade and rice pudding now and then, this flecked with brown bits which might be tealeaves from the previous use of the dixey (container) or a deceased fly. Then cards, dominoes etc, write a letter home in the active service green-buff envelope.

Norman  
Steed

Then we would arrange the vehicles in a leaguered circular formation like cowboys and indians. Gordon would have taken his turns at guard, but whereas at Moascar this was a highly dedicated, spit and polish affair, desert guard duty was highly informal - report to a Corporal at dusk, if one could find where his card school was in progress, wait for the laggards to turn up. Disagree vociferously on the "Rota" - go back to what one was doing and at the appropriate time, with a mate, wander around - rifle and bayonet vaguely ready. A grave responsibility fell upon the last shift as they had to rouse the Cook and his mate. "The Guard" would then get warmed at the paraffin "blower" and stir the porridge, or alternatively, the biscuit bash; made by bashing a few packets of biscuits into crumble, plus one or two tins of "Coronation" milk and half a ladle of sugar. Tea and porridge served to oneself was of course to a superior standard.

Whilst travelling, each section would frequently cater for themselves with rations drawn from the Cookhouse truck - the cooker being two halves of a petrol tin clearly embossed "this tin contains lead" - one half filled with sand soaked with petrol - the other being the cooking pot. When night fell, it was off to bed between the blankets, kept rolled up in a ground sheet by day. Possibly in a shallow slit trench of ones own making or beneath the truck where it was thought to be safer than in the open. Though how this could be with 20 gallons of petrol and about half a hundredweight of explosive above your head I am not really sure.

The advance from Tripoli was set in motion by 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division only; to positions just beyond Medenine where The Queens dug in with great difficulty.

It was noted that on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1943, the situation was tense and a minefield was laid in expectation of an attack. This was a rather informal affair, not with the sort of precision I have outlined at Alamein. We also constructed shallow gun pits for the 6-pounder Anti-tank guns. Made difficult by the rocky ground, that needed blasting and more complicated by the strata of sand-rock-sand-rock. Having bored holes with the compressor, the charge sometimes blew out a fountain of sand without disturbing the surface to any useful extent.

Two days later Rommel attacked but with much credit to The Queens anti-tank gunners, fifty enemy tanks were destroyed. When Rommel pulled back there was a litter of tanks, some of which the Germans tried to recover. To prevent this sort of thing sappers would explode a charge of surplus explosive or odd shells in the gun and in the turrets of knocked out tanks.

Norman  
Steed

This defensive battle became known as the Battle of Medenine. Field Marshall Montgomery, in speaking of the Battle of Alam Halfa as a battle which never received the attention it deserved as a vital action which we could not afford to lose refers to a similar battle at Medenine, saying, "There, also success at Medenine paved the way for decisive victory in our subsequent offensive at Mareth."

The Queens were awarded a new six pounder gun to replace the one which had wrought most havoc on that night, but preferred to keep the gun that had served them well and which they finally brought home. Now known and respected as The Medenine Gun. Positions were then taken up in front of the Mareth Line; a formidable obstacle to our advance into Tunisia.



The Battle of Medenine, 6<sup>th</sup> March 1943, by Terence Cuneo

The anti-tank guns of the Left Flank Company 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Scots Guards, during the battle of Medenine, The scene depicts the moment when Lt F A L Waldron's Platoon knocked out three German tanks as they came over the crest of the ridge.

On 16 March 1943, Gordon took part in an attack on the three heights at the south of the Mareth line with 201 Guards Brigade. This was to be a preliminary to the main attack on the Mareth Line, which would happen later.

Norman  
Steed

*This came to be known (not by many) as The Battle of The Horseshoe and is described to some extent in the Histories of Scots Guards and Coldstreams. Monty had encouraged Officers to keep their men informed on what was going on and before this action got going our Captain Paddy Ewart said - "Tonight, boys, we are going with The Guards in an action which will open the gates of Tunis, you mark my words". He then described the importance of the three heights. "We shall move from the start line behind a moving barrage which will be laid on these hills - 21,000 shells in half an hour. If this does not kill off every B... German it will surely leave them with a singing in their ears. It will be a piece of cake ...". Unfortunately there were a few hard nuts in this particular piece of cake. The Guards took the heights, but the Germans did not evacuate completely and next morning they regained their positions. It was a failure which has not attracted the attention given to more glorious failures, reconnaissance had not revealed the extent of mines. The death of Gordon's 2OC and wounding of L/Sgt Pugh indicate that Gordon was in the thick of it.*

The main attack was launched according to plan at 10:30 p.m. on 20<sup>th</sup> March across the Wadi Zig-Zaou. The wadi ran across the front of the enemy position and formed an efficient anti-tank, and even anti-personnel, obstacle. It was about 200 feet broad and had steep, almost un-climbable, banks twenty feet high. There was little water in it but quantities of mud. In preparation for the assault, the engineers had made quantities of fascines and ladders, armed with which, the infantry and sappers advanced "as though at the storm of Badajoz". The infantry stormed successfully three or four strong points and formed a bridgehead. The engineers under a storm of fire, for the enemy's artillery had the range accurately and their machine-guns enfiladed the wadi, carried forward their fascines and started to build causeways for tanks and vehicles. Casualties were extremely heavy, but in spite of these they managed to build one causeway for tracked vehicles but were unable to improve it to take wheeled transport. Further, in the deep mud, the first light tanks crossing damaged the causeway so badly that heavier tanks were unable to follow.

On the night of 21<sup>st</sup>/22<sup>nd</sup>, heavy rain brought the wadi down in spate and further damaged the crossing. During the afternoon the enemy counter-attacked strongly and considerably reduced the bridgehead. When work started in the evening to build two new causeways, conditions could hardly have been worse. The enemy were on the offensive and at very close range. The wadi was an inferno of fire. The rising moon silhouetted the men working on the east bank, but the sappers worked feverishly with fascines and wire mesh to build the causeways. Lieut-Colonel Blundell was everywhere encouraging his men and pointing out, though the peak of his cap had been shot off, that if a man of his height, well over six feet, was unhurt, others would be too. When an infantry officer asked help for some of his men who had been blown up in a minefield, Blundell and a sapper with a detector went to the rescue. While doing so the sapper was hit and Blundell carried him to safety.

At 3:30 am the enemy put down a heavy barrage in preparation for a further counter-attack. Under this the causeways were finished and Blundell withdrew his men but not before he had given orders that no one was to hurry away so as not to alarm other troops in the area. He himself went last stopping to talk to infantry groups while his men waited for him. Many units bore witness to the heartening effect of the coolness of the sappers.

Despite the enemy resistance, the Allies finally made progress and many prisoners were captured which also included German Youth movement and Italian Young Fascists.

Gordon's 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday was spent 10 miles South of Gabes. His troop managed to pinch a lamb from a Bedouin shepherd for dinner and fruit pudding made a good substitute for birthday cake.

After this, many hundreds of miles were covered in the chase across the desert by 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division as the Afrika Corps resistance crumbled.

Norman  
Steed

*Setting off into the dusk and lurching, bumping, stopping and starting for miles in what must have seemed ever decreasing circles would not have been very comfortable. In some sort of over-loaded vehicle, sitting on and amongst all the gear. The tools of the trade - picks, shovels, hammers, wire cutters, chisels, wire, pickets, rifles, helmets, gas masks, bedding, personal boxes, ropes, rations, water, petrol, clothing, bivvys, and probably about 5 cwt of explosives various, and ammunition.*

With the fall of Tunis on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1943, the desert campaign was won. Gordon had left the Alexandria area in Egypt in September 1942 and traversed the 1,900 miles or so to Tunis to say nothing of the hundreds of spiralling miles between.

John  
Laing

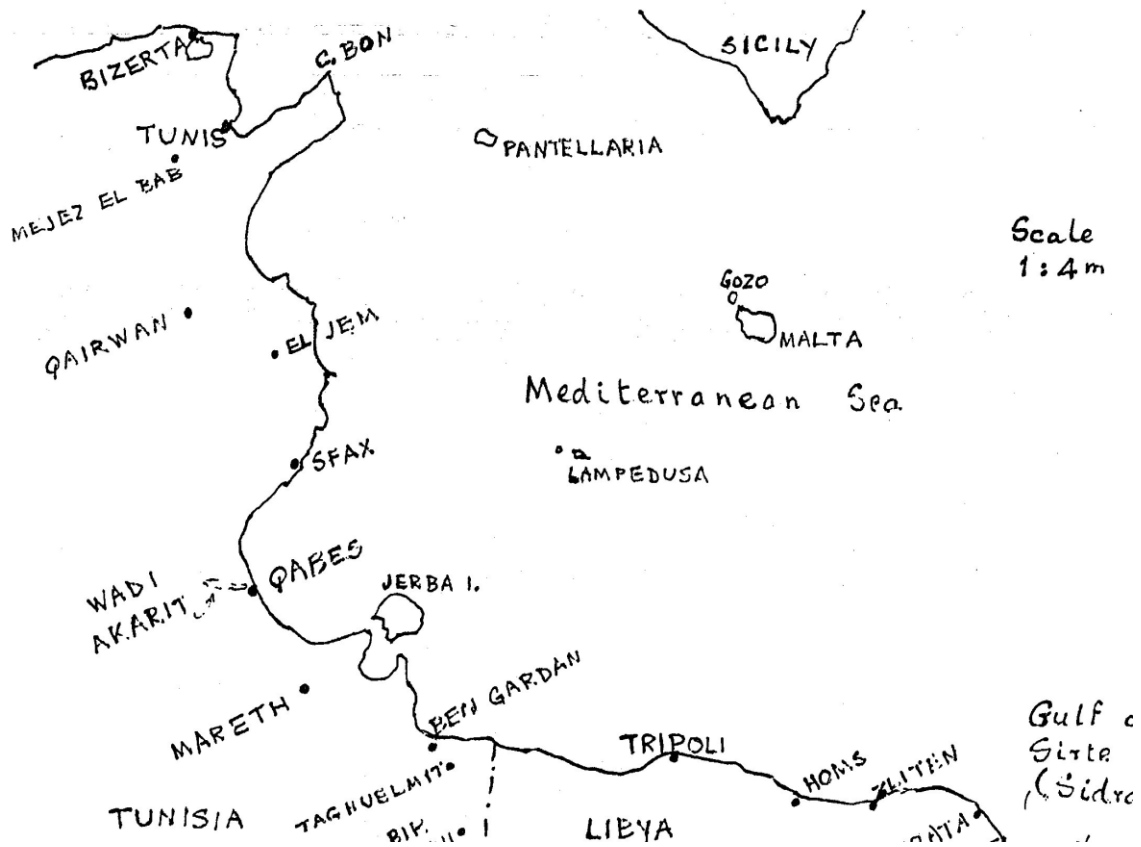
*After the surrender there was great jubilation in Tunis. The city was virtually undamaged and there were shops, restaurants and cafes open. French girls were waiting in the streets to rush up and kiss our soldiers, while some people were handing out bottles of wine.*

21<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron returned East to Tripoli and Gordon's activities turned to bricklaying and reconstruction work by day with concerts being enjoyed in the evening. This continued into July when Gordon was involved in the building of a new hospital at Maida. With the completion of reconstruction duties, priorities returned to fitness and training for the next assault – Sicily, possibly, Italy? It was not for Gordon to know.

7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division took part in the victory parade at Tripoli on 21<sup>st</sup> June where they were reviewed by The King.

John  
Laing

You may wonder how Gordon was expected to be a dusty bricklayer at one minute and a parade ground soldier the next. That is how it was - lined up on the road into Tripoli, and waiting for The King. I recall that we had bleached and blanched our webbing and gaiters with some chalky white powder which was not blanco and came off on clothes and hands. A jeep appeared and stopped a few yards to my left. A tall and high ranking officer got out with a tin of the blanco and brush and painted a white dot on the road, climbed back in, accompanied by a softly murmured "Hooray". After a while The King's vehicle came and stopped at the dot for a few words with an officer. We did not see anything of the rest of the parade. There was a light shower of rain and in a few moments our inferior blanco was dribbling all over our best battledress and highly polished boots.



Tripoli to Tunis 1943

In August the arrival of the new "Bailey Bridge" was a landmark occasion for the engineers.

Norman  
Steed

It was very heavy and always too hot, too cold or too wet to handle - but handle we did.

This sparked an intensive time of training on the coast at Homs, East of Tripoli, with many exercises in deploying and lifting of the bridging equipment. These new skills would prove vital to the Allies advance as they prepared to move on new fronts.

The loading of landing ships and practising of beach invasion landings was soon to be the order of the day. Camouflage changed from sand to green/black, and soon the white star in a circle was being displayed which seemed to make nonsense of the camouflage. Anything that could be, was religiously greased and waterproofed. During these busy days of training and preparation Gordon still managed to get days off to relax in nearby Tripoli or go swimming in the Med.

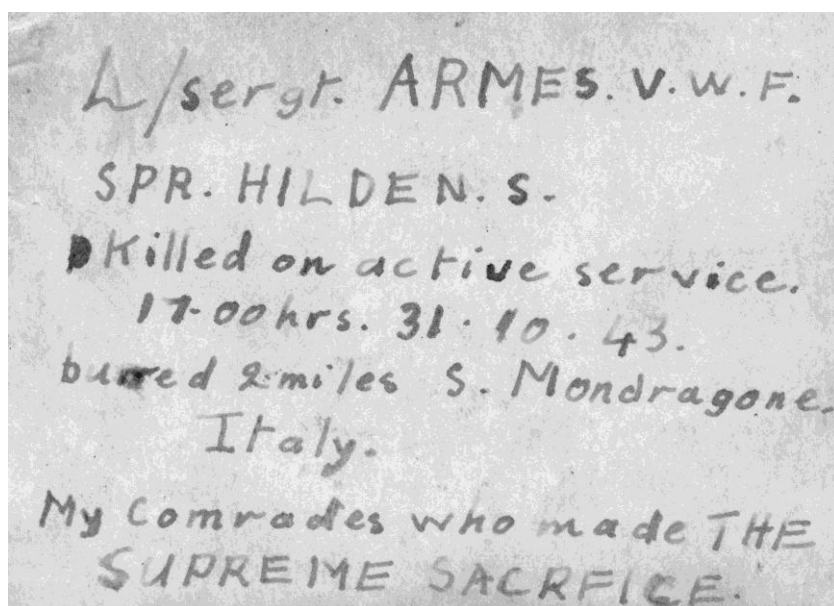
## The Salerno Landings, Italy

On 16<sup>th</sup> September 1943, under the command of General Clark's American 5<sup>th</sup> Army, 21<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron, now renamed 621<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron, embarked on tank landing ships and in the late evening slipped away from Tripoli docks – destination Italy.

The three day voyage passed through the calm of the Messina Strait and landed on the shores south of Salerno. The enemy occupied the surrounding heights but the engineers landed unopposed and without getting their feet wet but the scene was of general confusion. The existing bridgehead had been forced to retract and there was not enough room for all the troops.

But within two days 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured were thrust into the battle. After deploying their first Bailey bridge at Scafati, Gordon's troop advanced with The Queens towards Mondragone. The fighting continued and this became another busy time for the engineers as they dealt with the removal of road blocks, repairing craters and generally keeping the advance going.

Full details are not known, but Gordon's section came under attack with two of his close friends being killed and another three being wounded. Gordon's photograph of the graves is shown below and his own comments can be found on the reverse.



Lance Sergeant Armes and Sapper Hilden are now buried in the Minturno War Cemetery.

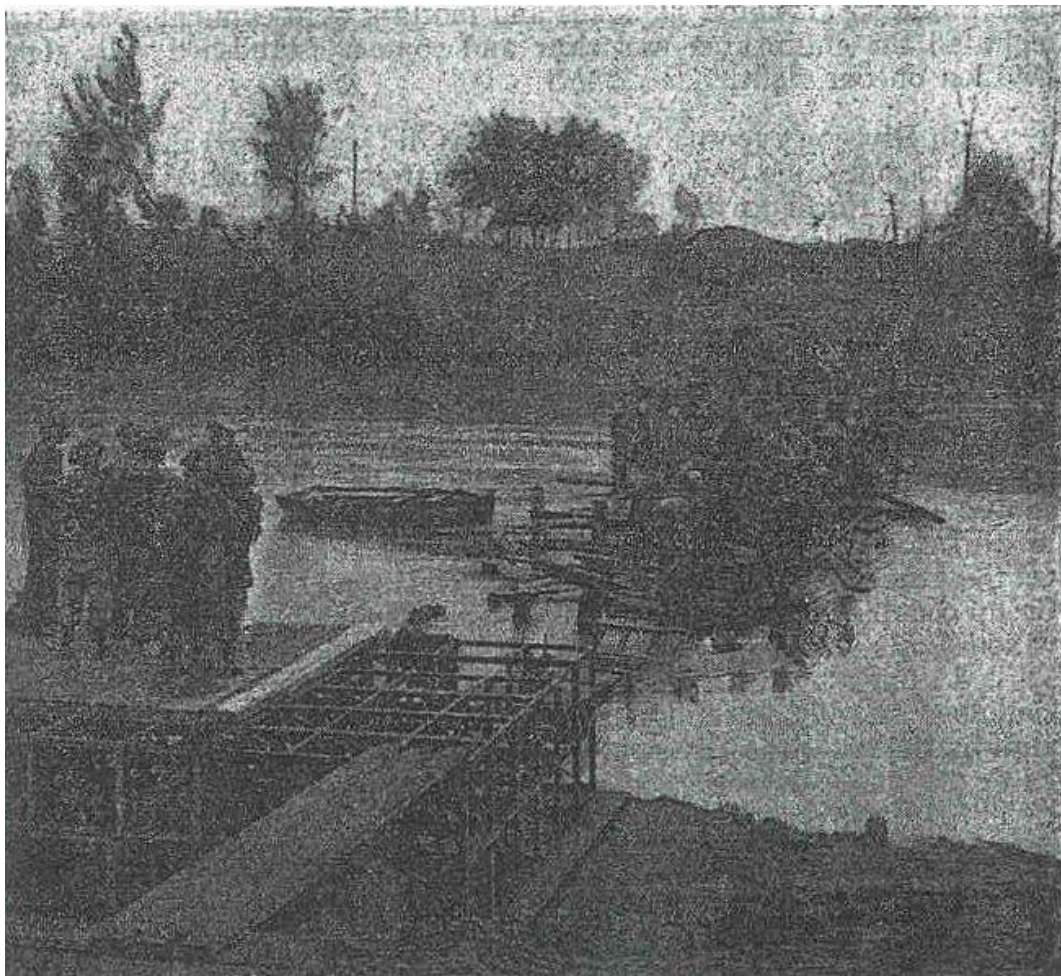


In between the fighting, trips were made to Pompeii and even an ascent of Mount Vesuvius on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1943.

Norman  
Steed

*There had been an overflow of lava sometime previously which had cut the road. We were able to drive up in our trucks most of the way but the last mile perhaps was on foot - peering into red glowing crevices underfoot and climbing the slippery shale of cinders to catch a glimpse of the crater. Great plumes of molten lava were being shot into the air and raining down close. The Italian guides knew how to dash in, seize a small lump in their tongs and press into it a small coin, as a souvenir for the invading enemy whom they seemed to regard as tourists.*

The advance continued North to the river Volturno. This was to be an assault crossing which proved very costly in casualties as the far bank was well fortified and heavily defended by the enemy. The engineers were involved in many bridging tasks at this time and also constructed rafts to ferry the tanks and armour across the river.



Royal Engineers bridge the Volturno River, November 1943

By mid November, 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division was withdrawn from the Italian campaign, it's skills and experience required for the liberation plans of Northwest Europe. Meanwhile, Gordon was billeted in a spaghetti factory. Daily routine comprised of parades, fitness training, lectures and church services.



In the early hours of 20<sup>th</sup> December, 621<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron, route marched the eight miles into Napoli docks. As one, 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division embarked on a convoy of six troopers and eight destroyers and was underway by mid afternoon.

The voyage must have been a quiet and relaxed affair after the fighting of the last fifteen months. The 1/5 Queens band and choir provided much entertainment and gramophones were the order of the day. The convoy spent Christmas in Oran, on the North African coast. Christmas Day started with a church service, with 1/5 Queens's band and choir in attendance. Christmas dinner came with turkey and Christmas pudding and, as is tradition in the services, the lower ranks were waited upon by their Sergeants and Officers. The King's speech was broadcast in the afternoon and there was an evening concert by the much overworked 1/5 Queens band.

Having sailed past Gibraltar, the convoy turned north for home and on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1944, 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, including 621<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron disembarked at Glasgow.

## Thetford Forest

Leave quickly followed and Gordon returned to his family at Whitstable and, on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, Ruth and Gordon were married in The Salvation Army at Whitstable.



Marriage of Ruth and Gordon, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1944, Whitstable

War did not allow for the new couple to spend much time together. After a short honeymoon at Gordon's grandmother's house in Kingsnorth they both returned to their units. For Gordon, those short lived home comforts were exchanged for the dark Nissen huts in the pine forests known as Thetford Chase, at Mundford in Suffolk. The heaths of East Anglia were a far cry from the winds and dusty sands of the desert, but alas there were few pubs or cinemas. The Nissen huts in that cold winter were only just preferable to tents and bivvies. Conditions were such that graffiti appeared on the walls saying "No leave, no second front."

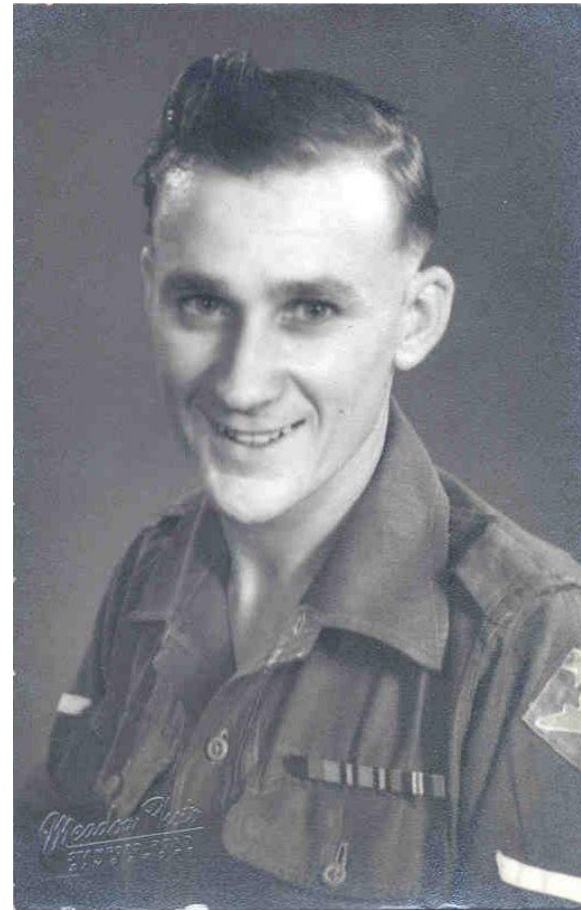
By this time, as with so many other British families, the family were now fully committed to the war effort. Thomas Blyth was a member of the Auxillary Fire Service. The Auxiliary Fire Service had grown as part of the A.R.P. (Air Raid Precautions) recruitment drive. The men and women who became part-timers in the Fire Service gave up one night in three to be at the station, and another to be "on call". Of course, this was in addition to a full days civilian job.

Donald was serving in the Royal Air Force as an air gunner, flying Halifax bombers with 102 Squadron from Pocklington airfield in Yorkshire. His pilot had transferred from fighters and was somewhat crazy, having attempted a loop the loop in the four engined aircraft. Donald survived three prangs with this pilot including one on take off when the aircraft ended up across a road as it didn't manage to get off the ground. He was involved in many of the "thousand bomber raids", the controversial strategy imposed by Bomber Harris. Having completed the maximum number of missions, Donald flew his last sortie on morning of D Day.

The youngest brother, Bernard, had been enlisted into the Royal Corps of Signals. He was soon to be serving in the Far East under General Bill Slim's "Forgotten" 14<sup>th</sup> Army, and was responsible for control and communications in support of airfield activities. He travelled through India, Bengal, Burma, Malaysia. Finally Bernard arrived in Singapore where he supervised Japanese prisoners of war in the reconstruction of Changi airfield. Bernard did not return from overseas duty until May 1947.



Donald Blyth, c. 1944



Bernard Blyth, December 1946 Singapore

For 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, the five months spent in the East Anglia area were the only time that the Desert Rats were in the United Kingdom in the entire existence of the war.

As they prepared for the invasion of Normandy, the Squadron received new equipment, learning to perfect the intricacies of the Bailey Bridge and how to disarm the multitude of unexploded bombs they were likely to encounter. The division carried out many exercises in southern England and it was during this time that Gordon collected his first wound – one night, whilst walking in the forest darkness he cracked his head open on a tree!

Today, the entrance to the camp is marked by the memorial to the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, a Mark IV Cromwell tank. The significance of the Cromwell Tank is that the three armoured regiments and the two reconnaissance regiments of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division were equipped mainly with Cromwell Tanks while stationed in Thetford Forest and the Division was then the first formation to take the then brand new British tank into action.



**7<sup>th</sup> ARMoured DIVISION  
DESERT RATS  
FROM EL ALAMEIN TO BERLIN  
Via  
NORTH AFRICA - ITALY - THETFORD FOREST - FRANCE -BELGIUM –  
HOLLAND**

The 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division was stationed in Thetford Forest between January and May 1944 while they prepared for the invasion of Normandy. This was the only time the division was in the United Kingdom in its entire existence. The Division sailed from Felixstowe on the 5 June 1944 with the first tanks landing on Gold Beach on the evening of 6th June 1944.

*May your glory ever shine, May your laurels never fade, May the memory of this glorious pilgrimage of war you have made from Alamein, via the Baltic to Berlin never die. It is a march unsurpassed thorough all the story of war.*

*May the fathers long tell the children about this tale.*

*Winston Churchill*

The Memorial To 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, Mundford

As the invasion date drew nearer the Squadron was moved into a sealed camp near Brentwood, Essex.

## The Campaign In Northwest Europe

About 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1944 we were put into a Landing Ship Tank at Tilbury, Essex intending to land on D + 3 but having got around Dover under the smoke, we sat off France for a couple of days, wining and dining off tins of cold 'Meat and Veg' washed down by tins of cocoa or oxtail soup heated by a firework in the centre of the can. The LST bumped us into about 2 feet of water and we rode on to St. Paul du Vernay. The British bridgehead was not going too well. There was barely space for the armour to get ashore. The countryside was like Somerset/Dorset where elm trees lined the hedgerows. We demolished a few road blocks and then were employed like Council Highways, widening and repairing roads to make a passage for tanks. We went into Villers Bocage and were promptly thrown out. The weather was fine, cider plentiful, Calvados there for those with strong stomachs. Local foodstuff was liberated and with a butcher in our ranks we sometimes found that a homeless pig sought refuge with us.

Norman  
Steed

We seldom operated as a Squadron and not often as a troop. Usually we were functioning as sections or half sections. One half section would travel on an International Harvester half tracked vehicle in Europe or, a White wheeled scout car in the desert. Six or seven of us with clothes, big pack, small pack, webbing, ammunition pouches, rifle, picks, shovels, axes, crowbars, heavy hammers, ropes, petrol, water, food, blankets, bedroll, groundsheet, a few tins of detonators, exploder, various coils of fuse, half a dozen beehive charges, about 15 lbs explosive various, few hand grenades, ammunition for the 300 Browning machine gun and an assortment of guns and ammo acquired from the enemy.

(I was at Bovington Camp Museum recently looking at a half track and could not imagine how all this was fitted in plus the blokes and loaded and unloaded day after day). The other half section travelled in a 3-ton canvas top truck and we had jeeps and motorbikes for nipping around. The H.Q. section had 15cwt trucks, wireless truck, 3-tonners, recovery vehicle, and various heavy supplies. Larger supplies and equipment came via the Field Park Squadron which could supply a small amount of bridging equipment.

Larger bridge material was supplied by Bridging Companies.

In our half sections we were tagged on to any unit which felt the need. The infantry of the division would attempt to get forward. They could deal with obstacles and mines as well as engineers but they did not have time for that sort of thing and that was where we came in. They wanted close support as soon as possible, anti-tank guns, tanks, defensive mines, wire, etc. Bridges or culverts were necessary to get this support forward. Sometimes the tanks moved forward first, but they were vulnerable in many respects and liked to be in company of some infantry and engineers. We were protected by infantry or armour.

We muddled on in largely uninformed state. Not knowing where we were for weeks on end. Sometimes the war would get away from us and then we would catch up for some larger operation. The scene was seldom depicted as in the movies. From our individual point of view a glimpse of two or three tanks or ten blokes moving along a hedgerow would be the only noticeable indication of "The Front". Gordon's experience would have taught him which of the numerous varieties of gunfire could be detrimental. Obviously we had to work on the surface but could show a good turn of speed to the nearest hole for bit of protection. As the Germans had blown up the roads and bridges we were repairing they knew where we would be without looking and had the range worked out so there could be frequent stoppages. Fortunately on full pay - which was seven shillings per week (less barrack room damages) when I 'joined', and not much more when I left.

Norman  
Steed

We got back into Villers Bocage and, with the Canadians we went into Caen, having watched the RAF and Americans unload about 2000 tons of bombs in an hour or two. We moved into the Industrial Area, then assembled for Operation Goodwood which is described in History of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Divison. Past Lille and taking part in clearing the factory area of Ghent - where we were cut off for a day or two and would not have known if the BBC had not announced it. We built a large Bailey bridge over the Escaut canal. A brief glimpse of Brussels in passing and to Sittard where we were at Christmas 1944. From there we circulated a bit having been part of the "Garden" part of "Market Garden", which was the thrust through Eindhoven and Nijmegen to Arnhem by air and land forces. For a week or so we acted as infantry along the left hand side of the corridor. We operated around S' Hertogenbosch and Veghel, Eindhoven and Tilburg from where we could see V2's going up. From Sittard we were diverted to the assistance of the Americans under threat in 'The Bulge' but we did nothing but sit out cold frosty nights in our half-track, camouflaged with bed sheets. These were of necessity taken from homes of Dutch people driven out by war and probably suffering much more than us.

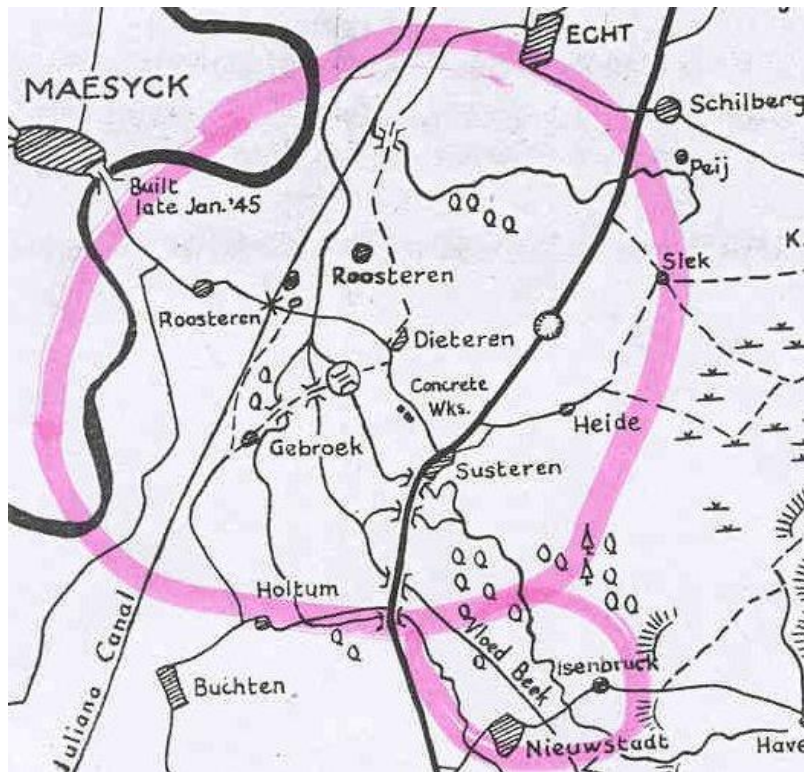
There were many days when the war went on without us and we enjoyed the hospitality and friendship of good people whose land and homes we had destroyed. In Tilburg we dispensed rations and cigarettes and sometimes a little rum from the school where we set up a temporary kitchen and accidentally set fire to the school room.

On New Years Eve 1944, I was toasting Dan and Mar de Reght of 29 Station Street, Sittard, with a minute quantity of cognac saved for the 'liberation'. Some bombs whistled down, I hit the floor - rapidly- in concert with my mates and the civvies trampled over us on their way to the cellar. I cut the under part of my nose on the glass, but the contents were unspilled - just reddened a bit. I expect Gordon was in similar circumstances and able to enjoy what passed as festivities. Short-lived, I'm afraid as we were soon in the bleak area around Susteren - flat, bleak and wetly cold. I do wish that I could recall more detail of events, but I cannot at present. The fields were bordered by drains, like the Fens around Ely, Cambridgeshire.



## Operation Blackcock

The intention of Operation Blackcock, 13<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> January 1945, was to clear the territory up to the River Roer. The plan was to drive a salient into the enemy's positions on the left of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division's sector, to gain the main road that runs from Sittard to Roermond, and then to outflank the German defences on the right.



Military map, January 1945, detailing bridging sites for operation Blackcock

On the 13<sup>th</sup>, The 1/5 Queens carried out a preliminary attack which, aided by Flail Tanks and an artillery barrage, was successful at the cost of seventeen casualties.

The main attack was due to start early on the 16<sup>th</sup> with an objective of capturing the small town of Susteren. This was to be the start of clearing an area known as the Roer Triangle, South of Roermond. The start had to be postponed for twelve hours as a smoke screen, put down to cover movement on the left flank, froze in the air and created a very dense fog. When, however, the fog dispersed the first attack was by the 9<sup>th</sup> Durham Light Infantry who, carrying ladders to cross the twenty foot stream (Vloedbeek) in front of the German posts, captured Dieteren and took many prisoners.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> of January and on into the early hours of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 621<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron Royal Engineers fought to bulldoze a causeway over the Vloedbeek. They were hampered by the thick fog, which, mixed with smoke fired from the 25-pounders, reduced vision to a few yards. Their stores lorries bogged in the mud and they worked under the constant and accurate shelling of the crossing site. The tenacity and bravery of the sappers was beyond all praise.

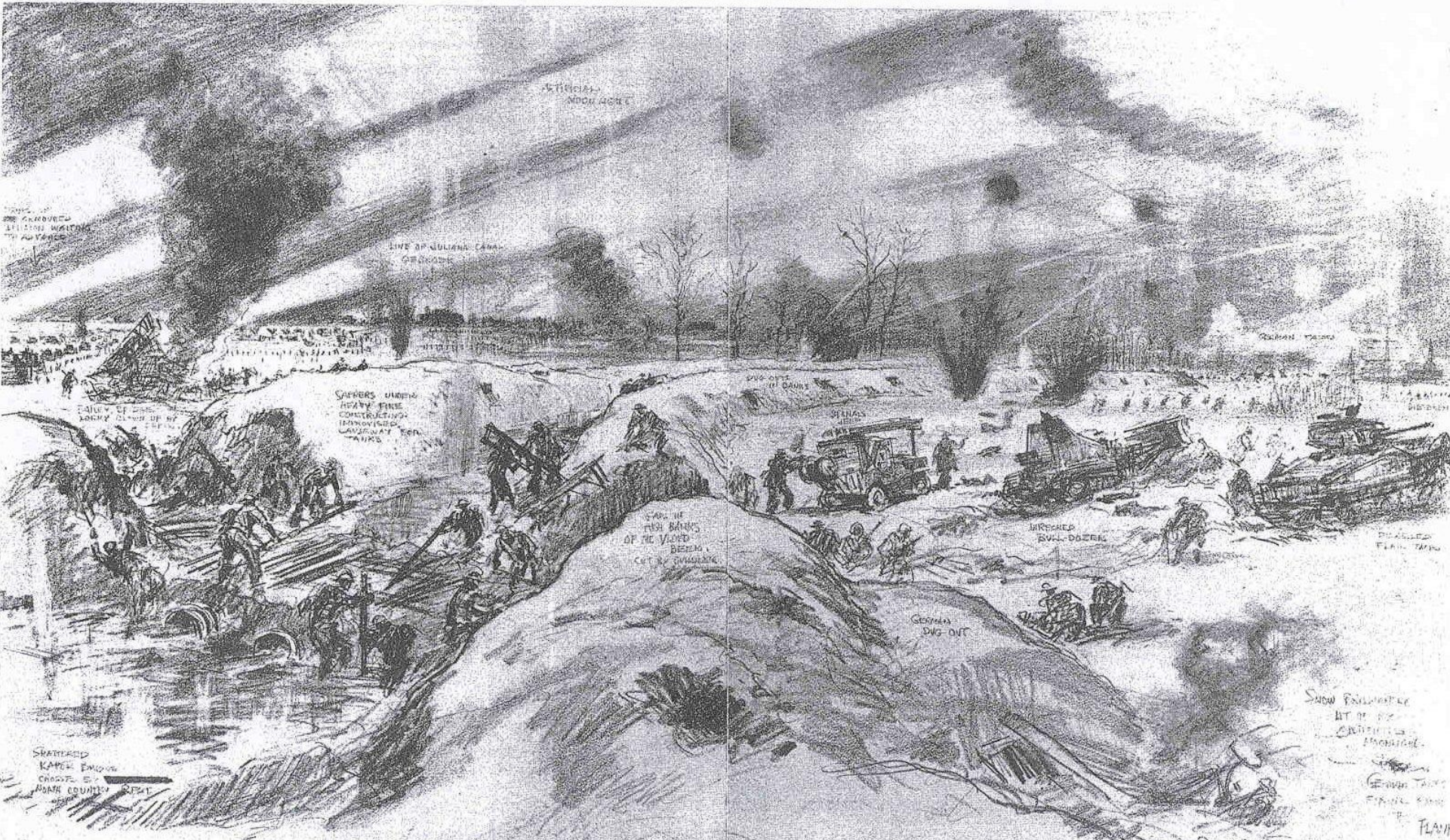
Meanwhile, owing to a light thaw, which was rapidly making the Gebroek road to the West impassable, it was decided to proceed straight away with the capture of Susteren from the West. At 02:00 in the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>, pitch dark and freezing, The Queens started their approach march to cross the Vloedbeek. Conditions were extremely bad; the thaw had produced thick mud, and the fog still persisted. As the leading company were making the crossing of the beek they were counter attacked by Spandau teams from the direction of Susteren. A very dangerous situation was saved by dropping off Bren gun teams to return fire and by a very effective concentration put down on the right flank by 3<sup>rd</sup> Royal Horse Artillery. This fire was so accurate that prisoners said later that almost all the counter attacking force were killed or wounded. The Queens escaped without a single casualty from this affair and their approach march continued.

The battle was of such significance that a drawing by renowned war artist, Captain Bryan De Grineau, appeared in The London Illustrated News on 17 February 1945, as shown on the next page.



BRITISH 2ND ARMY—No. 1: THE CROSSING OF THE VLOED BEEK

WITH THE BRITISH SECOND ARMY IN HOLLAND



SECOND ARMY ON JANUARY 17, OPENING THE ROAD TO SCHILBERG AND ECHT

This drawing, and those on succeeding pages, are typical of the conditions under which a modern battle is fought. The battle was that of the Roer triangle, won by British Second Army troops under General Dempsey. The attack was launched on January 16, the first objective being the village of Dieteren, captured on the first

day, but the initial thrust was designed with the purpose of opening up the road to Schillerg and Echt, and ultimately to drive the enemy across the Ruer, last considerable stream before the Rhine, with Cologne and Dusseldorf only about 30 miles distant. Between Diesteren and Susteren is the Vloed Beek.

or Beek stream, crossed by our forces in the face of desperate German counter-attacks from both flanks. Our War Artist, on the scene of the conflict of Vloed Beek, on January 17, has shown the battlefield as it opened up, with Sappers (left foreground) working under heavy fire to construct an improvised

causeway over the Beck stream for our tanks, while a lorry, bringing up a Bailey bridge, is on fire from a direct hit by an enemy shell. On the right, over the snow, brilliantly lighted by artificial moonlight, infantry are advancing guardedly, being fired on from the flanks by German tanks.



It is known that Gordon was killed by machine gun fire during the early hours of 17<sup>th</sup> January in the vicinity of the bridging site at the Vloedbeek. It is difficult to determine the exact circumstances surrounding his death but it may well have occurred during this incident.



The Area Of The Vloedbeek Bridging Site 2002

Hard fighting still continued, but by 08:00 hours, B Company under Major J Evans had a secure foothold in the northern part of the village. Major Evans made company headquarters at 14 Louerstraat but thirty minutes later they were counter attacked by a battalion of infantry supported by six tanks and self propelled guns. One platoon was overrun and company headquarters severely bombarded during which Major Evans was seriously wounded and had to be evacuated through the cellar window, using a wooden door as a makeshift stretcher.

Meanwhile, the engineers continued to work furiously to complete the causeway across the Vloedbeek so that the waiting armour could get up to support the infantry. The persistent mist, accurate and continuous shelling, and the repeated bogging of their vehicles did nothing to daunt them.

In the village, two of the enemy tanks were knocked out, one by a PIAT fired from the upper window of a house, before B Squadron 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Tanks arrived in support of the embattled Queens. The enemy armour withdrew and the infantry retreated into the houses on the approach of our tanks, and by 15:00 hours the village was clear, except for the southwest corner, from which the enemy was ejected by last light.

About forty prisoners were taken but losses were considerable; to The Queens, thirty-nine killed and wounded (including all the officers of B company) and twenty nine missing, with 1<sup>st</sup> Tanks Royal Tanks losing seven tanks during the battle.

Casualties reported by 621<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron at 18:05 on 17<sup>th</sup> January were one killed (Gordon), and five wounded plus six unconfirmed wounded. Five others with wounds were not evacuated. The OC 3 Troop, Lt. A Pepper was also wounded and evacuated to 10 Casualty Clearing Station.

Also, during the night of the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> of January, Churchill bridge layers were successfully put in position over the two streams to the south of the Vloedbeek, although the Rifle Brigade had trouble with an enemy patrol encountered on the way, who made off, losing their dog, and later, had to blast a small standing patrol out of a house covering the second bridging site.

The attack on Susteren, however, so distracted the enemy that during day, the sappers, covered by the 1<sup>st</sup> Rifle Brigade, had been able to make good progress in completing the two remaining bridges South of Susteren.

*We were supporting an attack by The Queens and the objective was first to get them across some outlying dykes and then construct culverts or bridges as necessary to carry across the close support. We collected rubble in a tipper for the culvert and scoured the area for ladders and scaffold boards.*

Norman  
Steed

*In training, the drains would have been crossed by assault bridges comprising floats like miniature mattresses filled with kapok and just capable of supporting a man on one leg if he did not stop. In practise it was ladders and scaffold boards nailed over the rungs - some laid by the infantry, some by us - then we were able to work on the road-making but the Germans did not go away.*



Ladder Crossing At The Vloedbeek, January 1945

Norman  
Steed

*I learned later that there were two bridges made at Susteren and I worked on one and stayed on with the maintenance party. The procedure was to erect the Bailey and then cover the beautiful hardwood decking with rough sawn timber called chessing.*

*The scissors bridge had been laid before we arrived and obstructed by the ant-tank gun rolling off. An old fellow I know, in York was wounded there. He was one of those who had a hard time, he was wounded at Dunkirk and at the battle of The Horseshoe in front of the Mareth Line. Unfortunately he does not recall detail but from snippets I have heard from him and other mates, now gone, there is no doubt that "Susteren" was a testing time for the sappers as well as the fighting men.*

*I did not see much of Susteren - the usual road of demolished houses on the way in. There were Schumines there which had only one small metal pin (which did not record on the mine detector), and one of us lost a leg. I recall a night trying to sleep near a tank which intermittently sprayed the woods nearby with 300mm. Gordon would have been nearby.*



621<sup>st</sup> Royal Engineers Laying Chessing On Bailey Bridge At Susteren, January 1945

Sadly, Gordon's death came just days before his first wedding anniversary to Ruth. It is not possible to know her anguish and that of Gordon's parents on receipt of the curt notice of his death but we can spare a moment to think of and honour the part that they played. The war effort did not allow Ruth the time to grieve and she had to return to her duties within one week.

As a soldier of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, the most famous of all British fighting divisions and the most favourite division of Field Marshal Montgomery, Gordon relentlessly pursued the enemy, in a journey covering some ten thousand miles across two continents. He justly wore the collar badge of the British Royal Engineers, a flaming grenade and the inscription "Ubique" (Everywhere). Had he survived maybe another two or three weeks of fighting, the enemy forces would have been in full retreat with the Rhine crossing full in the Allies sights. However, Gordon was called upon to make the supreme sacrifice, as so many of his comrades had done before him. One of the last bloody battles had been won, in the cause of freedom and justice. The occupying forces were now in full retreat and the suffering citizens of Susteren had been liberated.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division went on to Hamburg and the shores of The Baltic and eventually led The Victory Parade in Berlin.

Let us borrow the quotation of Churchill and say, "If in later years anyone should ask, it will be sufficient to say, with pride, he marched with Seventh Armoured Division".

### **A Temporary Resting Place**

On the 16<sup>th</sup> January 1945, 131 Field Ambulance set up an Advanced Dressing Station in the schoolhouse of Buchten village in support of Operation Blackcock. Soon the first wounded soldiers and casualties started to arrive.

Hub Lumens a twelve year old boy at the time, recalls the activities of the British around his school. The building was divided into different areas. The wounded would arrive through the main door. The first classroom became the operating theatre and the British tried to hide the procedures from view by hanging makeshift curtains in the windows. But as boys, we were inquisitive and could peep through the gaps to see what was happening. The British soldiers did not want us to see what was going on inside and tried to chase us away.

From the operating theatre the injured would be moved into the next room and as they recovered they would be processed along into the next classroom and so forth. Finally those that were well enough would leave by the rear exit of the school. The whole system was like a conveyor belt.



The Schoolhouse, Buchten 1945

Hub remembers that the bodies of the dead soldiers were placed on stretchers against the wall of the schoolhouse, swathed in brown blankets. On every stretcher was placed a glass pot containing a yellow form, probably the details of the deceased.



The Schoolhouse, Buchten 2005

Winter was very cold that year with a lot of snow and ice and for that reason the soldiers had to use dynamite to loosen the ground to be able to dig the graves. Seven British soldiers, including Gordon and also one German soldier were buried in the field next to the school house. The field belonged to Hub's family at the time. At every funeral, attended by a small group of soldiers, a smoke screen was made. Hub has never known the exact reason for this action. Although he was just a schoolboy then, the sad scenes in and near the schoolhouse made a deep impression on him.





Temporary Cemetary at Buchten

This field was only a provisional resting place for the fallen and on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1946 the “Graves Concentration Unit” moved the British soldiers to the military cemetery at Nederweert.

Today the village of Buchten has grown and the field where the cemetery was situated is now built upon.



Site Of The Tempopary Cemetary in 2005

## Nederweert

Gordon's final resting place is at Nederweert War Cemetery.

The family made their first visit to the grave in September 1947. Gordon's youngest brother Bernard, having recently returned from military service in the Far East, describes their journey. "We went by train to Harwich, then boat to the Hook of Holland. Then train to Weert, via Rotterdam and Breda. The actual journey was chaotic as it was so soon after the end of the war.

We were met at Weert Station by the Buys family, and stayed with them at their house. One of the daughters, Mary, worked in a florist's at Weert where we purchased flowers for the grave. In those days there was quite a long stretch of country in the three miles between Weert and Nederweert. So we went to the cemetery by a ramshackle bus. Nederweert in those days was really only a hamlet. Whereas the cemetery now is within the village, then it was quite a walk from the bus as the cemetery was just a field outside the village".



Nederweert Cemetery, September 1947

The Buys family adopted the grave and later, Mary married John Limonard, a Major in the Dutch Army. John and Mary cared the grave for many years, for which we are extremely grateful. They moved to Breda in more recent times.





The First Visit To Nederweert in September 1947  
(l - r; Bernard, Mrs Blyth, Mr Blyth)



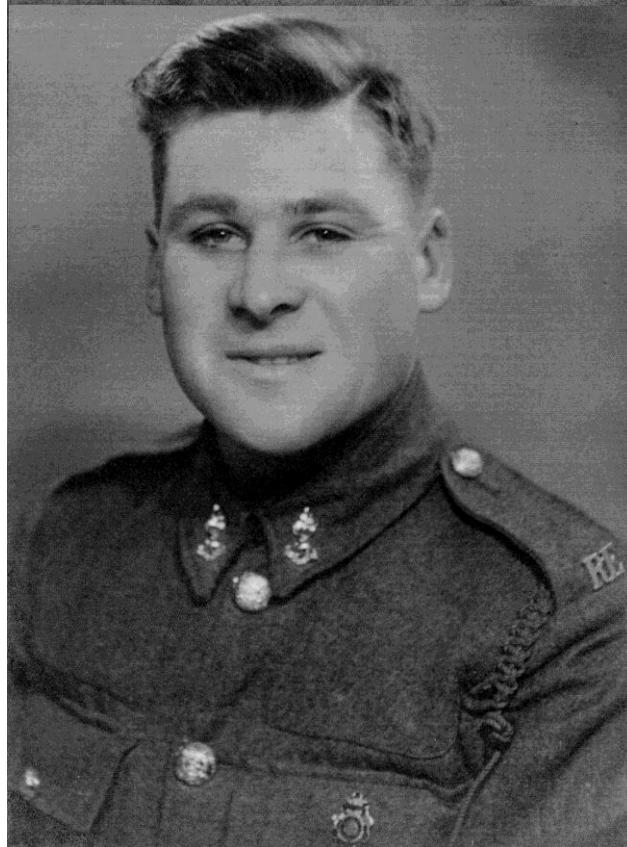
Nederweert May 1951

Today the headstone carries the laurel wreathed badge of The Royal Engineers and is inscribed with the words from Psalm 23, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil".



Sapper G T Blyth  
Grave 3, Row B, Plot 3, Nederweert War Cemetery  
August 1990

And so we conclude Gordon's journey – much loved husband, son and brother, fondly remembered and sadly missed.



Gordon Thomas Blyth  
Born 30<sup>th</sup> March 1920, Whitstable  
Killed In Action 17<sup>th</sup> January 1945, Vloedbeek

“When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow, we gave our today”

Kohima Epitaph

## Campaign Medals



Campaign Medals for Sapper G T Blyth

- ★ The 1939 – 1945 Star
  - The first in a series of eight stars, qualification for this medal was by serving 6 months in operational areas throughout the world.
- ★ The Africa Star
  - Awarded for entry into an operational area between June 1940 and May 1943. The bar denotes service with the 8<sup>th</sup> Army between October 1942 and May 1943.
- ★ The Italy Star
  - Awarded for operational service on the land in Italy, Sicily, Greece, Yugoslavia, the Aegean area and Dodecanese islands, Corsica, Sardinia and Elba during the period June 1943 until May 1945.
- ★ The France and Germany Star
  - Awarded for operational service in Belgium, France, Holland or Germany from 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944 until 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945.
- ★ The War medal
  - Awarded to all personnel whom had served 28 days in the armed forces during the war.